Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” 3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) 10 Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 12 They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

“They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. 15 He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). 17 Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Along the Nile River in Egypt, you usually hear about the Pyramids at Giza, but there are over one hundred pyramids built between the years 2400 BC and 300 AD. Some of these pyramids were ancient when the Israelites arrived in Egypt. Even now that a lot of them are in ruins and none of them are what they once were, they are awe-inspiring structures. They are fascinating. How they were built by hand and what all they contain is still mysterious even today. But do you remember why they were built? They were tombs. Tombs that held Egypt’s most powerful Pharaohs.
A lot of the world’s most ancient, iconic sites were built for dead people. The Taj Mahal in India. The terracotta army in China—a tomb filled with thousands of statues of soldiers that spans 22 square miles and took 700,000 laborers to build. It’s funny to think that many of history’s greatest, most powerful kings and emperors spent so much time and effort building the structures that would hold them when they were dead and gone.

I’ll tell you one king who didn’t do that. I’ll tell you one king whose tomb pretty much said he was not such a great king: Jesus. Jesus died late on Friday afternoon, and since they couldn’t bury him on the Sabbath Day, a follower of his named Joseph and another named Nicodemus put him in a newly constructed tomb that just happened to be open nearby. It wasn’t built for Jesus. It didn’t have his name anywhere on it. You just had to remember that that was where he was.

To his enemies, that tomb confirmed what they had always believed: Jesus only claimed to be a king.

To his followers, that tomb signaled the end to what they had always believed: Jesus really was a king—the king.

But on Easter Sunday, that tomb—that anonymous tomb—become the most magnificent, most memorable, most important burial place that was ever been built. A place that Christians to this day will never forget.

The Apostle John, when he wrote the words of today’s account, was afraid, I guess, that his readers might forget where this took place. “Mary went to the tomb” he writes “… She said to Peter and John, “Jesus is not in the tomb.” They started for the tomb… the tomb… the tomb, the tomb, the tomb. In case you would forget, John insists you remember, Jesus was dead.

Do you know what the Greek word for tomb is? Of course, you don’t. Why would you ever need to know that? It’s μνημείον. Mnemeion comes from a word that means to remember, or memory. A tomb is a place to remember a person who has died, right? Which is the only reason Mary went to the tomb that morning. She wasn’t expecting to find anything but Jesus’ dead body and a lot of bittersweet memories.

Which is perfectly understandable to us, right? We do the same thing. After a funeral, we follow the hearse to the cemetery. We watch as the casket is lowered to the ground. We stand there and say our final goodbyes. We talk about the person and what they meant to us. What they liked. What they were like. What they accomplished in their lifetime. We remember.

Why do kings build such elaborate tombs for themselves? So people will remember them and what they did. In Egypt, under the ruins of an ancient pyramid, there’s a burial chamber where the body of a Pharaoh named Unas once lay. It used to be filled with riches, but the body and the wealth were taken by grave robbers a long time ago. All that’s left now are the walls of the chamber, elaborately carved with intricate hieroglyphs. On those walls, there’s one particular image that pops up again and again. Can you guess what it says? Unas. It’s the man’s name. He covered the walls of his tomb with records of his accomplishments. He ascribes to himself divine power and describes how he caused the Nile River to flood each year. He tells how he defeated his enemies and held their hearts in his hands. He brags about taking any woman he wanted for
himself. His greatest accomplishment was creating a record of his life so that the generations after him would remember what he’d done. Well, we do, and he was kind of a jerk.

If any king has ever deserved to be remembered, it was Jesus. Yet what legacy did he leave behind? He didn’t even own a home, let alone a tomb. So, when the time came for him to be buried, they laid him in a stranger’s tomb.

There were no vast records of his accomplishments there. There were no treasures he’d collected over the years. There was just a body in an unmarked tomb.

But that wouldn’t stop Mary from remembering. So, with a heavy heart and tear-stained eyes, she trudged along in the gloomy pre-dawn. She came to the tomb where his body had been laid, and, as if things could not have gotten worse, she found it open and empty. Now, not only was Jesus dead and gone, his body was gone. A week after he entered Jerusalem like a king, there was nothing left to remember him by.

So, Mary frantically ran to find the disciples. Her only thought became, “I have to find his body.” So, Peter and John rushed to the tomb. They found it just as she said. Open and empty. The only proof that he’d ever been there, the linen strips and the cloth that had covered his face off to the side, neatly folded.

I always wondered why John included that detail, he says the strips of linen were there, but the cloth that covered Jesus face was off to the side. I get mentioning that they were there. Why did he have to mention that the cloth was separate? I always wondered why that mattered, until I realized that the disciple who ran to the tomb with Peter—who John calls, “the disciple whom Jesus loved”—was John himself. He wrote this account as an eyewitness. He remembered every little detail of what he saw that day. He wrote about Mary, too, what she saw. The one thing she remembered most? Just wanting to find Christ’s body.

Mary went there to the tomb to remember, but she was kept from even doing that. But remembering is never hopeful, is it? In fact, remembering is entirely hope-less. Hope looks forward. Memory looks back. Tombs are often a place to remember. You remember what you used to have with a person you loved. Tombs are rarely a place to hope. What can you look forward to when a person you loved is dead?

You can’t blame Mary, but she didn’t really understand that, did she? She was looking for memories, not hope that first Easter. She was so desperate to find Christ’s body when the last thing she should’ve wanted was to find Jesus still dead. For all the wonderful things Christ did in his lifetime that could’ve covered the walls of a thousand tombs, if he’d been in that tomb that day, all hope would’ve been lost.

But when John remembered that morning, he didn’t remember a frantic search for Jesus’ body. He remembered sprinting as fast as he could to the tomb, not daring to go in. He remembered Peter chugging along after him and, of course, going straight into the tomb. He remembered finally working up the courage to go in, and, sure enough, no body. He remembered a perfectly empty tomb, with only strips of linen and a burial cloth off to the side, neatly folded. He remembered that cloth years later. That cloth didn’t tell him a single thing about Jesus’ life. It did, though, it did hint at the most hopeful thing, he hardly dared to believe. Jesus was alive! He didn’t understand it, not
yet. He couldn’t explain it, not in that moment, but John saw that neatly folded cloth and—what does he write? “He saw and believed.” Jesus was alive.

A tomb is not typically a hopeful place. Remembering not typically a hopeful thing. But this tomb and this memory were. I picture John and Mary sitting together with the other disciples and after years of reliving that day still laughing—still just as joyful as they were that first Easter.

I picture Mary laughing sheepishly at herself as she remembers how many times she insisted that someone had taken Jesus’ body and she need to know where it was. Or how she had turned around and seen Jesus and thought he was the gardener. She had insisted that Jesus himself show her where the body was and that once he did, she would carry it back herself. Jesus was standing there alive the whole time. Of course he was alive. He said it so many times. I picture Mary remembering how she had hugged him so tight, until Jesus finally had to say, “Mary, look, I’ve gotta go. Don’t you think the other disciples might want to hear about this?”

The tombs of the people we love are not typically the most hopeful places. They’re places of remembering. But if we remember this tomb… it won’t be that way. This tomb carries the memory of hope, of a man who was dead who stood there alive and said to a woman who had lost all reason to hope, “Mary.”

The tomb of a Christian is a hopeful place. For all the long and often difficult years of this life. For all the sickness, and pain, and loss, and death we see around us that we deserve but can hardly hope to carry ourselves, we know, we believe that one day the tomb of every Christian will be the site of another mini Easter. I know that my redeemer lives and that in the end, Christ will stand outside my tomb years after I am dead and gone, when no one on earth remembers my name, and I will stand there, too, alive. He will call my name, and I will never see death again. Death will be dead then. Life will be alive forever. There will be no need for memories. Well, just one: the hopeful memory of an empty tomb and a neatly folded cloth that spoke a better message than the Great Pyramid at Giza, than the Taj Mahal, than 1000 terracotta warriors. That says to you, “Jesus is alive.” He lives. And so will you. Alleluia. Amen.