



Last at the Cross, First at the Empty Tomb

Easter, April 1, 2018

John 20:11-18

David Sunday

Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Praise the Lord! This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.

Someone has said that one of the funniest verses in the Bible is Matthew 27:65, when Pilate said to the chief priests and Pharisees, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go. Make the tomb of Jesus as secure as you can.” Well, good luck with that. How secure can you make it, when the Lord of life and glory is living in that tomb, and He’s about to crush death’s head. That was not a good day to be a guard in Jerusalem. Jesus triumphed over death. Praise Him for that.

Resurrection day is redemption day. The Bible is full of stories of redemption, which is when someone who is strong puts all his resources out in order to liberate—to set free from captivity, shame and bondage—people who are oppressed, guilty or in need of a deliverer. The Bible has lots of these stories. Think of Hosea marrying Gomer, a prostitute. Or Boaz marrying Ruth, a widow from Moab who didn’t have any children—and then she becomes part of the lineage of King David. These are redemption stories.

The original redemption story in the Bible is the story of the children of Israel when they were enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years. They needed a deliverer, so God raised up a servant named Moses. When he was born, the king tried to kill him—but he didn’t succeed. Moses survived.

As the time came for the children of Israel to be delivered from their bondage, Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and say, “God’s judgment is going to come upon you and your land if you do not repent and let the people of Israel go” (Exodus 5-10). But the slavery and bondage continue to get worse and worse. Finally, on the night of the Passover, when the people of Israel sacrifice a lamb and they are shielded by the blood of the lamb that they put over the doorposts of their homes, God’s judgment falls on Egypt, but the people of Israel go free.

They run out of their homes, make their way to the Red Sea in the middle of the night, then Pharaoh and his army chase them—and it almost looks like the enemy is going to win. But the Israelites, as they're pinned to the edge of the Red Sea, find that God opens the sea and they're able to pass through on dry ground. God sets them free. That's redemption.

As they get to the other side and are heading toward the Promised Land, they look out at the sea and see it swallowing up all of Pharaoh's army. They've been delivered from the enemy forever. There's a woman there, a woman named Miriam—who takes out her tambourine and starts dancing and singing, "Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously. The horse and the rider He has thrown into the sea" (Exodus 15). That's redemption. That's the Old Testament story of redemption. But it's not the ultimate climactic story of redemption.

I heard a pastor in Britain compare the Exodus story to the Easter story. Have you ever thought about how these two are related? Compared to the Easter story, the Exodus story is like a black and white film. It's like a sketch, and Easter is like a high resolution, surround sound, IMAX theater, grand finale of the redemption story.

Think about it. All of humanity is in bondage to sin, death and evil for thousands of years. God's people have been crying out, "O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel." God raises up a Deliverer Whose name, Jesus, means "The Lord saves." He will save His people from their sins.

A king named Herod tries to kill Him at birth, but His parents flee to Egypt and He escapes. When He is grown, He and His older cousin John begin warning the authorities and the people to repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Destruction is going to fall upon the city if they do not repent.

This story reaches its climax at Passover—the week that's being observed throughout the world this very week—when God brings His judgment down. But He provides a Substitute, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), Who is killed by the people. But all who are shielded by the blood of this Lamb are set free from God's wrath, and they are now free to live before God with a new life.

From Friday evening until the wee hours of Sunday morning, it looks like the enemy has won the victory. But as it's been said, the night is darkest just before the dawn, and I promise you, the dawn is coming. In the middle of the night, God conquers the darkness, He throws the enemy into the deep and He raises His Son, our Deliverer, from the dead. Jesus is alive. Death is conquered. Love has won. Life and Light triumph.

And who's the first person to greet this risen Redeemer, in the dawn of His glorious immortality? A woman who, in Hebrew, would be known as Miriam. But we know her as Mary—

Mary Magdalene, because she's from a town called Magdala. It was women who were the last to linger at the cross of Jesus—they stayed with Him to the end—and it was women who were the first to arrive at the empty tomb.

In the first century, whether it was Roman or Greek or Jewish law, a woman's testimony was not admissible in court. These were extremely patriarchal societies. But Jesus chooses a woman to be the first witness of His resurrection—and this is confirmation of the credibility of the account. Mary Magdalene stayed with Jesus all the way through His agony. She was there with Mary, the mother of Jesus, when they buried Him. She and the other women who were with her saw the tomb and how His body was laid, Luke tells us.

Then they returned to their homes, and they prepared spices and ointments. But they had to wait a day. They had to rest on the Sabbath day (Saturday), according to the commandment. I'd like us to pick up the story as John tells it in his Gospel (John 20). When this story is read, we can hear the drama and meaning and poignancy of it. It seems as if Mary Magdalene was unable to sleep on Saturday night. She tossed and turned.

We're told in verse one, she "*came to the tomb early, while it was still dark.*" Luke tells us other women were with her at this point, where they found the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Mary was startled. She was frightened and perplexed by this. She had heard the words Jesus had spoken before with clarity. Several times Jesus had told them, "I must go up to Jerusalem. I must suffer there many things from the elders, chief priests and scribes. I will be handed over to the Gentiles. I'll be mocked and flogged and crucified—and on the third day, I will rise again" (Luke 9:22, 18:32). Jesus had told them this. So you would think that as they came to this tomb and saw that it was empty, they would think, "Hmm. This sounds familiar. Could it be that He's risen?" But the light bulb is not turning on yet. They didn't understand. It hadn't sunk in. No one was expecting the resurrection of Jesus.

So Mary runs. She finds Simon Peter and John, and her first words are not, "Jesus is risen from the dead!" Her first words, in verse two, are, "*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.*" So Peter and John start running toward the tomb, and in verse four we see a very important point that John wants to make sure we understand. He wants us to know that he was the faster runner of the two. He outran Peter. He reached the tomb first. Plus he wants us to know, "I'm the disciple Jesus loved...just so you know." But Peter was the first one to actually go inside the tomb. We read in verses six and seven, "*He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.*"

One of the early church fathers pointed out that if robbers had stolen the body of Jesus, they surely wouldn't have gone to the trouble of unwrapping Him first. He was tightly bound by Nicodemus, as we can read in the previous chapter. Grave robbers wouldn't have gone through all that trouble, nor would they have neatly folded up the face cloth. They don't usually take time to tidy up.

So here is evidence that confirms Jesus really did rise from the dead. His grave clothes were left behind in the tomb, and the stone was rolled away—presumably not to let Jesus out, because no stone could keep Him in that tomb. No, the stone was rolled away to let the eye witnesses in, so that they could see the tomb was empty. He's no longer there. When John went in, he says in verse eight that he saw and he believed. We don't know exactly what he believed just yet, because verses nine and ten tell us, *“For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.”*

But we know why John is writing this account for us. We know that John tells us in verse 30 of this chapter that there are so many things Jesus did that aren't contained in this Gospel, but he selected these accounts with a particular purpose in mind. Look at what he says in John 20:31: *“These are written so that you (that's all of us who read this) may believe that Jesus is the Christ...”* He is God's anointed King, sent to deliver us, to redeem us. *“These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ (the redeeming King), the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”*

John wanted us to share in the resurrection life, which is why he wrote this book, and why the Holy Spirit has given these words to us in the 21st century. John wanted us to experience redemption. But what does that redemption look like? How does it happen? How do you know if redemption has happened to you? The story of Mary Magdalene in John 20:11-18 highlights three characteristics that everyone who experiences redemption shares in common:

- 1) There's a desperate need.
- 2) There is a personal encounter.
- 3) There is an unstoppable witness.

1. Redemption begins with an awareness of your desperate need.

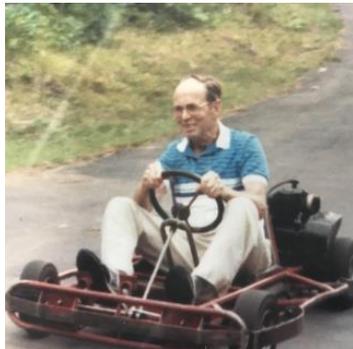
Look at verse 11. No one else has stayed at the empty tomb, *“but Mary stood weeping.”* Mary lingered. Those who love much, linger long. J.C. Ryle said, “Love made Mary linger at that tomb.” As she weeps, she stoops to look into the tomb, and behold, “two angels in white, keeping guard over the place where the body had lain—one at the head, one at the feet.” Heaven is celebrating. The monster of death has swallowed the King of life and glory, and that monster could not keep Him in. The King of heaven came forth and vanquished death.

So they say to Mary, *“Woman, why are you weeping?”* Well, Mary doesn’t realize yet that Jesus is alive. According to verse 13, all she sees is, *“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”* She can’t stop weeping, because no one has ever loved her like Jesus. Her life was lost and Jesus gave it back. Remember, this was a woman who was notoriously wicked. Luke 8:2 tells us that before she met Jesus, Mary had been possessed by seven demons.

Can you imagine what that might have been like? The hatred, the wickedness, the mental torment, the confusion, the immorality that plagued her life—she was a demon possessed woman. Not just one, but seven demons. She was under the control of evil, until Jesus set her free. He gave her life meaning and beauty and hope and forgiveness. Now if Jesus is dead, Mary’s got nothing to live for. She has nowhere else to go. There’s no hope.

Friends, Easter is for people like this. It’s for people who are hopeless without redemption. It’s for people who are broken—and they know it. It’s for people who say, “I’m willing to stake everything on the fact that Jesus is raised from the dead. If He’s not raised, I can only weep. I’ve lost hope.” Andrew Wilson says, “Easter changes everything for the desperate.” If you’re not desperate for it, then Easter might not change you. If you just think, “Well, Easter’s a nice story. But, you know, if it’s not really true, it’s not that big of a deal. If it’s not really true that Jesus rose from the dead, my life wouldn’t change that much. It wouldn’t be the end of the world for me.”

No. Easter is for people who actually believe it would be the end of the world if Jesus is not raised from the dead. All hope would be gone. There’s no hope for the future. There’s no hope for the world that all its evil can be recreated and made new, if Jesus is not raised. There’s nothing to live for that’s not going to ultimately be destroyed by death, if Jesus is not raised from the dead. I need the resurrection.



I keep these pictures of my grandparents in my office. This is my Grandpa Gene, riding a go-cart up in northern Wisconsin, where we loved to go on vacation when I was a kid. And this is my Nanna Joyce. They were sweet grandparents. They loved Jesus and they brought so much joy into my life. My Grandpa Gene died in 1995 when he was 74. He died on Kate’s birthday. And my Nanna Joyce died in 2010 on my 40th birthday. It’s kind of an odd thing. They’re gone, yet I remember them when I look at these pictures.





Then here's my Nanna Gert. She was my great-grandmother. She lived to be 103 years old! On her 100th birthday, she came down to Roselle to pray at my ordination. She's so precious to me.

And here's Nanna Hazel, my mom's mom. She just died about five years ago, in her 90s. She was such a great influence on my life. I still miss her to this day. Each one of them

were strong believers in Jesus.

I share these pictures because they remind me of the hope of the resurrection. They remind me of the hope that my grandparents are more alive today than they ever were here on earth. I'm going to see them again in glory. We're going to live forever in a new heaven and a new earth.



But if Christ is not raised, my grandparents are just dead. That's all there is. It's that grim. If Christ is not raised, friends, my preaching is useless and our faith is worthless. If Christ is not raised, we're all under the control of sin and death. We're all doomed. No wonder Mary's weeping beside the tomb. If Jesus is dead, she's desperate. Are you? Would you be desperate without a living Savior? Would it be the end of the world to you if Jesus had not been raised? For me, it would be. All hope would be gone. I wouldn't have a message to preach and we should just close up shop—close up church. Don't bother coming next Sunday. Just sleep in because it's been accurately said that if Christ is not risen, then Christianity does not matter. But if Christ has been risen, then nothing else matters more. I believe He's risen and I believe He's speaking to us today. I believe redemption comes through a personal encounter with your living Savior.

2. Redemption comes through an encounter with your living Savior.

Beginning in verse 14 we read, *"Having said this, [Mary] turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?'"* Those are two vital questions for all of us to answer today.

"Why are you weeping?" Are you weeping today because your life is a wreck? Are you weeping today because you're lonely? Are you weeping today because you're confused about who you are and what your purpose should be—what you were created to be and to do? Are you weeping today because a friend or a loved one has disappointed you or betrayed you? It's good to diagnose your tears. Why are you weeping?

Sometimes we don't know why we're weeping, so it's even more important to move to the next question in verse 14: "*Whom are you seeking?*" Are you here today because you really want to know Who God is? Are you hungry to find the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6)? Are you willing to follow the path that God sets before you in His Word, wherever His Word leads you? Are you willing to examine the claims of Jesus and really come to terms with Who He is and what He promises to be and to do for you? Will you take seriously His call to seek the Lord while He may be found and to call upon Him while He is near (Isaiah 55:6)?

Friends, God is near. He's nearer to us than we may realize, just like He was nearer to Mary Magdalene when she did not yet realize He was near. She thought He was the gardener. And do you know what? She was not completely mistaken. Where did the first creation begin? In a garden. Where did humanity's misery and ruin start? In a garden. Where did we fall for Satan's lie and choose to disobey rather than to trust God's Word? In a garden. All the misery of this world can be traced back to where? A garden.

But where did God promise Adam and Eve that from their seed would come a Son Who was going to crush the head of evil and restore His creation? Where did God make that promise? In the garden. And here He stands, on the first day of the week, at the dawning of the new creation. Where do we find the risen Lord? In a garden.

I love the Gospel Transformation Bible comments here: "The grain of gospel wheat died and was planted in a garden tomb, and now the grand harvest begins." Where there was death, He's going to bring life. Where there were thorns and thistles, He's going to bring blossoms. Where there were only dead stumps, He's going to raise up a fruitful orchard. Where there were only weeds, He's cultivating a rose festival. Where there was nothing but sin and sorrow, Jesus is going to bring beauty and gladness.

Jesus rises in a garden, friends, to "make His blessings flow far as the curse is found." All that Adam forfeited, Jesus is going to reclaim. This old world is going to be made new. And your life can be made new too, through a personal encounter with the living Lord Jesus. Mary says, "*Sir (dear gardener), if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.*"

I can just imagine Jesus thinking, "Oh Mary, I can't take this any longer. This is getting ridiculous." He cannot hold her in suspense a moment longer. All it takes is one word: "Mary." The voice that cast out the demons: "Mary." The voice that forgave her of all her guilt and shame: "Mary." The voice that restored her dignity: "Mary." The voice that brought her into friendship and fellowship. The voice that gave her purpose and stilled the storms of her heart. The voice that brought her peace. The voice that taught her wisdom: "Mary."

“She turned and said to him in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher).” My dear teacher. And she clings to Him for dear life. Now that she’s got Him back, she doesn’t want to ever let go of Him again. “You’re staying here with me, Jesus. Never leave me again.”

Friends, Jesus knows each of us as personally as He knew Mary Magdalene. He knows your name. We are fully known and fully loved by Mary’s Savior. He says, “I am the good Shepherd. I call My own sheep by name and I lead them out. My sheep hear My voice. I know them and they follow Me. I give them eternal life; they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:1-30).

You might think, “Well, I can’t see Jesus physically today like Mary could. I can’t hear His voice like she could. How can I have a personal encounter with the risen Lord?” That’s why verse 17 is such wonderful news for you and for me. Look at that verse: *“Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”*

Friends, the problem was not that Mary was touching Jesus. Jesus doesn’t have a problem with people touching Him in His resurrection body. At the end of this chapter, Thomas is going to need to touch Him in order to really believe that He’s risen. The problem is that Mary is holding on to Him. She clutching on to Him for dear life, as if He’s just her personal Savior and not the Savior and Lord of the world.

“Jesus is not just her private dream come true,” says D.A. Carson. Jesus is the Savior and Lord of the universe and He’s creating a new family. Jesus is going to ascend to the Father. He’s going to pour out His Spirit on all flesh, so that now anyone, anywhere, from any nation, can become part of His family. Millions of people are going to become part of Jesus’ family.

Friends, when you get the Spirit of Jesus, you get the Spirit of adoption. His Father becomes your Father. His God becomes your God. His Spirit fills your spirit. His victory over death becomes your everlasting life. His power over sin becomes your holiness. His future becomes your glorious destiny. His brothers and sisters in the church become your family.

So Jesus sends Mary back to His disciples who had hurt Him, who had denied Him, who had cursed Him, who had fled from Him, who are now hiding in shame. Jesus says, “Mary, tell them I want them in My family. They’re My brothers. They’re forgiven. My Father is their Father. My God is their God.” Friends, Jesus is sending the same message to you and to me today. No matter how badly you’ve failed God—no matter how wretched your life is—you can become part of the family of Jesus. You can become a new creation. You can be forgiven today.

Just his past week, I heard Pastor J.R. Vassar say, “God is not a God of second chances.” I hope that startles you a little bit. But He’s not. He’s not offering us a second chance today. He’s

not offering us a do-over. God is offering us something infinitely better than that. God is saying to us, “It’s all been done for you on the cross. I will make you a new creation.”

So to all the greedy, all the broken, guilty, ashamed, sexually promiscuous, all the bigots, racists, self-righteous and all the wicked who will come to Jesus and say, “Have mercy on me, Savior. I need You to rescue me, redeem me, change me,” He will do that for you. He will make you a new person. Not a do-over. It’s already done by Him and He will make you completely new. When you encounter Jesus, everything you used to be becomes “B.C.” —before Christ. All things start to become new. He changes you.

3. Redemption turns you into an unstoppable witness.

There’s one more thing that we must see. It’s short, but it’s very vital this Easter. Verse 18 tells us that redemption turns us into unstoppable witnesses of the risen Christ. Mary realizes now, “I have a mission to fulfill.” She’s the first Christian missionary—a woman who had been possessed by seven demons. Jesus says to her, “I’ve got work for you to do, Mary. It doesn’t matter what you used to be. What matters is who I’m making you to be. Go to My brothers and tell them I want to be family with them.”

Verse 18, *“Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’—and that he had said these things to her.”* Friends, the message of Easter really hasn’t sunk in until it has that same effect on you, until it has the effect of compelling you, propelling you, to share the message of the risen Christ with others. I love how Lesslie Newbigin puts it:

Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact? The mission of the church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving.

What’s he saying? He’s saying, “Once the risen Christ has taken hold of your life, you cannot keep it in. You cannot keep Him to yourself.” Is He your personal Savior? Yes. But He’s not your private Savior. He’s the Savior of the world. He’s the risen Lord of all nations. And once you’ve met Him, it’s irrepressible. It demands proclamation. It must be shouted from the mountains: “I have seen the Lord. Alleluia! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.” We need to respond to the risen Lord. We’re going to look at a prayer together that we should only really pray if we believe that He died on the cross for our sins. If you believe that what Jesus did on the

cross was something you desperately needed—that when He rose from the dead, it was confirmation that His payment was accepted—then this is a prayer for you to pray.

You may be praying this for the first time. You may be thinking, “I want to encounter Jesus. I’m desperate for Him. I need to know Him.” We invite you to pray this prayer with us, and then afterwards to tell us, “I prayed that prayer. I needed that prayer. I meant that prayer. I’d like to have someone call me and tell me more about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.” We’d love to talk with you more about a new life of following Jesus Christ. But it begins with surrendering to Him.

I invite you to pray this with me:

I am desperate for You, Lord Jesus. Without You, my life is empty without purpose; condemned without forgiveness; captive to sin and covered in shame. I need salvation; I cannot save myself. Thank You for accomplishing it for me! I believe Your Cross is the payment for my sins, and your Resurrection is the proof that Your payment was accepted.

I turn away today from living my life independently from You. I give myself to You, my Lord and my God. Make my life a witness to Your power to redeem all that sin has broken.

Thank You that now Your Father is my Father, Your God is my God. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Text provided by sermontranscribers.net ♦ emily@sermontranscribers.net