

Burial Assurance

Maybe it's because I watch old people TV, but every other commercial is about burial insurance. I don't know if I need burial insurance or not but I do need burial *assurance*. Most people do. The guy who owned the gas station I worked at my first year in seminary did. So did the first guy I buried. The one told me he had a phobia about being buried in such a small space. The widow of the other said he could not stand the thought of the vault going over the casket. It was too confining. Think these guys are outliers? I don't. Graveyards may be unsettling to some. Graves are to more. Open graves are to most. We sing in a hymn, "Open-eyed my grave is staring" and we can all see it, can't we? Paraphrasing Nietzsche: stare back too long and it blinks.

Mary is alone at the grave when she finds it open. She didn't proclaim, "Christ is risen!" She went running to Peter and John to tell them that grave robbers had struck. She had gone there to give a dead Jesus a proper burial and now there was no body to attend to. Even after seeing the empty grave clothes, even after seeing 2 angels, she got nothing but tears from an open grave. How about you? An open grave, either yours or a loved one's, we'd rather not think about and certainly not go into. Our text says otherwise. You can't see this so good in English but there is a 3 word phrase repeated 6 times in the first 11 verses of our text: "into the tomb."

"Into the tomb" Mary Magdalene goes early Easter morning. She tells Peter and John of the missing Jesus and they came "into the tomb." John the quicker of the two came first "into the tomb" but stops at the mouth of the open grave. Peter doesn't stop; he barrels past John and enters "into the tomb". Then John eventually enters but he is identified this way: as the other disciples who came first "into the tomb." Finally, verse 11 tells you that as Mary wept she bent down 'into the tomb.' Like the tolling of a bell *into the tomb* sounds over the first part of our text. *Into the tomb* all but Peter is hesitant to go. *Into the tomb* is where death leads; *into the tomb* is where our sins inevitably take us. *Into the tomb* where demons, devils, and unclean spirits are at home. We don't want to go there, but look how relentlessly Mary, John, and Peter are drawn *into the tomb*. Like light into a black hole; like iron to a magnet; like a sinner into sins.

Rodney Atkins first sang it 2006, but Churchill first said it in 1943: "If you're going through hell, keep going." Well, if you must go into the tomb keep digging. There is no burial assurance outside of this tomb. That's why all the people in the text at least look into the tomb. That's why the angels remain in the tomb. So even if you don't want to go, keep digging. What's that smell? Is that chocolate? We gather at the open Easter grave, and many if not most of us probably can smell chocolate right now. The smell and taste of chocolate go with the celebration of Easter. I didn't grow up poor, but I did grow up in the time when candy was had in abundance only twice a year: Halloween and Easter. And Easter was the chocolate holiday.

That chocolate smell, taste is paired with the empty grave of Easter. It can be an assurance of sort. As we grow, though, there comes a time when what church tradition has melded together, chocolate and the empty grave, the world would separate. Once there is a distinction between the two, one has to come first. The world has been very successful doing this in regard to Christmas. Just say 'Christmas' and it's tree before manger, Big Red One before Christ-child, and presents for Christmas rather than the Christ as present. As C. S. Lewis observed, If we put the spiritual first we can still taste something of Easter in the chocolate egg. If we put the chocolate egg first, it's just another chocolate candy (*Psalms*, 48-9).

We approach the open grave where we expect the badly beaten, lashed, nailed, and stabbed corpse of Jesus to be. We have no assurance except that He's dead. We saw it with our own eyes. John at least saw the death, but Mary watched the burial. But what's that I smell. Chocolate? No heaven. There are living angels in the tomb. There is no death here. Paul trumpets this in 1 Cor. 15: The fact the grave is empty means "Death is swallowed up in victory." Then Paul precedes to tease Death and Grave: "O Death where is your sting? O Grave where is your victory?" The figure here is not the annual bursting forth of new life from winter's death that is spring. O spring is a figure, but a pale one. The more marvelous comparison of Christ's victory over Death and Grave, is not only a dead tree but a decomposed one coming back to life. Dead trees in spring 'rise' but a decayed, decomposed body of a tree doesn't (*G.K. Chesterton, Works, Vol. XX, 90*). Well that's Easter!

"Into the tomb" keep on digging. See, it's empty. Christ is risen. He leaves angels behind. But they don't speak words of assurance like they do in the other Gospels. The empty tomb does. It says, Jesus is God. Death can't hold God in flesh and blood, immortality wrapped in our flesh. He died to pay for all sins of all times and places. Once

the Father accepted His death as payment, there's no more dying then. Jesus rises from the dead and where the head goes the body must follow. Christ is the head of the Church. All in the Body of Christ go where He goes. But what's with the angels asking a crying Mary why she's crying? Okay that implies she doesn't need to be but it's not assuring. It only makes her restate her problem. Mary finally gets her burial assurance from the resurrected Jesus in person. But what of us?

Ours is there in the tomb empty of Jesus but having angels. Matthew has one angel rolling away the stone and sitting on it. Mark has one angel inside the tomb sitting on the right. Luke has two angels standing by the women. John tells us there are two angels as well. He has them sitting like Matthew and Mark but John has this detail, they were "seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot." He knows where the head and feet were because Peter when he went into the tomb saw the empty burial linens. They were still in the shape of a body, picture a shroud wrapped corpse, but there's no body in it. What in the Bible is described as having angelic cherubim on either side? The mercy seat. Read Exodus 25:18-21. Moses is commanded to make two cherubim of gold and place them at the two ends of the mercy seat. They are to face each other. And the mercy seat itself is the lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

We find the mercy seat referred to in Hebrews 9. There it mentions that the blood of goats and bulls poured into the OT mercy seat had to be repeated because these never really took away sins. In the NT Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary with His own blood to atone for sins forever, to appease God's anger at sins; to cover the sins of the world. Romans 3:25 says that God set forth Jesus as a mercy seat. Here's the picture. The mercy seat covers the Ark of the Covenant. In it were the tablets of the 10 Commandments. Above it dwelled God in a Cloudy Presence. The 10 Commandments are the proof that we are sinners. There's not one we don't break repeatedly. We don't just deserve to die once but forever. God is wrathful at our breaking them. Go to Exodus 20 see Sinai shake and smoke. The blood of goats and bulls reminded the OT Church that God promised to one day to provide a lasting atoning sacrifice for sins and sinners. The Body of Jesus given over to death on the cross, the Blood of Jesus shed there are the NT Mercy Seat. In Him the broken Commandments are hidden from God.

Here is burial assurance you can take not only to the grave but through it to resurrection and everlasting life. Christ Jesus as the Lamb of God carried the sins of the world to the cross on Friday. There not only His body, but your sins, and the Commandments that convict you were all nailed. God had no mercy there. He gave no quarter. Like some of us stamp roaches or beat snakes in fury, in rage, to be sure they're good and dead, that's what the Father did to Christ for every one of your sins. What you should hear at the foot of the cross is what those at the Alamo heard at Santa Anna's last charge. He had promised there would be no quarter and he ordered a Deguello played. That word literally means beheading or throat-slashing, but it signals: no quarter.

A possible eyewitness to the battle said when the Deguello was sounded The Alamo defenders "all understood very well what it meant, and every man was prepared to sell his life as dearly as possible" (www.awesomestories.com/pdf/make/144413). They tried to take as many enemies with them into death. Jesus took all of the sins of His enemies there, and rose without them, proclaiming them forgiven. That's why from this empty, open-grave staring at you, you ought to hear not a death song, not a call for no quarter, no mercy, but a love song. You should hear the tune the Texans marching on Santa Anna at San Jacinto did. It was a jaunty, high stepping, love song.

You want burial assurance? Need burial assurance? You want some reassurance that when you go into the tomb you're coming out? And not as the living dead, the walking dead, but as the glorified Jesus did? Look not inside of you for inside are only sin and death. Look not to men. What can they do against Sin and Death and the Devil who walks with them and stalks you? Look not at medicine, technology, or space. These are fallen just like you. Read Shakespeare's sonnet 146. His answer there is the death of death. He says, "And, Death once dead, there's no more dying then."

Our story ends like "An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog" does. Death showed up to devour Jesus for our sins and sinfulness, but after biting Jesus it was the Mad Dog, Death, that did die. Jesus and all in Him live. They live. Amen

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The Resurrection of Our Lord (20220417); John 20:1-18