

Everything Will Be Made New

John 20:1-31

As many of you know this week we experienced a crushing disappointment. We had an ultrasound scheduled for Friday, Good Friday, to find out the gender of our baby. Instead we discovered that our baby died about three weeks ago in the womb. We are heartbroken, but so thankful for the prayers and support we've received.

And even as we're still reeling in our grief, the reality is that disappointment is a common part of the human story. It's something we all experience. Sometimes it's rather petty—I thought I was going to get this for my birthday, and instead I got that. I thought this would be the year we finally took an Easter picture with all the kids smiling at the same time. But sometimes disappointment can be devastating. Losing a child. Losing your ability to walk. Losing your job. I thought that by this point in life I'd finally be married; I thought this surgery was supposed to cure my chronic back pain; I thought the chemo would kill the cancer. I thought things would get better; it looks like they're only getting worse.

And when disappointment hits us like that, it's easy to become disoriented or disillusioned—I don't know which way to go or who or what to believe anymore, or if I should even care. In a word, it's easy to lose *hope*. To give way to grief, or fear, or even cynicism. To think that there is no hope for a better world because *hope did not come in the shape that I expected*.

That's what the followers of Jesus were experiencing that first Easter morning. The first Easter did not start with fanfare and bright colors and beautiful dresses. We sing hallelujah today, but there was no Hallelujah Chorus when the women arrived at Jesus' tomb that morning. Their day started with darkness and gloom, with sadness and confusion. Their hope for a new and better world seemed all but lost. Their king, their Savior, had been crucified. Condemned as a criminal and nailed to a Roman cross. The man they had thought was on the road to coronation, to become king over all Judea, even to the ends of the earth, was instead crowned with a wreath of thorns and executed like a common criminal. Their expectations about how God was going to rescue his people and renew this broken earth were now buried in the grave, quite literally.

As the apostle John tells the story of that first Easter day, we see three different reactions to the disappointment of Jesus' apparent defeat: grief, fear, and skepticism—reactions we can identify with.¹ But we also see what happens when those reactions encounter the resurrected Christ and find that hope is *not* lost, it just came to us in a way we never expected.

Grief

Mary Magdalene, who was first to the tomb, responded to Jesus' death with *grief*. When she went to the tomb that morning, she wasn't there to see if Jesus had risen yet or not, like kids who

¹ See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 634-635, who attributes this observation to R. Kysar, *John* (Augsburg, 1986).

wake up before the sun rises on the day Grandma and Grandpa are coming to see if they're here yet. She was there to mourn and to grieve his tragic death. And so discovering the empty tomb was not a sign of hope, but of scandal and insult. Her beloved king was now not only dead, but someone had taken his body for who knows what purpose.

John 20:1-2:

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

And even after Peter and John (who refers to himself throughout the book only as "the disciple whom Jesus loved")—even after they came and investigated, and then went back home, Mary remains at the tomb weeping. "And as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb," v. 12: "And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him'" (20:11-13).

Mary can no longer cling to the hope of a new world. Her hopes died with Jesus. And so she tries instead to cling to the memory of that hope, the emblem of all she had ever dreamed of and now will never be—the body of Jesus. And many of us respond to the crushing disappointments of life in a similar way—clinging to the memorial of our loss, whatever it is—what we hoped would make things better, but now know will never be. Mary tries to cling to Jesus' body.

But it's gone. The tomb is open and the body's not there. And she's devastated and confused. And it's there—in her grief and devastation—that the resurrected Christ meets her and changes her world in ways she could have never expected. Verse 14:

Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). (20:14-16)

Beyond all hope and expectation, the man she watched suffer and die now stands before her, having conquered the grave. It's unbelievable. Unparalleled in human history. And it means that although it did not come as she expected, *hope is not lost*. Because Jesus is risen; he is bringing peace to his people and making all things new.

Upon seeing him, Mary (quite understandably) clings to Jesus, as if she's afraid of losing him again. But Jesus' death wasn't the end; it was a new beginning. And he has a mission now for Mary—to report to the disciples the victory of his resurrection and coming ascension (20:17). And she does it, she goes and announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her" (20:18). Jesus meets her in her grief, and gives her purpose and joy through the truth of his resurrection.

Fear

The disciples' reaction to the cross was somewhat different. The disciples were the twelve men (now eleven, after Judas' betrayal) whom Jesus had chosen to be his special witnesses. No doubt they were grieved as Mary was, but the reaction emphasized in this story is *fear*. Verse 19: "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for *fear* of the Jews . . ." What did they have to be afraid of? Their king and leader had just been executed; their full expectation was that they would probably be next. And so they are hiding.

And this is even after Peter and John had seen the empty tomb. That morning, when Mary Magdalene had reported that the tomb had been broken open, Peter and John ran to investigate. Verse 5: "And stooping to look in, [John] saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. 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" (20:5-7).

What could that possibly mean? If someone had stolen the body, would they really have taken time to unwrap it first? And from the description, it sounds more like the body somehow passed through the grave clothes, leaving an empty pile. Only the face cloth is specified as having been rolled up and set aside because it's no longer needed.

And it's not as though resurrection was an obvious alternative. Ancient Jews believed in a bodily resurrection from the dead; the Old Testament promised it (e.g. Dan. 12:2). But they believed it was something that would happen to all people at the end of time (cf. Jn. 11:24); they had no category for their crucified king bringing that future hope into the present. That was not something they expected.

We're not told what Peter makes of this. We are told that John saw and believed—he believed the resurrection (20:8-9). He didn't necessarily understand *why* Christ had to rise from the dead according to the Old Testament Scriptures, but he believed it happened.

And yet that evening they're all behind locked doors. Afraid for their lives. It's that fear that so often grips us when our expectations of how we think things are going to get better fall apart. So what happens now? What's next? What else will go wrong? And they're trapped in their fear . . . until Jesus appears. Middle of v. 19: "Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. . . ." (20:19-20).

Here, before their very eyes, was their resurrected Lord. There was no mistaking him. He was *real flesh*; in Luke's account, he tells us how Jesus ate a piece of fish to prove to them he wasn't a ghost (Lk. 24:41-43). It was the *same flesh*—Jesus shows them the wounds he incurred on the cross—the place where the nails pierced his hands, and the spear his side (cf. Jn. 19:31-37). Yet it was *transformed flesh*—there was something new about it. You see it here in how he's able to pass through a locked door, not unlike how he passed through the grave clothes. And elsewhere we're told that this flesh—this resurrected flesh—is immortal, never to decay again (cf. 1 Cor. 15:42-44, 53-55).

And when they saw him, John tells us the disciples were *glad* (20:20). The resurrected Jesus met them in their fear, and fear gave way to joy when they realized that all was not lost; that their

king had conquered death; that he would in fact redeem his people and make all things new—just not the way they expected.

Moreover, these very men who feared for their lives would become the messengers of Christ's new kingdom. Verse 21: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld'" (20:21-23). Jesus entrusts his apostles with the keys of the kingdom—the message of the gospel. The hope that the sin and shame that separate us from God—all our disobedience and rebellion—it can all be forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ. There is hope for a new and better life through the cross and resurrection of Christ.

Skepticism

And yet not everyone is convinced. One unfortunate disciple was absent from that first meeting, and there is nothing his companions can do or say that will convince him to ever hope again.

Verse 24:

Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." (20:24-25)

Thomas responds to the cross, like his fellow disciples, with fear. But he responds to news of the resurrection with skepticism. Not because dead people don't come alive again; everyone knew that. It's not like we needed modern science to clarify that for us; of course it would have to be a miracle from God. His skepticism isn't over whether God *could* raise the dead, but whether he *did*. And until he had proof, he was unwilling to believe.

And many of us share that skepticism. Not merely skepticism over whether the resurrection is true, but cynicism over whether we should hope for anything good again. Sometimes, when we have hoped so deeply and believed so strongly that things were going to change, that something good was going to come along, and it doesn't, it's easier to stop hoping than to risk being hurt again. To risk being let down one more time. We need proof.

And what's amazing here is that Jesus doesn't rebuke Thomas for his unbelief; he meets him in his doubt and skepticism, and invites him to believe. Verse 26:

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." (20:26-27)

And listen to Thomas's response—one of the greatest declarations of faith recorded in the whole New Testament: "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). Thomas recognized that in seeing the resurrected Christ, he was looking into the face of God.

The resurrected Jesus met Thomas in his skepticism, and doubt gave way to faith. He met Mary in her grief, the disciples in their fear. Where will he meet you?

The answer? *Wherever you are*. Wherever you are, Jesus invites you to believe, because his resurrection truly changes everything.

Hope

It's probably not the answer to how we thought our problems would be solved, or our dreams would be realized. But the resurrection of Christ offers something so much better. It offers real and lasting *peace*; it brings wholeness to whatever is broken in our lives.

Notice how in each of his appearances in this story, the first words out of Jesus' mouth are, "Peace be with you" (vv. 19, 21, 26). And whereas that was certainly a common greeting back then (as it is today), peace is also something Jesus specifically promised his followers: "I have said these things to you, that *in me* you may have *peace*. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (16:33). And he's not just talking about the absence of conflict; kids no longer fighting in the backseat when we're trying to talk on the phone. He's talking about *shalom*, wholeness, *the world as it was meant to be*. He's talking about everything that is wrong with this broken world finally being made right again *in him*.

One of the beautiful things about John's account of the resurrection is how he frames it with allusions to the first creation account in Genesis. He wants us to see in the cross and resurrection an echo of God's first creation, so that we understand that what God is doing here is launching *new creation*. He is making all things new. As God completed his creative work on the sixth day by making man in his own image, so Jesus is crucified on the sixth day, Good Friday, paying the penalty for sinful man and announcing with his final words, "it is finished!" (19:30). Just as God rested on the seventh day from all his labor, so Jesus rests in the tomb on the seventh day, Holy Saturday, having completed his work of redemption on the cross. Twice John emphasizes that Jesus rose on the "first day" of the week (20:1, 19)—Sunday. His resurrection marks the beginning of God's new creation. John points out that Jesus is buried in a garden (19:41)—the same setting as the first creation; and Jesus is even mistaken as a gardener (20:15)—a fitting association with the first gardener, Adam. When Jesus equips his disciples for their mission and breathes on them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (20:22), it's an echo of how God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7).²

Through the resurrection of Jesus, everything will be made new. Like the first spring crocus that pierces the winter snow, the new world God promised has broken through the surface, with the resurrection of Christ as the firstfruits and down payment of a new world to come (1 Cor. 15:20-26).

The fullness of that new creation waits for the end, when Jesus comes again. In that day the Bible tells us that "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). No more will we wake up with legs that don't work the way they're supposed to. No longer will we our hearts break with disappointment in this fallen world. No longer will we "labor in vain or bear children for calamity" (Isa. 65:23). As Isaiah promised so long ago, in that day:

[God] will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. ⁹ It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he

² See N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 39-40.

might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." (Isa. 25:8-9).

But here's the miracle and mystery: The peace and wholeness that God promises for that day is *already* present in part through the cross and resurrection of Christ. The God who raised Jesus from the dead has the power to heal our broken hearts, our broken relationships, our broken bodies, our broken marriages.

And it begins by healing our broken relationship with God. Whether we realize it or not, our greatest problem in this world the loss of a job, a lack of friends, the loss of a child, a lack of money, or opportunities, or health, or self-confidence. Our greatest problem in this world is that *we are sinners against a holy God*. And that sin, that rebellious disobedience, spoils our relationship and brings us under God's righteous judgment.

But the message of Good Friday is that the judgment we deserve has *already* been poured out on God's Son in our place. Jesus Christ died willingly for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18). And the message of Easter is that there really is new life in Jesus Christ. Easter proves to us that Jesus did not die for his own sins. If he had sin, death would have had a rightful claim on him. It had none, and therefore could not hold him. He broke the power of death and brings forgiveness and new life in a way we could have never expected. He makes us part of God's new creation. And if his cross and resurrection are able to deal with our greatest problem, then why wouldn't we find in them a solution to all the other problems as well?

Hope for a better life, a better world, doesn't always come the way we thought it would. But that's no reason to give up hope. The resurrection may not be the hope we were looking for; but it's the hope that we truly need. Jesus is making all things new. And he wants to make your life new—*wherever you are*—to meet you there with the forgiveness of the cross and the peace of the resurrection—if you will believe in him. If you will follow Mary's, and the disciples', and even Thomas' example, and *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the eternal Son of God, so that by believing you may have *life* in his name (20:30-31). Even we who have not seen the resurrected Christ with our own eyes, but rely instead on the testimony of his apostles—which is in fact a very reliable historical witness—Jesus invites us who have not seen to *believe*. He says to Thomas in v. 29, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus is speaking there to us. Will you hear that invitation this morning? Will you experience that blessing through faith in Jesus Christ, and find in him the hope you didn't even know you were looking for?