

Finding Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. It's good to be with you. I was thinking about this as I was preparing this sermon. You know, what are my goals when I preach? And one of my goals is actually captured by a prayer that was attributed to Richard of Chichester, which of course you'll all know.

He was an English bishop who lived in the 13th century, and his prayer goes like this. We thank you, our Father, for all the benefits you've given us in your Son, Jesus Christ, our most merciful Redeemer, friend, and brother, and for all the pain and insults he has borne for us.

And we pray that we may know Jesus more intimately, love him more deeply, and follow him more closely, him who lives and reigns with you in the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

And this part in the bishop's prayer was that we would know Jesus more intimately, love him more deeply, and follow him more closely is what I hope always is what comes out of my preaching. And I've often said I love looking at the Gospels because we get to zoom in close and look at particular things about Jesus. Our passage this morning that Lisa read sits in a context, and I want to talk about a few things that are going on in this context of Scripture, and then take a couple looks at a few things about knowing Jesus. For me, John's gospel is one that I resonate with the most. You're not supposed to have favorites, but I do like John. John is the brother of James. He is Peter's fisher friend, and he crafted a very rich and sophisticated narrative about Jesus, of course with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But I think the Holy Spirit had a lot to work with with a guy who started his life in the lake fish trade. So never underestimate anybody. And to put our passage in context, it sits in the second of two blocks of text. The first block I will call from the cross to the empty tomb. And it starts with the death of Jesus, and it includes everything that happens between then until the morning of the third day when Jesus is resurrected. And the second block I'll call the empty tomb to the ascension. It starts from that moment of the empty tomb, includes everything that goes up to the ascension. There's a lot in there. I'm not going to cover all of it this morning, but I'm going to look at a couple things. Our passage sits in that second block between the empty tomb and the ascension. And it focuses on Jesus appearing to his disciples first time, to the group without Thomas, a second time to the group with Thomas. And so why am I taking this big wide lens? Well, I think when you look at things in context, you get to see some of the key points that are actually being made. And for John's gospel in particular, given that it is such a well-constructed narrative, you can't just pick out bits and pieces. John intends things to be read as a story.

[3 : 0 8] So let's take a look at that first block of text. So in that period from the cross to the empty tomb, Jesus is dead. We always read Jesus's death from the cross, on the cross, from the vantage point of Easter. That is, whenever we read scripture, we read it already knowing Jesus is going to be raised from the dead, that he is in fact alive. And I'm going to say that I think we don't just read this part through the lens of Easter, but we read it knowing that Jesus had told his disciples three times at least that this was all going to happen. And that two, at least one or two of those times when he talked about it, he said he would rise from the dead. But for those who were there at the time, Jesus's friends who witnessed his death, they didn't have the Easter vantage point. And for some reason, his words to them during his earthly ministry didn't either make sense or weren't coming back to mind when Jesus died. For those close to Jesus, when he died, the cross and all those days that followed, that time between the cross and the empty tomb, were inexpressibly dark. Their friend was brutally killed, and with his death, so died their faith that the Messiah had come and started something new. Along with that was the death of belief that evil was being rolled back and God's promises were coming true, and that everyone in the world would finally be freed of much sin and pain. Jesus's friends who witnessed his death were grief-struck, broken-hearted, traumatized, and broken in faith.

So what was happening in this dark time? Well, the main group of disciples were locked in a room in fear, and understandably so. But what we see is a secondary group of followers of Jesus doing some things. First, we read about Joseph of Arimathea, and not just John, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all four Gospels. In John, we find out that Nicodemus went with him. These were two secret followers of Jesus who ended their secrecy that day and went public about following Jesus. And they went boldly to Pilate and asked for his body, took it down, instead of letting it be left up on the cross for a few days, as was common practice for Romans. And they put it in a nearby tomb, wrapping his body in linen with spices, about 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe. And the second thing we read is that Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus' mother, and it seems like a third woman, I think Joanna, went to Jesus' tomb early in the morning of the third day to do the same thing. They brought their own spices and ointments. And when they found the empty tomb, they went and told the main group of disciples, the 12, and only two of them went to go see if this was true. These are secondary followers of Jesus. The whole time in the Gospels, we've been focusing on the 12. But these secondary followers of Jesus did something at a time that was intensely spiritually dark. They sought Jesus.

What they had in common was their grief and their broken faith, and they still went looking for him. And they didn't just go look for him. They went to adore and worship him. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus cared for Jesus' body, dignifying it with proper burial, and they honored him.

There was every bit like Mary, sister of Martha, who anointed Jesus with expensive perfume days before his burial, adoring and worshiping Jesus like she did. Mary Magdalene, Jesus' mother, Mary Joanna, all came to do the same thing. They came with ointments and spices to lavish on Jesus' body and honor him.

And John draws our attention to these so-called lesser characters, these followers of Jesus who are secondary in the narrative to the main group, as examples for us to follow that we may also find Jesus. When it is the spiritually darkest, your heart is broken, your faith is shattered, keep seeking Jesus. Keep worshiping him.

[7 : 19] Because although they saw a dead body before them, the dark was going to turn to light, and the night to day, and death to life, beyond what they could imagine and sooner than they could know.

So right now, you're seeking Jesus in your current darkness. I want you to know it pleases the Lord immensely. Your dawn will break into darkness sooner than you think, so keep going. Keep seeking.

Keep worshiping, even if it all feels dead right now. The next block of text, which comes after the first, is the empty tomb to the ascension. And it's very, very light. Lighter than any of the disciples can comprehend. There's a lot of intuiting right now, more than knowing in the head.

And between these two blocks, there's a profound pivot. In the first block, from the cross to the empty tomb, it is people seeking Jesus. And in the second block, from the empty tomb to the ascension, it's now Jesus who seeks people. If in this first block, it was the initiative was on people, the second block, we see the initiative on Jesus. And there's a lot, a lot of moments like this, of Jesus going looking for people after he resurrected. And it's worth mentioning a bunch of them, because when you see it all together, you start to see, you start to see a picture of what Jesus was doing in the days right after he resurrected. In John, early in the morning, of course, right after he resurrected, when the other women leave the tomb, Mary Magdalene stays around. And Jesus approaches her, though at first she doesn't recognize him. In Luke, that same evening, two disciples, Cleopas and one other unnamed are going to Emmaus, when Jesus approaches them and joins them. And only later at the table do they recognize him. In Luke, and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we learn that Jesus came to Peter sometime during the same evening when Jesus joined Cleopas and the other disciple on the road to Emmaus. And then in Luke and John, when the two disciples come back from Emmaus, back to Jerusalem, Jesus comes to the disciples who are gathered there, minus Thomas, of course. And this time they recognize him, but with a mix of fear and joy. And a week later, Jesus comes to them again, this time when Thomas is in the room.

[9 : 40] Even again later in John, the disciples are fishing all night, and in the morning they see Jesus calling to them from the beach. Only John recognizes him at first. This one was, this one I completely forgot about, honestly, when I think about what was Jesus doing. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that Jesus came to the 12 disciples, which we read about in the Gospels. But he says Jesus

also came to a gathering of about 500 people at one time. And then he also came to his brother James.

And there's even more examples. We should notice with this list is the number of times in scriptures that Jesus, now resurrected, goes after his people and seeks them out vastly exceeds the number of times that people are seeking him. And the people Jesus seeks are everybody. His main followers, the so-called lesser followers, men, women, disciples we know, some we didn't know about, like Cleopas, right? The first time he's mentioned, I think, is when he's on the road to Emmaus, but apparently he was there the whole time. And then there are even those who are never named, like Cleopas' friend. I think it's amazing that Jesus appeared to 500 people in a single gathering. And if he was trying to communicate that he is raised from the dead, I would have thought he would do that more often. He probably needed probably about five good big gathering appearances, and everybody would have been like, he's alive, and he can move on with things. So why did he not do that more? Why did he go meet with so many people individually?

And there's a short and simple answer. He loved them. He knew these people. Jesus came to these people, some of whom that we don't know, and we don't even know their names, because he knows them, and he loved them. They mattered to him. They had hurting, broken hearts, and broken faith, and so he went looking for them. He could have showed up in front of a big crowd, and they would have said, yep, yep, he's alive. But Jesus said, it's important that I go to individuals, and I come alongside of them, and I connect with them in the place of their hurting hearts.

And it's good to look at a couple examples. So Mary Magdalene standing outside the tomb. When she stood outside the tomb, she wasn't sure what to do next. She was confused by what felt like one more blow to her. Jesus's body has now been taken, and she, beyond her reach, and she'll never be able to see it again. It's like she was as ready for death to overtake her now and be as final as the tomb was behind her. She just sat by the tomb, not sure where to go next. But then she heard, the one who created her and now saved her speak her name. She heard the voice of love, and it was unmistakable to her. Faith returned, and joy followed. And Mary knew not only that Jesus was really alive, but she knew herself as the one he loves, as the one known and loved by him.

And it's the same for us. We know Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, when he speaks our name. Take Thomas, for example. Thomas struggled throughout the Gospel of John to believe that Jesus really was stronger than death. He didn't think Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead.

[13 : 07] He was convinced instead that they're all going to die. And he couldn't accept it when Jesus said he would go away to the Father. Thomas's worst suspicions seemed to have come true when Jesus died.

And when his friends came and said, we saw him alive, he just refused to believe it until he had tangible proof. So when Jesus came to the group when Thomas was there, he immediately turned to Thomas and showed him his hands and side and replayed Thomas's very words back to him, like he was there with Thomas in that other conversation the whole time. He met Thomas with gentleness. Everybody calls him Doubting Thomas. I think he gets a bad rap. Thomas was hurt, and his faith was shattered. And I see Jesus coming to him in great gentleness, meeting him in his place of broken faith.

And when Thomas saw Jesus' wounds, it wasn't just that he knew it was Jesus because he saw the one who was crucified now alive. But when he saw the wounds on Jesus now alive, he knew that death, this thing he struggled with his whole life, was actually, in fact, forever defeated. And he shouted his confession of faith, my Lord and my God. And it's the same for us. When we see Jesus' wounds, whether in the scriptures or in the breaking of the bread, we know him by his wounds that he took for us.

Peter. So after they had their kind of camping breakfast on the beach, Jesus turns to Peter and says to him three times, do you love me? And he wasn't rubbing anything in. He wasn't trying to make a point to Peter. But he was making Peter dig down and own a deeper truth inside himself, inside his heart, a truth that was deeper than his earlier betrayal, the truth that he loves Jesus more than anything, despite his betrayal. And when Jesus drew out of Peter this deeper understanding of his identity, and that he is someone Jesus loves and is forgiven, and is someone who actually truly does love Jesus, Jesus then restored Peter's purpose and call. And it's the same for us. We know Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, when he calls out our identity and our purpose. So friends, I hope when you read these scriptures and when you consider the scriptures that we read and the context they sit in, that you saw Jesus and your vision of him is renewed. And so I'll echo this again. If

you're in a time of spiritual darkness right now, don't quit. Don't give up. If you don't quit, you win. It's actually true.

Keep seeking him. Keep worshiping. The dawn and the life that on the other side of death is closer than you think. And if you wonder whether Jesus will come looking for you in your spiritual darkness or in your pain when you have nothing left to give, or because you think you've gone too far and can't get back, the answer is he will come for you because he knows you and he loves you. He'll meet you right where you are. These things are important things to pray about on your own. But if you want to pray with someone about any of these things, please reach out. Reach out for prayer. Reach out to me. Reach out to Hillary. We'd love to come alongside of you and pray alongside of you to see Jesus reach out to you and come find you. So let me pray with the prayer I prayed at the start to close. Thank you, our Father, for all the benefits you've given us in your Son, Jesus Christ, our most merciful Redeemer, friend, and brother, and for all the pain and insults he has borne for us. We pray that we may know Jesus more intimately, love him more deeply, and follow him more closely. He who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

[17:17] Let's make it our prayer that we would seek and find Jesus. Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart. Not be all else to me, save that thou art. Thou my best thought, by day or by night. Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light. High King of Heaven, my victory won. May I reach Heaven's joys, O bright and sun. Heart of my own heart. Whatever befall. Still be my vision, O ruler of all.

Let's join our voices with all saints across time and space, confessing our faith, using the words of the Nicene Creed. We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty.