

## INTRODUCTION

Our Scripture reading for this Resurrection Sunday is taken from **The Gospel of John chapter 20, and verses 1-18. John 20**, and we'll begin reading in **verse 1**. Let us now hear God's Word. **(READ)**

## THE BRIDGE

Utterly unexpected!

That's what sticks out to me when I read this account of what took place on that first Easter Sunday, of how Easter itself came as a complete shock to Jesus' first disciples. For none of them awoke early that Sunday long ago to celebrate new life. None of them awoke to proclaim, 'Christ is risen!' No, they awoke to mourn, to mourn the death of Jesus, because in their minds Jesus wasn't coming back.

For after a long sorrowful Sabbath, Jesus' followers awoke that first Easter morning to the grim reminder that goodness was gone from the world because he was gone. For on the previous Friday their hopes had been dashed and their dreams crushed under the weight of a cruel Roman cross. And that's why Jesus' first followers, that first Easter morning, weren't joyful. No, they were dejected and despairing, somber and sorrowful. And in that state, some of them, specifically some women, went to the tomb to pay their final respects and simply to mourn some more, to mourn over unmet expectations and unfulfilled dreams. They simply went to be at the tomb, for in light of Jesus' death where else was there to go, what else was there to do? For from their perspective, now that Jesus was gone all that remained in the world was darkness and death. That was the sad reality of Jesus' first followers on that first Easter morning.

And it's a reality with which we're familiar, particularly in this season where we're tasting our fair share of disappointment. Where we're experiencing the deep loss of things we hold dear, such as not gathering this morning. Daily we're confronted with reports of higher death tolls all the while wondering if things will ever go back to normal, and maybe they will and maybe they won't. We don't know, and that in itself is painful. In this season, we're coming face to face with the reality of darkness and death, a reality that easily produces bitterness and cynicism, that shuts our ability to expect newness, the sort of newness that Easter brings. And that's why we need to hear the first Easter story again. We need to hear it afresh today. We need it to surprise us...to challenge us...to crack open our shriveled and weary worldviews so that Jesus' resurrection newness might flood our lives with the wonder of New Creation. New Creation given by the One who went into death and defeated death so that we might know life, abundant life, incorruptible life, life filled with God's grace and glory, the life we were made for, and that deep down we long for and seek. We need to hear this story today.

## THE FIRST SCENE

And when we do, the first thing we see is Mary Magdalene coming, coming in the dark, coming to the place of the dead, to the tomb of her Lord. And she's not alone, as **verse 2** makes clear, yet she is the one John highlights. In one sense, she's the main character of the story.

Now the last time we saw Mary in **The Gospel of John** she was standing at the foot of Jesus' cross. She *was* there when they crucified her Lord.

- She saw the nails driven into his hands and feet
- She heard his final words from the cross
- She witnessed his bow his head in death (and)
- And she saw when the soldier pierced Jesus' side ensuring that he was indeed gone, gone from the world.

On that Friday, Jesus died, and Mary knew he was dead. And like other first century people, she knew what that meant, that she'd never see him again *in* this life. More than likely, she probably believed, like so many first century Jews, that Jesus would be raised at the end of history, but that didn't mean she expected him to be raised now, to be raised in the present. For Mary had no Easter Expectation as she made her way to the place of the dead that Sunday morning while it was still dark.

And that's why when she came to the tomb and saw the large stone had been taken away, her first reaction wasn't to say, 'Christ is risen!' Rather it was to turn back and run to the disciples, particularly to Peter and to unnamed disciple, whom I take to be John, in order to relay the horrific news... **They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they've laid him.** Mary saw the stone rolled away, but for her there was only one explanation...Jesus' corpse had been stolen. For the open tomb didn't produce an inkling of hope. Rather it only furthered Mary's despair, deepening her belief that all that remained was darkness and death.

And as the story makes clear, Peter and John were no help. For when they hear Mary's news they don't say, 'Well, maybe Mary this means Jesus has been raised!' They didn't say that. Instead, they, too, run. They ran to the scene of the crime. And it's comical to watch as it unfolds. At first, they're running together and then John begins to pull away. It's a footrace to the tomb. And John, who's probably the younger of the two, bests his elder. He arrives first, *but he doesn't go in*. Rather he stoops to look into the tomb. And what does he see? Well, he sees the linen cloths, the very linen strips that would've been used to intricately wrap and bind Jesus' body for burial. He sees them lying there, 'there' being the slab or the shelf where Jesus' body would have been laid. The body of Jesus was gone and all that remained were his grave clothes.

But isn't that odd? Why would grave robbers, body snatchers, take the time to unwrap the corpse before they stole it? Weren't these sorts of things normally done in haste, for everyone at that time knew that body snatching and grave tampering were a capital offense? So if you're gonna steal a body, why take the time, why run the risk, to unwrap it first?

And notice, as John stands stooping and pondering this strange sight, up comes Peter huffing and puffing from the race. And in good Peter fashion, he doesn't stoop cautiously. No, he simply walks in boldly. And once inside the tomb he encounters an even more curious sight. He, like John, sees the linen cloths lying there on the slab, but he also sees something else...he sees the face cloth. He sees the single cloth that would have been around Jesus' head, and it's not with the other cloths. It's separated and it's all folded up all nice and neat. So not only has someone unwrapped Jesus' body before they stole it but they tidied up after themselves. And in fact, they're supposed tidiness has created a dramatic effect that makes it look as if Jesus' body wasn't actually picked up and moved at all, but that it simply vanished altogether, leaving only the shell of empty grave clothes that now looked like a deflated balloon or an empty cocoon. Now how did body snatchers do that? Such strangeness. So many questions.

And then it happens. John finally comes in. He sees it all and as the Sunday morning sun begins to dawn and light begins to fill the tomb, another light, a deeper light, begins to fill John's heart and mind, a light that makes him begin to think that *possibly* there's another explanation. For the theory that says Jesus' body was stolen doesn't match up with what John is seeing in that empty tomb that's filled only with left behind grave clothes. What he's seeing is telling him that something more mysterious and powerful has occurred in this place of darkness and death. Something that makes him think that maybe...just maybe darkness hasn't overcome, that maybe, just maybe, death hasn't triumphed.

Now we really don't know everything that was going on in John's mind. All we know is what we're told in **verse 8**, which says...**He saw and he believed**. Believed what? Well, believed that resurrection was a possibility. Now granted it was an early belief, a belief filled with remaining perplexity, for as the text goes on to say...**He saw and believed, for as yet they did not understand the Scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead**. What John was experiencing was the beginning of a resurrection belief, a belief that arose from an empty tomb and some left behind grave clothes, and it was and is strong evidence for resurrection.

Now I know that some of you tuning in this morning are skeptical about this whole bodily resurrection thing. And here's what I want to say to you: That's okay. So were Jesus' first followers. But in your skepticism, let me encourage you to keep pondering. Keep questioning. Keep looking at the evidence, evidence like an empty tomb. And as you do, ask yourself: Is my worldview large enough to entertain the possibility of resurrection? Could the one who claimed to be God in the flesh go into death and come out the other side victorious, come out the other side bodily, solidly, materially...resurrected with a life that death can no longer touch? Is your worldview big enough to entertain the possibility that Jesus was indeed resurrected? For the empty tomb is an invitation to broaden your worldview. But at the same time it encourages you to look for more evidence. An empty tomb is great. It's necessary in order to believe in the resurrection, but we need something else. In addition to the empty tomb, we need a witness. We need someone who actually saw Jesus alive from the dead. And that brings us back to Mary Magdalene.

### THE SCEOND SCENE

For notice in **verse 11** she's now back at the tomb. She's standing outside and she's weeping. Peter and John don't even stop to console her. They're too wrapped in wonder. And upon their leaving, she now stoops to look in into the tomb herself and through her tears she doesn't see the linen cloths lying there. Instead, she sees two angels clothed in white sitting on the slab where Jesus' body had been laid, one at the head and one at the foot. And the angels ask her a question, **Woman, why are you weeping?**

Now put yourself in Mary's shoes. What would you've been thinking at that moment? An empty tomb. Two angels...two angels addressing you. Would you have been thinking that possibly something amazing might have happened in this place, something mysterious, even miraculous?

Well, Mary wasn't. The angels ask her why she's crying and all she can do is repeat her previous conclusion...**They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him**. Even in the face of a spiritual experience, resurrection remains an impossibility for Mary. All Mary can fathom is darkness and death.

And as she sits in her despair looking into the tomb all of a sudden she hears something or someone behind her. So she turned around and we read in **verse 14** that...**She saw Jesus standing (not lying down as a corpse would've been, not taken away as she had thought and not wearing grave clothes, but instead wearing the clothes of resurrection and immortality)**. She sees Jesus standing...**but she didn't know it was Jesus**. She sees him. She hears him, yet she still doesn't recognize him. She thinks he's the gardener, for even as she looks at the resurrected Jesus she remains adamant that resurrection is an impossibility. That's why at this point in the story he tears continued to flow as she desperately searched for Jesus' corpse.

- For an empty tomb wasn't enough to shake Mary's resolute determination that resurrection's impossible.

- The sight of two angels wasn't enough to broaden Mary's outlook that something amazing might have occurred.
- Even the sight of Jesus himself wasn't enough to convince her that he was alive, that he was the one who desecrated his own tomb with his resurrection...that he was the one who took his corpse out of the grave, taking it from death to life

Nothing gets through to Mary, nothing can get through to Mary until, until the resurrected Jesus speaks her name...**Mary**. And it was upon hearing her name that she now recognized the voice and she turns for a second time and this time she sees him, sees him as he really is, standing alive from the dead. When Jesus said her name, resurrection impossibility became resurrection reality. And it was a resurrection reality that Jesus was inviting her into by saying her name. And notice she jumps at the invitation. She embraces Jesus, but it's upon embracing him that he gives her a mild rebuke...**Don't cling to me**. Now why would he say that?

Well, he says it because he wants Mary to know that what he's inviting her into something that's bigger than she can imagine, for he's inviting her into his resurrection life, not some meager resuscitated life. In other words, Jesus wants Mary **and us** to know that he hasn't simply been resuscitated to come back to life as it was, to in a sense get life back to normal. Rather he's been resurrected to an entirely new life, to the life of New Creation, to the life of making all things new. You see, ironically, what Jesus wants Mary to know is that one level she was right when she thought he was the gardener, for he is THE Gardener. He is the New Adam. He is the true human, the human being God always had in mind from the beginning. And as the true human, the Gardener of Creation, he's been charged with bringing it into full flower. For he's been raised to uproot the thorns and thistles so as to plant the harvests of God's loving redemption. He's been raised to make all things new (materially and spiritually), but in order for this New Creation project to go forward, he must go to the Father and he must sit down at the right hand of the Father as the rightful and resurrected Lord of creation. And it's from that position that he, in turn, gives to those who believe in him what they need most, and that his resurrection life given to us now spiritually and in the future bodily.

Mary don't to cling to me. You have to let me go, to let me go to the Father so that I might embrace you not with a hug, but with my own Spirit, with my personal resurrection life. What Jesus was saying to Mary was this: I know you want to embrace me, but I have a better embrace for you, for when I go to the Father I will send you my personal Spirit. I will put my life in yours. I will flood your life with my resurrection life. I will come to you and to all who follow me in order to put my risen life into yours, and in so doing my Father will be your Father.

My friends, in his death Jesus went into darkness and death in order to take on all our sin and shame and sorrow, and he allowed it to do its worst to him. He took the full force of it that he might extinguish it. He who is God in the flesh tasted darkness and death for us, and he did so not simply to feel it, but to conquer it. As **Saint John Chrysostom** declares in his Easter sermon...**Christ has destroyed death by undergoing death. He vexed and embittered it even as death tasted of His flesh. For death was filled with bitterness when it met Christ face to face. Death was filled with bitterness, for Christ has brought it to nothing. Christ has overthrown it, for Christ has put death in chains, binding it up forever! For when death received his body; it encountered God.** Think about that...death was encountered by God, when it encountered Christ. **Death confronted Heaven when Christ the Holy One died and therefore in his death, he gained the victory over death!**

That's why we sang this morning...**Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death.** For his death was the victory and his resurrection was the confirmation of that victory, and because he's the one who gained the victory God's New Creation has burst upon this world filled with darkness and death. Think of it this way: On a Friday, the sixth day, Jesus finished his work of defeating sin and death on the cross, and then on Saturday, the seventh day, he rested in the tomb because he'd completed his work of redemption. And after resting, he's now raised on a Sunday, Easter Sunday, which is both the eighth day and the first day, signaling that the new day New Creation has begun. And with this New Creation, birthed from the tomb, Jesus has brought a whole new newness to the world, the newness of a...

- **A New Relationship...**for in the crucified and resurrected Jesus we've been given a new relationship with God, for his Father is now our Father, our loving Father who has forgiven our sins and assured that death can never have the final word. For in Jesus sin and death are no more. In Christ your sins have been cleansed, your guilt has been removed, your shame has been erased, and you've been freed from the fear of the death itself, because in Jesus God is now your loving, forgiving and life-giving God.

But at the same time, the Resurrected Jesus has brought the newness of a...

- **A New Vocation...**an Easter vocation.

Jesus tells Mary, 'Don't cling to me, but instead go.' For he sends her and in sending her she becomes the first evangelist to the disciples. For the woman who first came to the disciples with the horrific news...**They've taken the Lord out of the tomb**, now returns to them proclaiming...**I have seen the Lord.** For Mary was given the marvelous task of making Jesus' resurrection known. For in meeting the resurrected Jesus, Mary's reality of death and darkness was transformed into the reality of light and life, and now she's called to proclaim it. And so are we. For in the resurrection, Jesus comes to us. He speaks our name. He invites us in, and then sends out that we might proclaim with our lips and lives...Christ is risen! New Creation has begun! Sin has been forgiven. Death has been defeated, and our Lord, the Lord of Heaven and earth reigns, and he's called us to make his resurrection known as...

- As we seek him who first sought us
- As we offer up to him our very lives, our circumstances, our plans and aspirations, our hopes and dreams
- As we reflect him in our homes and vocations (and)
- As we serve him by loving others in the way he's loved us with a love that's stronger than death.

For apart from the Resurrected Jesus, we're left only with darkness and death. For if Christ hasn't been raised then nothing matters. It'll all end up on the junk heap of death. But my friends, Christ has been raised, and with this resurrection he invites you in to know his life and love and he also sends you out to make his New Creation known. For he, the Gardener, has equipped you with the gardening tools of his Word and Spirit and Church, tools that enable you to declare in the face of darkness and death...Christ is risen!

## **CONCLUSION**

My friends, the tomb was empty. The Lord was seen. And today this same resurrected Lord is calling us by name, calling you away from darkness and death that you might know his light and life and love. For... Christ is risen! And death has been annihilated!  
Christ is risen! And the evil one has been cast down!  
Christ is risen! And your sin has been forgiven!  
Christ is risen! And life reigns now and will so forever!

May the resurrected Jesus be pleased to surprise you, to startle you, and to renew you today with his resurrection life. Hear his voice and live...live confidently, live joyfully, live gratefully, for you belong to the One who desecrated death that you might share in and to make known in his inexhaustible life.