THE EMPTY TOMB

by Carol A. Secord
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THE EMPTY TOMB

A sunrise service of six stories

by CAROL A. SECORD
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DEDICATED

To Rivermont Presbyterian Church, which allowed me to coordinate the sunrise service each year, and encouraged me to write, with unrestricted artistic freedom, original dramas for our Easter celebration.
CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR
CAIAPHAS, THE HIGH PRIEST
MARY, MOTHER OF CHRIST
JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA
MARY MAGDALENE
JOHN, THE APOSTLE
JAIRUS’ DAUGHTER
**PRODUCTION NOTES**

The play is set in the garden outside the tomb in which Christ was buried on the first Easter morning. Six people tell how they are affected by the discovery that the tomb is empty. When originally produced at Rivermont Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the drama was presented in an outdoor courtyard. As the sun rose, the congregation focused on a large representation of a cave with a “stone” on one side of a large opening while the characters spoke. The play alternatively can be performed indoors, with readers stepping out one at a time from a screen. The drama also can be performed as a Readers Theatre, with no sets or costumes. Any of the these options is easy to produce, indoors or outdoors. Only minimal rehearsal time is needed.

The drama was written to intensify with each reading, with individual parts threaded together by the theme of the empty tomb. Any of the monologs can be performed independently, however, as part of a worship service or devotional. One of the monologs could be done as a “preview” of the upcoming Easter drama. Parts can be deleted according to the number of male and female readers available, and the amount of time allotted.

In the premier performance of *The Empty Tomb*, we performed music between each reading. The amount of music can vary according to the number of musicians and amount of time available. With music, the drama ran approximately forty-five minutes.

The only set is a large representation of a cave, with a “stone” large enough to cover the opening at one side. An alternative set is a large, rough-hewn cross. If the view behind the focal point is distracting, hang sheets or erect large screens. Do everything possible to focus the congregation’s attention on the words spoken and sung.

Costumes should be simple biblical robes and sandals. Both men and women should wear a length of cloth on their heads, with the men’s tied to their heads with a piece of cord, and the women’s left hanging loosely around their faces.

As you prepare readers for their parts, explain that each character comes to an important realization about themselves,
or their belief in Christ, when they learn that the tomb is empty. 
Caiaphas realizes that the empty tomb represents the beginning of trouble, rather than the end. Mary, the Mother of Christ, marvels that she forgot earlier assurances of her son's divinity and even questioned his sanity. Joseph of Arimathea sees the irony of his legalism about proper burial for a man who would rise again. Mary Magdalene recognizes that she let anxiety overwhelm her faith in Jesus' promise to return. John, the Apostle, finally understands that Jesus was the sacrificial lamb that overcame death. Jairus' Daughter wonders if her second chance at life means that she should live differently.

As you will see when you read the script, the latter characters reflect attitudes that prevent us, even now, from recognizing Jesus as Savior and Lord. Jairus' Daughter, although not a traditional character for Easter plays, summarizes the drama of the empty tomb and speaks to all of us: we should live differently, because Christ gave us a second chance at life.
STAGING SUGGESTIONS

If *The Empty Tomb* is done as a sunrise service, begin in total darkness and let sunlight gradually illuminate the tomb. At night, spotlight the tomb.

The tomb can be painted onto a canvas flat, or onto cardboard that is propped in front of sheets or screens. An alternative set is a large, wooden cross in front of the blank backdrop.

![Diagram of a stage setup with a tomb, choir loft, platform, and screen to conceal piano.]

(A) Musicians perform behind the backdrop, or from a balcony. If a piano is used, and is conspicuously in front of the sanctuary, erect a screen to conceal the pianist and any vocalists. Characters stand beside the empty tomb to deliver their lines.
(B) Musicians perform in the rear of the sanctuary. Rope off the last few pews and bring down the lights as readers and musicians take their places. This drawing assumes that instruments are moved to the back, as well. If this is not feasible, simply erect screens to conceal the musicians. Characters say their lines by the cross.
(C) The service is held outdoors, in a courtyard or park. If the background is a natural setting, simply prop onto a frame the depiction of the empty tomb, or place a large cross in front. If the background is distracting, stretch sheets across a large frame, then place the tomb or cross in front (as done indoors in A and B). Arrange chairs to face the tomb or cross. Musicians may perform at the microphone and stand at the rear of the area. Characters stand beside the tomb to repeat their lines, either wearing a wireless microphone or with a microphone on a stand positioned nearby. Use a portable sound system to ensure that listeners hear clearly.
ORDER OF WORSHIP

The following information may be used in your bulletin, with the names of the cast and the musicians beside their respective characters/songs.

The Easter songs listed here may be found in most hymnals. You may substitute appropriate contemporary songs if you prefer.

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Today you will hear contemporaries of Christ share their feelings as they realize his tomb is empty. Stand with them at the entrance and rejoice: Christ is risen!

Prelude: “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”

Narrator

“Were You There?”

Caiaphas, the High Priest

And one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” ...So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

John 11:49-50, 53

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

Mary, Mother of Christ

Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to calm him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

Mark 3:31-35

“What Wondrous Love Is This?”

Joseph of Arimathea

As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body, and Pilate

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ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock.

*Matthew 27:57-60*

“Tis Finished! The Messiah Dies”

**Mary Magdalene**

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

*Mark 16:1-5*

“Low in the Grave He Lay”

**John, the Apostle**

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter, and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there, but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. 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. Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

*John 20:3-8*

“Thine Is the Glory”

**Jairus’ Daughter**

While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. “Your daughter is dead,” he said. “Don't bother the teacher anymore.” Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, “Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed.” When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child's father and mother. Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. “Stop wailing,” Jesus said. “She is not dead, but asleep.” They laughed at him, knowing she was
dead. But he took her by the hand and said, "My child, get up!"
Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told
them to give her something to eat.

_Luke 8:49-55_

"Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"

**Narrator**

**Congregational Hymn:** "He Arose!"

**Benediction**
(NARRATOR is in place behind microphone.)

NARRATOR: We stand before a tomb today.

We normally view burial grounds with fear. They remind us of our own mortality. The dark interior of this tomb, however, is cause for tremendous joy and praise.

It is empty.

This tomb held the body of our Lord after his painful and humiliating death on a cross. The emptiness of this tomb reveals the heart of our Christian faith: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. (NARRATOR exits. CAIAPHAS enters.)

CAIAPHAS: The story that I sought to end has just begun. I failed miserably to silence the Galilean blasphemer. His followers stole the body in spite of the guards we posted. They immediately circulated the fantastic rumor that he overcame death. They even claimed that he spoke and ate with people. Of course, the superstitious masses embellished the tales.

Those ignorant, common people want to believe that the Messiah will come in their lifetimes. But I should not sneer too much at their desire. I recall that as an idealistic young rabbi, I once entertained the same absurd hope.

Many years ago, a twelve-year-old boy came to the temple at Passover. He joined our group as we argued an abstract point of law. He listened for a few moments, then cited holy writings that supported his point of view. We were astonished at the degree of learning and understanding this simple country lad displayed.

As he spoke that first day, I was overcome by irrational joy and an uncommon feeling of peace. I sat at his feet for days to absorb every word. I convinced myself that he was the promised one. Surely he would declare himself Messiah at any moment! But the boy's parents found him, and he left as abruptly as he came. I never heard of him
after that. I resolved not to be so foolish again.

Here I stand, twenty years later, in the empty tomb of yet another fraudulent Deliverer. My face still burns when I recall how he taunted us at every opportunity. He compared us to a nest of snakes, full of deceit and venom. He was contemptuous of our learning, our dedication to the sacred law, and the political alliances we so carefully maintained with Rome.

Once he told a crowd that the Pharisees were like whitened sepulchres—clean and shining without, but rotten within. He evoked laughter when he remarked that we worried about cleaning the outside of the cup, but ignored the filth within.

My decision was not whether to execute him, but when and how. The Romans did not allow us to carry out death sentences. We therefore had to enlist Rome’s assistance to silence this insurrectionist and scatter his disciples.

Unfortunately, his followers, by stealth and deceit, ensured that trouble continued. They stole his body from under our noses. This tomb, which should have held the end of the matter, marks the beginning. (CAIAPHAS exits.

MARY enters.)

MARY, MOTHER OF CHRIST: The emptiness of my son’s tomb was a reproach as well as a joy. After all, I should have realized more than anyone that he was no ordinary man.

A man in brilliant garments appeared to us in this tomb and asked us why we sought the living among the dead. Suddenly I remembered another shining visitor, when I was just a maiden. In that moment, I realized how much I had misunderstood about my son.

What had that angel told me so many years ago? “He will be the Son of God, the Son of the Most High.” I was puzzled, uncertain how this could be, but my spirit rejoiced anyway. And the wonders of his birth! Shepherds arrived and claimed that angels had told them to come.
Three astrologers from faraway lands brought expensive gifts. They swore they were led to us by a star. When we took him to be consecrated, an elderly man and woman exclaimed that God allowed them to see the Messiah! Joseph and I marveled at these events, but eventually life resumed its ordinary course.

You may well ask if I discounted the unusual maturity and learning that my son displayed at the temple twelve years later. At first, I must admit, I was more concerned about the anxiety and inconvenience he caused us. Then I realized that well-educated rabbis not only asked my son questions, but eagerly awaited his answers! I pondered this as we trudged back to Nazareth. Once we returned, however, the demands of keeping body and soul together crowded out further contemplation.

When I viewed the discarded graveclothes in this tomb, I was deeply ashamed by the memory of that time I stood with his brothers in Capernaum. James and I, especially, despaired for his sanity. We wanted to save our family from the humiliation of his madness. We tried to bring him home and keep him quiet.

His response wounded me. He denied me, in front of the crowd. "Who is my mother?" he asked. "Whoever does the will of my heavenly father is my brother, my sister, my mother." I did not realize, even then, that he was not of this world.

As I wept at his cross, however, he acknowledged his love and concern for me. He asked John to treat me as his own mother. He asked me to consider John as my son. Even in the midst of his excruciating anguish and humiliation, his last concern was for me.

Did he know I would finally understand everything—here—in his empty tomb? (MARY exits. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA enters.)

1Mark 3:33, 35