

The Open Tombs

Text | Matthew 27:52

Readings | John 5:16-30; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Matthew 27:45-53

Congregation,

Could there be a more depressing scene for those of this world than that of an open grave? They who had so much hoped and trusted in what they could do have got nothing left they can do. “Dust to dust, and ashes to ashes” is so true! For them it is as Aristotle confessed, “Death is a dreadful thing, for it is the end!” And Rousseau bluntly affirmed it, “He who pretends to face death without fear is a liar!”

Perhaps we have been very sad then, too. We are going to miss them. There will always be that empty gap in our lives. But yet we know where they are now – don’t we? We aren’t afraid like the world is. By faith we say confidently those words of the 23rd Psalm, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

I have conducted many funerals in my ministry and there’s an eternity of difference between a Christian and an unbeliever’s funeral. For the one it really is the end; for the other it’s whole new beginning!

As Matthew describes for us ‘The Miracles at Calvary’ he comes to this same ultimate distinction. For he has told us of the miracle which symbolised the darkness of God’s curse. And he graphically pictured the supernatural cry from the cross. Then there was the torn curtain – ripped from top to bottom – representing how everything between God and His people has gone because of His Son. And that was at the exact same time as the violent earthquake which expressed God’s power in creation singing out its ‘Amen’ to the death on the cross. Now it is through the Church Herself that God here finally confirms the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Imagine how this would have all brought it home to Matthew’s readers. They who had heard right at beginning the genealogy of the Messiah King, and right throughout the Gospel had had His Kingdom presented and proclaimed, now in His passion has confronted with the same!

How can I presume to state this? Well, where else do you find this particular miracle at Calvary? In Mark, where the Gospel so similar? No – not at all!

What about Luke, the other synoptic gospel? It’s not there either!

Perhaps John, the one so different – and yet the same? Again – no!

Congregation, you won’t find this miracle in any of them. But it’s here, and it’s true, for a perfectly good reason. You see, here are the citizens of the King; more than that, here are the King’s own ambassadors of the past; again representing their Master.

What a way to wake up! Because that’s indeed what physically happened to them. Their souls, already in heaven with the Lord, are now re-joined with their bodies, which are in the graves.

“The tombs broke open,” the text says. And they’re broken open by the same force which produced the earthquake and split the rocks.

Remember these tombs were set into the side of the hill. And it was a large stone which was rolled across to close the entrance.

In that breaking open the bodies of many of them are joined to their souls. The same divine force again does it. These bodies in the ground have no choice in proceedings. It is as Ezekiel prophesied from the LORD in chapter 37, verses 12 and 13, "O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them... Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them." What a way to wake up!

Now, some have thought this was rather cruel of the Lord. Imagine their souls having enjoyed the delights of the fellowship up above, and now being down among us here below!

So this must be a good reason! And what better reason could there be than to do it for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ! His was the perfect life of love! In His words in John 5 verses 21 till 23, "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. "He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him."

At this point it is relevant to mention that there have been two quite different views about what's happening in our text. These views are reflected in the different versions of the Bible.

You see, both agree that these saints arose at the same time the tombs were opened. The difference arises as to when those bodies came out of the tombs.

One view says that the bodies came out after Christ's resurrection and then went and appeared to people in Jerusalem. The other view says that these saints came out of the tombs when they were opened but did not appear to anyone until after Christ's resurrection.

Does it make such a difference? Yes, it does. Because such a startling event as all those tombs being opened would have meant people going and looking at the strange sight. And what would they have seen?

You see what I mean now – don't you? Because if they had risen they would have been seen alive in those tombs before the three days were up. And then the game would have been up!

Yet, if those curious people had found amongst all those opened tombs many which were empty, what would they be thinking then? And adding things, they would have noted quickly enough what kind of people no longer had their bodies lying there. Besides, as William Hendriksen points out, "is it reasonable to believe that these saints, with glorious resurrection bodies, remained in the darkness and corruption of the tombs from Friday afternoon until Sunday morning?"

Have you caught on? Notice who did rise up!

Congregation, let's join in that looking at the tombs. Perhaps it seems a bit morbid. But we're just curious. We want to see just who got left behind.

And what do we find? Why – many of the rich and famous bodies were still there. We're even surprised about some of those whose physical shell is still there.

But we're not surprised by those whose bodies are gone. Because they were the ones always looking so eagerly for Jesus to come. And now they have come back!

And all because Jesus Christ has brought them back. He has conquered death. And so He exposes as liars those who had taunted Him on the cross. They had shouted out at Him, as we read in Matthew 27 verse 42, "He saved others, he can't save himself!" "He's the king of Israel!" they insulted Him. "Let him come

down from the cross, and we will believe in him.” “Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

But do you think they would have believed Him if He did that? So now it wouldn't be any different. They would still deny Him. In the midst of their restless night, with all those stories going on around about the miracle at Calvary, they still wouldn't believe. They had more than enough signs to confirm it for the zealous Jew, but nothing was going to do. Like the story of the rich man and Lazarus, if the word hadn't touched them nothing else was going to do.

In fact, it's likely that a number of those resurrected saints were men and women that they had persecuted. As was done with the prophets of old, so it had been done to their most recent prophets, too. They had not been well received. John the Baptist is but one example.

It has been argued that because the saints were recognised when they went into Jerusalem, they must have just recently died. It's a good point, but that didn't stop Peter and John and James recognising Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. That's what we read in Matthew 17, the verses 1 till 13.

Because “many holy people” are mentioned it's actually likely they were from across the centuries. Of course they had to be those who had been buried in Jerusalem, but that cemetery had been there for a long time.

Congregation, this is the truth Jesus had spoken of in John 8 verse 56. For there, speaking to the Jews, He had said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” And now saints just like Abraham were tremendously joyful. This was the day they had so much looked forward to in their own life-time. And now they had that physical life returned so that they could testify to it, too.

So those ‘holy people’ were already a witness three days before anyone got to see them. Because their graves were empty! So imagine the suspense across the ‘holy city’ for those three days. People were openly asking, “What's happened to those bodies?” “Who could have taken that many?” “This must be a miracle!” “At least a mystery, anyway.”

Congregation, remember where we began this sermon. It was by the graveside. The open hole which either shows the end of a life, or the most glorious beginning.

In Jerusalem on Good Friday they were being confronted by many open graves. It confronted each one of them with their eternal destination. They couldn't just go and roll a stone on them!

Dear friend, those tombs are open before you, also, this day. They are witnessing to you the fifth miracle at Calvary. Because there are no bodies in them. Go on – have a look! The same mighty power that shifted those heavy stones which close the tombs, has given new life to many of those who were in them. Have you received that, too? And, you know, they are still prophesying. In this miracle God is giving us a foretaste of nothing less than the resurrection of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. It's the door of Christ's tomb which is the way by which you enter the Kingdom of God.

In the words of the apostle Paul in 1st Corinthians 15:20, Jesus is the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. It's all point straight at Him and what God's going to do through Him.

So, this coming Sunday what are you going to do? I should I say – who is doing it for you?

Amen.