

In his book, *THERE I GO AGAIN*, Steven Moseley tells about Anna Pavlova, a Russian ballet superstar of the early 1900s. Ms. Pavlova has been acclaimed as the greatest ballerina of all time. Her most memorable performance, however, took place after her death. Anna was to play the role she made famous, the Dying Swan, at the Apollo Theatre in London. Tragically, she succumbed to pneumonia and died two days before the event. Still, on the appointed night, a crowd of her fans packed the Apollo Theatre. The orchestra began playing, the curtain rose, a spotlight flashed through the dark, and the entire audience rose to its feet. They all stood gazing at a pool of light wandering around the stage, accompanied by the orchestral theme. As the light danced and the orchestra played, they remembered Anna Pavlova. In their hearts they could see her on stage, dressed in white with flashing dark eyes. And when the music stopped at last, they gave the vanished Anna a thunderous ovation that echoed on and on in the night.

An empty stage with only a spotlight, but in each heart present she was alive.

For some, this is the experience of Easter. The Lord was crucified, he died as all of us will one day die, and he was laid in a borrowed tomb, but in the hearts of his disciples and all who believe in him, **HE LIVES FOREVER.**
An empty stage, but not an empty tomb.

This is not the testimony of the New Testament. Yes, he was crucified. Yes, he did die. Yes, he was laid in a borrowed tomb, but when the women and later his disciples came to visit his tomb on the third day, the stone had been rolled away. The borrowed tomb was empty. The grave clothes that had been wrapped around his blood-stained body were neatly folded and laid to the side. **He was not there! He was alive!** He met with them, dined with them, and reassured them—**but not as a mere memory dancing in a spotlight, but as a real person.**
This is the Easter story. Not an empty stage, but an empty tomb.

Is this important? You bet it is. **Ultimately, you and I have a choice to make. It is the most important choice we will ever face.**

IT IS WHETHER TO ACCEPT THE “EMPTY STAGE” OR TO ACCEPT THE “EMPTY TOMB.” *Does Christ merely live in the hearts of his disciples or is he really alive today just as you and I are alive?*

Remember Woody Allen's comic assessment? *"I don't want to achieve immortality through my work," he said. "I want to achieve immortality by not dying."*

Which is it? Are we immortal because there are those who remember and cherish the fact that once we walked this "vale of tears" or are we immortal because Christ has once and forever battered down the gates of death?
Empty stage or empty tomb?

DEATH IS OFTEN AN UGLY EXPERIENCE. It means separation, loss, heartache beyond description. Oh, we try to pretend it is not so.

Has anyone here ever hear of Mrs. Martin Van Butchell? I would be surprised if anyone has. She's been dead for over 200 years.

Mrs. Butchell left a will. It specified that on her death, her husband had control of her fortune only as long as her body remained above ground. I don't know what she had against being buried, but that was her stipulation.

Mausoleums were little known at the time, so the husband hired the Scottish anatomist William Hunter to embalm his dead wife. Then he dressed her in fashionable attire and put her on display in the family parlor. Daily visiting hours were held for those who wished to view the corpse inside a glass-lidded coffin.

As news of how life-like Mrs. Butchell looked spread, the art of undertaking quickly became a thriving business. Families were encouraged to soften the loss of loved ones through embalming the person to look as life-like as possible. Some embalmers, to drum up new business, took their prize corpses on tour, exhibiting embalmed

bodies in the windows of barbershops, in public halls, and at county fairs so that rural folk could get a glimpse of the latest in funeral treatment. **And the public was duly impressed.**

We disguise death in many ways. *WITH OUR LANGUAGE WE DISCRIBE DEATH IN MANY WAYS...* he passed away, she's gone, mother's no longer with us. We dress the deceased in his finest suit or her prettiest dress. We make use of the embalmer's art. Sometimes we retreat into memories of better days. Anything to keep us from dealing with the finality of death. **DEATH IS UGLY IF EASTER IS MERELY A SPOTLIGHT ON AN EMPTY STAGE.** But if it is about an empty tomb, then death is an entirely different matter. **Indeed, IF "EASTER" IS ABOUT AN "EMPTY TOMB" -- death can be seen in an entirely different light.**

Many of you know of Tony Campolo. He is one of the most entertaining and thought-provoking speakers in America today. Many of you know about his love for his home church, Mount Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia, which happens to be a predominantly black church. Tony Campolo tells about the first funeral he attended at Mount Carmel when he was twenty years old.

Clarence, a college friend of his, had been killed in a subway-train accident. At the beginning of the service, says Tony Campolo, the pastor brilliantly expounded upon what the Bible says about the promise of the resurrection and the joys of being with Christ. Then he came down from the platform and went over to the right side of the sanctuary, where the family of Tony's dead friend was seated in the first three rows. There, he spoke special words of comfort for them.

Then the pastor did a most unusual thing. He went over to the open casket and spoke as though to the corpse. He said, "Clarence! Clarence! There were a lot of things we should have said to you when you were alive that we never got around to saying to you. And I want to say them now."

What followed was a beautiful litany of memories of things that Clarence had done for many people present and for the church. The list recalled how lovingly Clarence had served others without thought of reward. When he had finished, the pastor looked at Clarence's body and said, "Well, Clarence, that's it. I've got nothing else to say except this: Good night, Clarence. Good Night!" And with that he slammed down the lid of the casket as a stunned silence fell over the congregation.

Then a beautiful smile slowly lit up the pastor's face and he shouted, ***"And I know that God is going to give Clarence a good morning!"***

With that the choir rose to its feet and started singing, "On that great gettin' up morning we shall rise, we shall rise!" As the choir sang, everyone in the congregation rose to their feet and started singing it with them. "On that great gettin' up morning we shall rise, we shall rise!" There was clapping and crying, but the tears were tears of laughter. "Celebration had broken out in the face of death. Something of a party that is to come had broken into that church...Death had been swallowed up in victory."

NO EMPTY STAGE, BUT AN EMPTY TOMB. THAT IS THE MESSAGE OF EASTER. Death has been conquered. AND SO, HAS LIFE. Because of what happened that first Easter Sunday, you and I can **WALK IN FREEDOM & DIGNITY & JOY.**

That prince of the pulpit Charles Hadley Spurgeon was walking the streets of London deep in thought when he saw a young street boy. The lad was carrying an old, bent bird cage. Inside was a tiny field sparrow. Spurgeon stopped the boy and asked him what he was going to do with the bird.

"Well..." the boy said. "I think I'll play with it for a while, and then when I'm tired of playing with it," I think I'll kill it." He made that last comment with a wicked grin.

Moved with compassion for the bird, Spurgeon asked, "How much would you sell me that bird for?"

"You don't want this bird, mister," the boy said with a chuckle. "It's just a bleeding field sparrow." But then he saw the old gentleman was serious.

"You can have this bird for two pounds," he said slyly. Two pounds at that time would be worth more than a hundred dollars today-- an astronomical price for a bird-- worth only pennies. Spurgeon paid the price, and let the bird go.

The next morning, Easter Sunday morning, an empty bird cage sat on the pulpit of the great Metropolitan Tabernacle where Spurgeon preached.

"**Let me tell you about this cage,**" Spurgeon said as he began the sermon. Then he recounted the story about the little boy and how he had purchased the bird from him at a high cost.

"I tell you this story," he said, "because that's just what Jesus did for us. You see, an evil specter called Sin had us caged up and unable to escape. But then Jesus came up to Sin and said, 'What are you going to do with those people in that cage?'"

"'These people?' Sin answered with a laugh. 'I'm going to teach them to hate each other. Then I'll play with them until I'm tired of them,'" and then I'll kill them.'

"How much to buy them back?" Jesus asked.

"With a sly grin, Sin said, 'You don't want these people, Jesus. They'll only hate you and spit on you. They'll even nail you to a cross. But if you do want to buy them, it'll cost you all your tears and all your blood---your very life!'"

Spurgeon concluded, ***"That, ladies and gentlemen, is just what Jesus did for us on the cross. He paid the ultimate, immeasurable price for all who would believe, that we might be free from the inescapable penalty of death."***

That is the message of Easter. Death has been overcome, but so has life. You and I can be free, free as that bird delivered from its cage. We can walk in dignity and joy, with purpose and power. **Christ is stronger than sin and the grave.**

TODAY...TODAY, THIS IS A STORY THAT "Putin" needs to hear. They had a contest on public radio in Russia, recently, seeking a new name for the Soviet Union. One entry suggested that in light of the disintegration of their country, **the name for their Country should be changed from the U.S.S.R. to the U.S.S. Was.**

That's what Easter is all about. Pardon the grammar, but IT IS TAKING WHAT WE ARE... and MAKING THAT WHAT WE WAS. **It is about giving us new life today and forever.**

Anna Pavlova danced in the hearts of the people who loved her and admired her. The resurrection of Jesus is MUCH MORE THAN A DANCE... WHY? **BECAUSE HE IS "ALIVE."**

HIS IS MORE THAN AN EMPTY STAGE—HIS IS AN EMPTY TOMB... A TOMB THAT PROMISES "YOU AND I" THAT WE WILL LIVE FOREVER!! Amen.