

+ John 20:1-18 + See Your Savior Alive! + The Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Day + 27 March 2016 +

CIR HIRI!¹ Dear Friends in Christ Gathered at an Empty Tomb,

You find them everywhere this time of year. They're colorful—often brightly colorful. They're usually plastic. They split in two, but you can put them back together. When you open one, you hope to find a treat or a treasure. Sometimes you might even find one that has a surprise from last year. Yet they come with a challenge. You often have to search for an Easter egg before you get the treat or treasure inside.

At first, the search is pretty easy since some always seem to be right out in the open, but as the search goes on and eggs get fewer, it gets harder. You search high and low. You search every little nook and cranny because you never know, but the search goes on. It might even get a little frustrating as you go over the same area again and again. After a while, you hope the egg is worth all the effort and that you don't end up finding an empty egg. The search goes on. The person who hid the eggs starts giving hints—and it seems like you should've found this egg a long time ago, but nothing yet until finally you find it right there...in front of you. You open the egg and what's inside? Disappointment or a nice surprise?

People have been searching like that for more than 2,000 years. In fact, on that first Easter morning, there was a lot of searching going on, but not for Easter eggs. People were searching for answers.

It had all happened so suddenly. Just a week earlier the crowds had praised Jesus as the long-promised Savior-King. They had cried out to him, **“Hosanna!”** “Lord, save us!” as he humbly rode on the back of a donkey into the city of Jerusalem. But by Friday evening, Jesus had been betrayed by one of his own, arrested by his enemies, and condemned to die both by the local religious leaders and the Roman government.

Roman soldiers had forced Jesus to carry a heavy, wooden cross through those same streets of Jerusalem out to a skull-like hill called Golgotha. There they nailed him to that cross and lifted him up to die a slow, excruciating death. Then strange things happened. The bright noon sky turned to darkness until 3 PM when Jesus cried out, **“It is finished,”** (John 19:30) and breathed his last. The earth shook, rocks split, and even some of the dead buried outside of Jerusalem came back to life.

A couple of Jesus' friends swallowed their fear and got permission from the Roman governor to take down Jesus' body for burial. They had to do it quickly because there was a major festival going on in the city of Jerusalem. As quickly as they could, the two men wrapped Jesus' body in linen cloths with spices placed between each layer to prevent smell. A small group of women who had been following Jesus watched from a distance.

Among those faithful ladies was a woman named Mary Magdalene. She was devoted to Jesus, because he had once cast seven demons out of her. Jesus' power had changed her life. So she showed her gratitude by following him. With that group of ladies, Mary had witnessed Jesus' death on the cross and his hasty burial on Friday. They made plans to finish the burial preparations on Sunday morning as one last act of devotion. So you find Mary heading out in the Sunday darkness back to the cemetery in search of answers for all those questions that troubled her.

What answers did Mary seek? It doesn't take much to figure out what she was looking for. She had pinned her hopes and dreams on Jesus who had made a huge difference in her life. He had changed her life, but now he was gone. He was dead. She recalled how he had suffered and died and how his lifeless body was placed in that tomb. She looked for comfort. She looked for peace. She looked for closure. She looked for an answer for her disappointment and her grief and for the very practical question: “Who will roll the large stone away from the entrance to the tomb?”

Mary had a heart full of questions as she followed the path into the cemetery, but when she looked towards her Lord's tomb, she found a shocking surprise. The large, circular stone that had taken two men to heft into place in front of the entrance was tossed completely aside. Mary assumed that Jesus' enemies had carried out one last injustice against him.

Her mind raced with even more questions, but rather than look inside the tomb, she decided to run back and tell Jesus' followers, who were struggling with their own questions behind locked doors. “Will we be next? What

¹ “Christ is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” This is known as the *Paschal Greeting*, one of the oldest and most widespread traditions in the Christian church. Throughout the weeks of the Easter season, whenever the minister says to the people, “*Christ is risen!*”, they automatically respond loudly and boldly, “*He is risen indeed!*”

will happen to us? Why did that happen to Jesus?" When Mary found Jesus' followers Simon Peter and John, her report only raised more questions. **"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"** So Peter and John went searching.

They ran to the tomb. John stopped at the opening, but Peter pushed right through and found something remarkable—not disappointment, but a surprise. **"He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen."** Robbers and enemies had not been there. The linens so lovingly wrapped around Jesus were exactly where they had left him and even the cloth from around his head was neatly folded, but there was no body. It was as if he had disappeared! More questions and the search for answers continued. Peter went back wondering what he had seen, but John **"saw and believed."** In that unlikely place, in that empty tomb, Jesus' followers began to find answers.

...But Mary was still on a fruitless search. She went back to the cemetery. All alone she stood **"outside the tomb crying."** She had no answer for her grief, no answer for her pain, no answer for her confusion. Finally with tears streaming down her cheeks, she looked inside the tomb hoping for an answer. **"She saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been... They asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying?'"** The only answer she had was **"They have taken my Lord away...and I don't know where they have put him."** They were right in front of her, but it never crossed Mary's mind that she was speaking with angels. It never dawned on her that the answer she needed was right in front of her...or actually behind her.

Mary turned around and saw a man standing there. She thought he was the gardener who tended the cemetery. He asked her the same question as the angels, **"Woman...why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"** The answer was right in front of her. The man could not have dropped a more obvious hint, but she didn't see it. In her grief, she innocently asked, **"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."** And then Jesus said, **"Mary"**. Suddenly Mary's eyes were opened and she had the surprising answer to all of her questions. **CIR HIRI!**

Mary grabbed hold of Jesus, but he told her, **"Do not hold on to me..."** He sent her back with an answer to his **"brothers,"** his disciples who had so fearfully abandoned him just days before. He would see them soon! So Mary ran back and told them what she found, **"I have seen the Lord!" CIR HIRI!**

Where do you go looking for answers? Do you search for them like Easter eggs? Is help over here? Is guidance over there? Is comfort and peace up here? Is life or joy or love down here? You and I all go on searches like that because none of us have all the answers. So where do you go?

Do you look inside? Spend some time searching for answers in yourself and you're going to have a pretty fruitless search that just goes round and round. Try as you might, there's a big problem when you do that. It's called sin. It's something rotten and corrupt that you inherited from your parents and they from theirs and so on back to our first parents Adam and Eve. Sin is something that has brought terrible effects and consequences into our world and into every life, including the reality of death for all people. Sin has transformed every one of us into self-centered, me-focused enemies of God.

We were his beloved creation, but rather than love God and his holy will, you and I think we can do it ourselves. Do I need help or guidance? I've got it covered. Do I need comfort or peace? No problem, that is, until you realize how much of a fruitless rut searching for answers in yourself ends up becoming. You go round and round and what do you find? Disappointment? Frustration? Hopelessness? Guilt that just won't go away? Death?

Do you look to others? Family and friends and colleagues and classmates are all gifts from God, but they can only do so much. They're sinful human beings too with a limited capacity to help you find answers. They can't keep every promise. They can't prevent disappointment or frustration or hopelessness on your search. The same goes for seeking answers in things that make big promises to make your life better—products and medicine and technology and stuff, when in reality they don't keep their promises and never really help you find the answers you seek.

So where do you go looking for answers? Like the Easter egg hiding in plain sight right in front of your face, your living Savior has your answer in his Word. In that Word, he points you to his empty tomb. Rather than look in all the usual places, why not look there? Why be like Mary and not go there, but run away with more questions? Look into that empty tomb and see the completion of what Jesus did for you. You see, Jesus did die on a cross. Nails pierced his hands and feet, but not because he was a criminal and not because of

injustice. No, Jesus died on a cross to give you what you need most—forgiveness for your guilt, relief for your hurt, peace for your troubled heart, life eternal for your death, but he didn't stay dead! **CIR HIRI!**

Look into the empty tomb and what do you find? Easter eggs full of answers! You find that the grave couldn't hold Jesus, no matter how hard it tried to keep him in its cold, dark grasp. You find out that Jesus always keeps his promises, even to rise from the dead, because he loves you. You find joy and celebration that takes the place of your sorrow and grief because **CIR HIRI!** You find real help for those times when you don't have the answer because if Jesus can conquer death, he can help you through anything you might face. You find peace for your troubled heart and hope for your hopelessness. You find the gate of heaven open because **CIR HIRI!** You find so many answers all around that tomb, but there's one more.

Like Mary, turn around and find the greatest surprise of all. See your Savior alive! See his love in those nail-pierced hands and feet. See his faithfulness to you. See his peace that only he can give, and find the answer to all those questions in your Savior who lives. In the end, a day will come when Jesus will bring you to be with him in heaven where you will see your Savior alive with your own eyes—and there won't be any more questions, only life with Him, who is our answer, for all eternity. My friends, **CIR HIRI!** Amen.