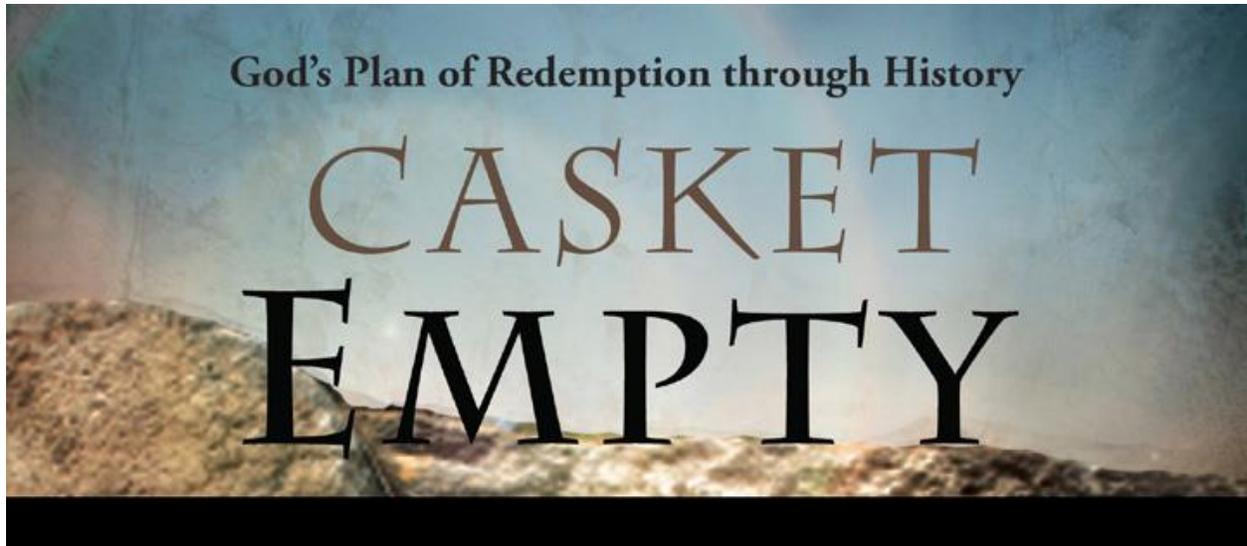


M is for Messiah
CASKET EMPTY Sermon Series
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
Easter Sunday April 1, 2018

TEXT: John 20:19-29



This is a joyful morning! If you are just joining us at Kenwood, we have been on a journey this year using the acronym CASKET EMPTY to highlight the death and resurrection of Jesus as the center of the Scriptures. This morning, we look at the center, the Holy of Holies. We look at the empty tomb of Christ. The apostle Paul says the death and resurrection of Jesus are the matters “of first importance.” They are the most important truths you will ever hear. The most important events that have ever happened on planet earth happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus. When we look at these most important events that have ever happened, we turn our attention to God's eternal purpose. Wherever you are this morning, I want us by the end of this sermon, by the end of this passage, to catch up with what God is doing in the world. Some of us are here and we have believed in Christ for many years. Others of us are here because it's springtime and we are tired of being locked up in our homes and the sun is finally out. Some of us may be here because we planted flowers all around the church, and you want to take pictures. Some of you are here because you heard that we have artists responding to the death and resurrection of Christ in real time and beautiful paintings are being done during worship of the empty tomb and the right response of worship. Whatever has brought you here this morning, I want us to enter into God's story as it is told to us in John 20. Vijay read to us this account of the first resurrection sightings. The opening of John 20 tells us that it was very

early on the first day of the week that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb of Jesus while it was still dark, and she saw that the stone had been rolled away. She ran and told Simon Peter and John, and they came to this tomb. They became in and they saw that the tomb was indeed empty. They left and went back to their homes, but Mary remained weeping outside of the tomb. As she was weeping, the resurrected Jesus Christ appeared to her. Mary Magdalene is the first witness of the resurrected Jesus, and Jesus asked her in John 20:13:

“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”

Then Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and is the first Christian of all time. The response for Mary of seeing Jesus raised from the dead was to go and announce it, and this is a pattern that I want you see. If you have seen Jesus Christ risen from the dead, the only thing that makes sense is to go and tell people about that, because if you haven't noticed, dead people don't usually rise. Mary goes with the testimony: “I've seen the Lord,” and then we begin with the text that Vijay read for us. It is important for us, and in a symbolic meaning that I don't want you to miss, Vijay is from India. He grew up there, and part of the legacy of Thomas' conversion that will see at the end of this text is Thomas' obedience to “go and tell.” He goes to India, and we will see this pattern. Mary goes and says, *“I have seen the Lord.”* In our text, in John 20:19, we read the events that happened later that day, and this is the place for many of us this morning. Jesus comes and stands in the midst of the disciples, and He proclaims this word of peace: *“Peace be with you.”*

Last Sunday, Palm Sunday, we spoke of Jesus' approach to the city of Jerusalem. He wept over the city saying that they didn't recognize the things that make for peace. Now we see with absolute certainty how peace is accomplished in this world. It is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We read in John 20:20:

“When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side.”

The marks of crucifixion were real. They had seen Jesus hanging on the cross, and Jesus, the



night on which He was betrayed, when He taught them, told them in John 16:20:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.”

Jesus told them right before the crucifixion: *“You will see Me no longer, and again in a little while you see Me again.”* The reality of the crucifixion is resolved with the great joy that the disciples have in seeing Him again. They were glad to see the Lord, and He spoke to them

again and said a second time: "Peace be with you." For many of us this morning, we think this should be the ending of the passage: "Peace be with you." We want to take hold of the peace of Christ as our own possession, but the passage doesn't end here. It doesn't end with Jesus' conferring peace upon us as the accomplishment of His death and resurrection. Jesus continues speaking, and the next line is really the most terrifying line of this passage. The next line of the passage after Jesus confers for the second time, "Peace be upon you," Jesus looks at all of us, and He says in John 20:21:

"As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you."

This is terrifying. If this is not terrifying to you, then you are not listening. We say, "O Jesus, peace. Give me peace! Amen." He even says it a second time: "Peace I give to you." All of a sudden Jesus seems to ruin the story by looking at you and me and saying: "*As the Father sent Me, so I am sending you.*" These are weighty words. What does that mean? The verbs of sending are unique, a prominent verb in the gospel of John. John 3:16 says:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

The text continues in John 3:17:

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him."

The sending of the Father is motivated by love; the purpose of the sending is salvation for the world; and the means of saving the world is the cross and the empty tomb. This is terrifying. Jesus Christ, resurrected from the dead, said: "As the Father's love for the world compelled the sending of the Son to save the world through Him in the cross-shaped mission, so I am sending you out with the same." You should feel as I do: overwhelmed, insufficient, inadequate for such a mission. John 20:21 translated into the Latin language is where we get the word mission. It is a sending.

So what happens to people like you and me with absolutely insufficient resources for such a mission? Did you catch the mission? It is motivated by love, salvation of the world through the cross-shaped life? Where would you find the resources for such a task? We feel inadequate. The disciples upon hearing this must have felt the same, and they had no time to ask a question or ask or seek clarification. Instead, they just received what happened next. What happened next is so hope-filling. What happens next is that after Jesus said this, He breathed on them, just like in the act of creation in Genesis: God makes humanity in His image and likeness and then breathes on them and they become alive. After receiving this staggering mission, Jesus breathes on us and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit comes into us, makes us alive, empowers us for the mission. Jesus clarifies our task with this statement in John 20:23:

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

That means that you and I are entrusted with the gospel of forgiveness of sins. It is not on our achievement, but Christ’s; it is not on our merit, but Christ’s merit, His perfect obedience to the Father. Entrusted with the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus, you can answer the question that’s longing to be answered in the human heart: “Where do I find forgiveness?” You can answer: “Forgiveness is in Jesus Christ, His death, His resurrection.” Jesus tells us: “If you withhold, or if you hold on to the sins of any, it is withheld.” The first person that I was ever used to lead to a saving knowledge of Christ wondered if his sins were too great, and I was able to tell him on the certainty of the cross and empty tomb that no sin is powerful enough that the cross of Christ and the empty tomb of Christ cannot forgive. We have this sacred responsibility, and Jesus gives us the resources for it: *As the Father sent Me, so I am sending you*, motivated by love, purpose of salvation, cross-shaped life, empowered by the Spirit. Those are the resources of heaven.

The rest of our passage, then, shows us how this plays out. We turn our attention, as John does, to the first recipient of the original Christian mission. The first recipient of early Christian mission is to Thomas. In John 20:24, we read that Thomas, one of the 12, was called the Twin—had a twin brother or sister whose name we don’t know. We do know that Thomas was not with them when Jesus came on Easter Sunday. Just a quick footnote: It’s always dangerous to miss church! You miss a Sunday, you can miss a lot. So, he missed church; we don’t know what happened. We don’t know if he was depressed. We don’t know if he was afraid. We don’t know what happened, but he missed church. He misses a Sunday, misses a lot, so the disciples come to him and he is the first recipient of the apostolic mission. They go to him and they say: “We have seen the Lord.” It is the first Sunday, and Thomas responds and says in John 20:25:

“Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe.”

The first recipient of the gospel mission knows that dead people don’t rise. It’s easy to condemn Thomas, but remember, Thomas missed church last Sunday. Everybody else saw; he didn’t, and he wonders as we do, do dead people rise? Was I just imagining that? No one ever survived Roman crucifixion. The marks on the body led to death, a certain death.

Thousands of people were crucified in the first century. In 1968, building contractors were working in a neighborhood in East Jerusalem called *Giv’at ha-Mivta*, and whenever you’re working in Israel and you start digging in the ground, you find ancient things. They found this. It was a first-century ossuary, or bone box. It was a custom of burial just in the first century, and

we have many examples of it. This one, for the Hebrew readers among us, if you look closely at the side, it tells you whose bone box this is. These are the bones of *Jehohanan ben Hagkol*, a first century Jewish man.

It wasn't extraordinary to find a bone box. Many have been found, even the bone box of



Caiaphas, for example, but what is remarkable about this bone box is what they found when they opened it. When they opened the bone box, you see Jehohanan had been crucified, and this is his heel bone. You can see the nail is still driven through it. No one survived

crucifixion. The marks were visible. This is not the bone box of Jesus Christ. This is the bone box of a man who was crucified in the first century, and everyone knew then and now that dead people don't rise.

Well, Thomas didn't miss the next Sunday. Eight days later, inclusive reckoning, it's the next Sunday. The disciples were gathered again and Thomas was with them. This time he was there, and again the doors were locked. Jesus stood among them and said for the third time in our passage: "Peace be with you." Then Jesus came to Thomas and he said in John 20:27:

"Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

Do not be any longer unbelieving, but believe. He is risen from the dead, alive forever! Thomas, who wondered about the reality of these things, bursts into spontaneous praise with the highest affirmation of Jesus in the gospel of John. Thomas answered and said: "My Lord and my God!" Jesus is God. He is Lord of all, and Thomas' question is satisfied and answered, and Thomas stands for all of us wondering, are these things really so? Did this Man really rise from the dead? I'm thankful that he asked the question. Jesus replies to him and says in John 20:29:

"Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

In the climax of our passage, Jesus speaks a blessing on you and me: "*Blessed are those who*

have not seen and yet have believed.” Our believing this morning rests upon the eyewitness testimony of those who did see. John tells us: “That which we have seen with our eyes, our ears have heard, our hands have touched concerning the Word of life—the life was made manifest and we saw it and we are testifying to you. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Just like Mary seeing Jesus went and told the disciples; just like the disciples seeing Jesus went and told Thomas. According to early church tradition, Thomas, having seen the Lord, went to India. Praise the Lord. So, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

The great joy of this morning is that as a minister of the gospel—I hardly ever get to use that phrase—I get to use that phrase after I marry people. It's a real high point for me: the wedding is great, the photographs are being taken, and I get to go down to my office and fill out the marriage license. It's just so thrilling. I'm always by myself; it's a quiet moment, but I actually know that's the moment legally that this is really happening. I always have to write down on the form for the government what authorizes me to fill this form out. You have options for your position title, and the option I choose is “minister of the gospel.” As a minister of the gospel, I testify that I have married these people, in this place, on this day. As exciting as marriages are, we have changed our relationships, changed status, even infinitely more exciting is, as a minister of the gospel, I want to tell you this morning that your sins are forgiven. Whatever you brought into the sanctuary, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ offers you full and total forgiveness. For those of us who have believed, or maybe you are believing for the first time even now, the death of Jesus secures our forgiveness, the resurrection of Jesus shows us that His offering for sin was accepted, and it is the resurrected Jesus who then gives us a reason for living, and it is to join His mission: “As the Father sent Me, so send I you.”

As we leave worship today, we will go out into a world that is increasingly disoriented. It's a world that increasingly has little exposure to the truths of Christianity, to the matters of first importance, and God, in His great sovereignty and plan and purpose, has designed to use you and me as His representatives in the world. Is it really the case that the blessing, the supreme blessing, is on those who have not yet seen yet have believed? Does Jesus continue to meet us along the way? He does, and He uses each of us. I was drawn to consider Jesus' power to do this. Just as Jesus answered Thomas' specific question, He answers ours.

Two years ago, we had the privilege of having Eric Metaxas here. He spoke at UC and he spoke at Kenwood. We got to know him and had lunch with him. Part of his testimony of conversion is a ripple effect of this blessing. He tells his own conversion story, and I want to quote his words. He says it that Jesus Christ spoke to him in what he called the secret vocabulary of his heart, just like Thomas. Thomas has this question, and Jesus answered it. Eric speaks of a dream he had around his 25th birthday. He said:



“If someone had investigated my life at that time to determine who I was, they’d likely have settled on three themes at the heart of my identity: first, that I am Greek; second, that I loved freshwater fishing; and third, that I was deeply committed to the life of the mind and the search for meaning.”

Eric grew up in a Greek Orthodox home, son of European immigrants. His father was Greek and mother was from Germany. Like all Greek parents, if you are partially Greek, you are fully Greek, and so part of the mission is to impress your Greekness on you. His father regularly taught him the meaning of the word *ixthys*, the fish symbol: *Iesus Xristos Theou Uios Sotir—Jesus Christ Son of God Our Savior*. Fishing was important to him, Greek was important, life of the mind was important. He went to Yale university. He was a good student, but was spiritually empty. He came up with his own religious answer like many today, and his religious answer was that the goal of life was like being out on the lake, a frozen lake and drilling through the ice and touching the God-force, like the water. That was the solution for the meaning of life that he came up with.

He graduated from Yale, and as he says, “I’ve been stepping and climbing this ladder my whole life, and when I graduated I stepped off the ladder into a stepless void.” He says he floated and drifted, which inevitably leads to that singularly humiliating cul-de-sac of moving back in with one’s parents. He says he took the only job he could find. Remember, this is a Yale graduate in literature, and the only job he could find was reading chemical manuals and other nonliterary arcana at Union Carbide. He said: “My cubicle was a quarter of a mile from the nearest window, and the password was *Gehenna*.” In the end, alone in the belly of the corporate whale, a graphic designer next to him named Ed Tuttle begin to share Christ with him. Ed eventually prayed for him. He was stunned. Eric’s uncle became ill, and Ed asked if he could pray for Eric’s uncle—workplace evangelism. They went into a heavily fluorescent-lit conference room. Ed prayed aloud, and Eric said it was as though a transcendent shift took place. “It was as though a window had been open and I felt the faintest touch of the heavenly breeze.”

Then came the dream one night near his 25th birthday. He says:

“One night near my 25th birthday, I dreamt I was ice-fishing on Candlewood Lake in Danbury, Connecticut. . . I looked into the large hole we had cut into the ice and saw the snout of a fish poking out. (Of course ice-fishing is never this easy.) I reached down and picked it up by the gills and held it up. It was a large pickerel or perhaps even a pike. And in the dazzlingly bright sunlight shining through the blue sky and off the white snow and ice onto the bronze-colored fish, it appeared positively golden. But then I realized that it didn’t merely look golden, it

actually was golden. It was a living golden fish, as though I were in a fairy tale. And suddenly I understood that this golden fish was *ixthys*—Jesus Christ Son of God Our Savior. I had wanted to touch inert water, to touch the so-called “collective unconscious,” but he had something more for me [and spoke to me in the language of my heart]: this was his Son, a living Person, Jesus Christ. And I realized in the dream that he was real and had come . . . and now I was holding him there in the bright sunlight and at long last my search was over. And I was flooded with joy.

“When I went to work the next day, I told Ed about the dream. He asked what it meant, and I said what I never would have said before—and would have cringed to hear anyone else say. I said that I had accepted Jesus. And when I spoke those words I was flooded with the same joy I had had inside the dream. And I’ve had that joy with me for the past 25 years.”

“My Lord and my God. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Brothers and sisters, He is risen from the dead, and He will meet you and is powerful enough to speak to you even in the secret language of your own heart. Jesus Christ is alive! If you do not yet know Him, I pray you see Him now. If you do know Him, I pray that you hear him now: *“As the Father sent Me, so send I you.”* Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, we extol You this morning, saving Son. We praise You that You have come forth sent from the Father's love on a saving mission that is cross-shaped. You are the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We worship You this morning, Lord. We desire to sing Your praise and honor You and to follow You as You go forth in the world.

In Jesus’ Name, Amen.