



More than Just an Empty Tomb: How Will We Respond?

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Seventy

He is risen!
He is risen indeed!

We simply could share in this traditional Easter greeting and, thereby, acknowledge and pay public homage to the miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ. But is that really an adequate response to this history-changing event?

Many other aspects scream that Easter can and should be celebrated every day, rather than just one day a year. Let's examine some to see if they might help us consider how we will respond to this remarkable encounter with the Divine.

The first we will explore occurred, according to scripture, before Jesus' crucifixion. Apparently knowing what he was about to face,

he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He is quoted as saying to God, "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matthew 26:39 NRSV). It appears Jesus did not want to face this ordeal, though he knew it was expected of him and was needed to disclose the breadth and depth of God's love for creation and God's desire to be reconciled with all people.

Elsewhere, we read that as Jesus prayed, "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Luke 22:44 (NRSV)). His plea was followed immediately by these words: "yet, not what I want but what you want" (Matthew 26:39 NRSV). Though he did not want to go through the crucifixion, Jesus didn't beg and plead to have his own way. Instead, he willingly presented himself to do what God wanted. Jesus' actions, as they had so many other times during his life and ministry, demonstrated humility

and an absolute commitment to being a servant minister.

As Jesus went to the garden, he invited some of his closest allies to sit some distance away as he prayed. When Jesus returned to their location, he found them fast asleep. He asked, “could you not stay awake with me one hour?” (Matthew 26:40 NRSV). Later when Jesus was arrested at the garden, these same individuals began denying they knew Jesus, apparently because they were afraid of rejection, arrest, or possibly even death. Rather than acknowledge their connection to Jesus, they took the easy way out.

The next aspect we will consider is reported to have happened on that first Easter morning. The experience is recorded differently in various Gospels, so rather than identifying specific players, let’s look at the two common threads.

The first is seen as various individuals and small groups discovered the empty tomb where Jesus’ body had been laid. In one way or another, these individuals were told not to fear. This is a theme in many scriptures from the earliest recorded prophecies and encounters.

It was present when angels told the shepherds to not be afraid as they shared the good news of the birth of a special baby in Bethlehem. It was present in Jesus’ interactions following his resurrection as he repeatedly told individuals to not be afraid. And it was and has been present in many other instances, when people have heard such counsel as, “Do not be afraid, little flock” (Luke 12:32 NRSV).

The second is when those who discovered the empty tomb were instructed to tell others what they had found. Setting aside their fear of possible rejection and ridicule, they returned and told other disciples. Because of their willingness to share that witness, others hurried to the tomb and saw for themselves that Jesus had risen.

From those beginnings, disciples began conveying the message of Jesus Christ—a movement that continues to this day throughout the world. The principle included, because of Jesus’ Easter miracle, the message that people do not need to fear even death itself.

So how will we respond? How will you respond?

Will you follow the example of humble servanthood set by the Risen Christ before and after his resurrection? We have received counsel through the generations such as “a man should not think of himself more highly than he ought

to think.” In our Enduring Principles, we find this message in at least three places: Worth of All Persons, Unity in Diversity, and All Are Called. Will we respond to this wonderful message of Easter by acknowledging that all people are of great worth, and that we should follow Christ’s example of humble servanthood rather than the culturally promoted ideas of pride, arrogance, haughtiness?

Though Jesus certainly had reason to place himself above others, instead he presented himself as no greater than the least.

Will we, like Jesus, extend this humble servanthood into every aspect of our lives and willingly say, nevertheless not my will, but yours be done—even if and when such commitment involves being counter-cultural as Jesus was? Such discipleship requires not only humility, but the kind of intentional and dedicated spiritual formation to which we have been called to discern what God’s will truly is.

Are we willing to embrace the call to not be afraid? The mission of Jesus Christ can be scary. Yet, we have been encouraged by word and deed to not let fear stop us, cause us to run away, or even deny that we know Jesus—like his closest friends did when he was arrested.

In our era, we have received counsel that can give us unbelievable strength as we strive to do the will of God rather than our own:

The call is for workers in the cause of Zion; therefore, neither tarry, nor doubt that I am. I know your perplexities and I am aware of your uncertainties, but if you will call upon my name my Spirit will go before you into whatsoever place you are sent and I will continue to bless you as you have need.

—Doctrine and Covenants 155:8

Can we respond, despite our fear, as those who discovered the empty tomb? Can we go and share the wonderful message of joy, hope, love, and peace that comes in relationship with the Risen Christ? Shortly after his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his followers to “go into all the world” (Mark 16:15 NRSV) and make disciples. We have heard similar counsel throughout the history of our movement. We now embody such direction in one of our Mission Initiatives: Invite People to Christ. This initiative includes inviting people into a covenantal, sacramental relationship with Jesus Christ through baptism and/or confirmation.

How will we respond to the total message of

Easter? How will you respond? Let's look at two examples of individuals who responded to this total experience.

The first is a woman from Albania named Mary Teresa Bojaxhiu. You may know her better as Mother Teresa, now referred to as Saint Teresa of Calcutta. This woman did not seek fame or fortune, power or glory. She responded to the wonderful message and life of Jesus Christ by wanting to be his hands, face, and feet to the least. Although she probably could have, she did not pursue high office. She was a humble servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's how she responded to the message of Easter.

The second is a young man who shall remain nameless. He became acquainted with Jesus because some humble servants felt called to take the message of Easter to people in a mobile home park. As a result, his life was changed.

At one Sunday-evening service, the pastor of this group noticed that the young man emptied his wallet into the offering plate. Although curious, the pastor felt he should not ask the young man why he had done this.

The next Sunday evening, the pastor watched as the same thing happened—the young man opened his wallet and emptied everything into the offering plate. The pastor felt compelled to ask the young man why he had done this. He said that if it weren't for this church group and the message of the Risen Christ, he was quite sure he would be dead or in prison.

The man from Galilee had transformed his life, so the young man wanted to give back whatever he had left monetarily at the end of the week to show his gratitude. He chose to respond to the totality of the Easter message by symbolically giving his whole life to Jesus.

So, how will we respond? How will you respond?

As you ponder this question, may you be guided by the following scripture:

Beloved Community of Christ, do not just speak and sing of Zion. Live, love, and share as Zion: those who strive to be visibly one in Christ, among whom there are no poor or oppressed.

As Christ's body, lovingly and patiently bear the weight of criticism from those who hesitate to respond to the divine vision of human worth and equality in Christ. This burden and blessing is yours for divine purposes.

And, always remember, the way of suffering love that leads to the cross also leads to resurrection and everlasting life in Christ's eternal community of oneness and peace. Trust in this promise.

—Doctrine and Covenants 165:6a–c

How Will You Respond?

One can only imagine the whiplash of emotions that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection brought to disciples. Now, nearly 2,000 years later, the events of Holy Week and Easter still provide more than a casual, annual observance. They bring a renewed call to discipleship. It's a call that urges all people to step into an inward journey of commitment, while also journeying outward to make Christ's mission our mission. This Easter season, we pray the stories in these pages of other people and their journeys will help you reflect on how you will respond.