

News that has to be shared

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[0:00] Again, happy Easter. Welcome to Church of the Advent. My name is Thomas. I'm the rector here and we're delighted to welcome you this morning. Hands down my favorite time of the year, Easter Sunday, and especially wonderful to be here in this new church home, this new space. Many of you have been a part of making this happen.

So we are deeply indebted to you and to the Lord for his goodness in bringing us here. There's a musician named Joshua Bell whom you may be familiar with. He's considered to be one of the finest classical musicians in our era. Widely recognized, many, many awards and recognitions. And Joshua Bell typically charges about \$1,000 a minute to play wherever he plays. Years back, the Washington Post, and those of you who have been around D.C. for a long time may remember this, the Washington Post brought Joshua Bell in to try a little social experiment. And they set him up at a metro stop on a busy weekday morning, and they asked him to play for 45 minutes at the metro stop. Joshua Bell, one of the finest musicians in the world, played some of the most beautiful music ever composed in human history on a Stradivarius violin worth, at that time, \$3.5 million.

One of the finest instruments in the world. One of the finest instruments in existence. Over 1,000 people passed by that morning on their way to work and various things. How many people do you think stopped?

[1:42] Seven. Over 1,000 people passed by. Seven people stopped to listen. And whatever the reason might be for these people going on their way, maybe they were busy, maybe they were late, maybe they were distracted.

This is the same year the iPhone came out. It was in 2007, so maybe that had something to do with it. Or maybe they just weren't music aficionados. Whatever their reasons might be. You read about that story and it immediately provoked and said, if that had been me, if I had been walking by that morning at that metro stop in downtown D.C., would I have stopped?

Would I have looked? Would I have recognized the significance of what was happening right in front of my face? Or would I have missed it? Would I have missed it?

Second glance. But those who have stopped and those who have looked and those who have come to understand the significance of that moment have had their lives transformed.

And those of you who are part of our church who know my story know that is exactly what happened to me at age 22. I stopped. I looked. I didn't know what I was expecting to find, but it ended up changing the course of my entire life.

[3:26] I came to realize that what we're dealing with when we talk about the resurrection of Jesus is not a myth. It's not a fanciful idea that got a religion going. It's actually a historic fact.

And it presents the world with a question of what do you believe? How do you make sense of the empty tomb? And this morning we're going to look at the very first person to stop and look.

The very first person in history to come to understand the significance of the empty tomb. The first witness. St. Augustine referred to her as the apostle to the apostles because she's the one that Jesus commissioned to go and tell the other apostles about the meaning of the tomb.

And of course, we're talking about Mary Magdalene. So we're going to look at Mary Magdalene in John chapter 20. She gives us a beautiful example of how to stop and look and investigate and ultimately come to believe in the resurrection.

She shows us that faith is what happens when honest inquiry meets divine grace and they come together. Let's pray. Our heavenly father, we thank you for this morning and the joy that is so evident here.

[4:34] Your presence, which is so obvious here. Lord, I thank you that in whatever state we came in this morning, whatever we were expecting, whatever might be tugging at the edges of our mind, distracting us.

We thank you that you're here with us and it's your voice we seek. Lord, not human thoughts or wisdom, but your voice speaking to each one of us. Lord, we pray and that we would have open hearts.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So the first thing we see in Mary and her encounter with the tomb is we see a beautiful example of what we would call honest inquiry.

The first thing we learn about Mary in this passage is that Mary is not naive. She doesn't show up expecting a miracle and that's extremely important.

She shows up expecting a body. She shows up expecting to grieve by the dead body of the teacher and mentor that she had come to love and follow.

[5:34] And so when she sees that the tomb is empty, her first thought is not resurrection. Her first thought is grave robbers. Her first thought is somebody has done something awful and we have to figure out where they've hidden his body.

And the gospel writer, John, who wrote this account, tells us that the disciples did not yet understand the scriptures about the resurrection. Nobody was expecting resurrection.

Nobody was thinking this is what was going to happen. And that's important because it's easy to assume that people way back then were simply more gullible. You think the people lived a couple of thousand years ago are just more primitive, they're more superstitious, they're more prone to believe these fanciful ideas, but we've moved on.

And now on the far side of the Enlightenment, we've become much more sophisticated. C.S. Lewis rightly called this kind of assumption chronological snobbery.

The idea that we're somehow inherently smarter than people who lived before us. The truth is, if we look at historical record, the idea of a bodily resurrection like this was no more plausible in the first century than it would be today.

[6:44] People would think that was utterly absurd. Utterly ridiculous. So Mary has no idea how to make sense of the empty tomb. And at first she makes lots of wrong assumptions.

But here's the thing, she's willing to investigate. And that's the example that she sets. Even after the other disciples come and they see the empty tomb and then they leave, Mary refuses to leave.

And by the way, I love how it describes, you know, this is written by John and John refers to himself as the one whom Jesus loved. And there's a little foot race that happens. And it says, you know, between Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved and they're both racing to the tomb.

And he just slips in there. And by the way, the disciple whom Jesus loved made it there first. You know, he's like, I won that race, by the way. And then he keeps telling us the story. But they run, they see, they don't understand.

And then they leave. But Mary stays. And she sits by the tomb. And she says, essentially, I'm not leaving until I understand what happened.

[7:47] And that, my friends, is a beautiful example of honest inquiry. And by that phrase, I simply mean this, that you're willing to look at the evidence for the resurrection with a genuine desire to know the truth.

With no preconceived notions, you're willing to consider the evidence. And friends, there is compelling evidence. This is something that I didn't fully understand in the years before I came to faith.

The gospels, which are the first four books of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are written as eyewitness accounts. And we have these gospels in their original languages.

And scholars used to claim, well, of course, these are written hundreds of years after all of this has happened. But that scholarship is actually outdated. The most recent scholarship has determined that these accounts were written much earlier than previously thought.

So if you want to read more about that, pick up Richard Baucom's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. These accounts were written within the lifetime of people who were around when all this happened. [8:55] And the fact that these are eyewitness accounts helps us make sense of why all these random details are included. This isn't the kind of story that you read and it says, once upon a time in a land far, far away, there lived a man who overcame death.

It's not written like that. It's written in a much more detailed and sometimes meaningless detailed kind of way. So John tells us that there was a miraculous catch of fish due to encountering Jesus. And so all these fish are caught in the net after the disciples encounter the resurrected Jesus. And then he says it was 153 fish to be exact. And I'm sure that there are preachers out there who have said, well, 153 has spiritual significance.

And it stands for the exact number of vertebrae in your spine or something like that. I don't know. But there's no spiritual significance. It's simply a detail that he's including because it's true, because that's what happened.

And that's what they remember. Remember how many? There were 153. You remember we counted them. Right? This is why Luke tells us that the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples and he's hungry.

[9:59] He's been through a lot. And he says, can I, and I'm hungry. Is there anything to eat? And they say, so we gave him a piece of broiled fish. There's no spiritual significance to broiled fish.

I mean, it's good to eat, but there's no meaning to that. It's just a detail because this is an eyewitness account. This is why we get the names and hometowns of people, even when they're not really relevant to the story.

And in John chapter 18, a couple of chapters earlier in this same gospel, after reading about the servant who got his ear cut off, there's a little parenthetical statement where it says the servant's name was Malchus.

That's the only time we see Malchus. He doesn't play any, all he does in the story is get his ear cut off and healed. And what we need to understand is these references are like the first century equivalent of footnotes.

So if you're writing a historic account, you're footnoting it by saying things like, hey, the eyewitness is still alive. You might not have been in the garden when that happened.

[10:59] But if you want to check, the servant's name was Malchus and Malchus lives in Jerusalem. Go find Malchus and ask him and he'll tell you the same thing. See, this is incredibly significant.

Most other religions, with all due respect, start because someone has, typically a man has a private dream or a private revelation from God or some private experience or private insight that occurs only to them.

And then that one person tells everyone else and says, essentially, you're just going to have to take my word for it. So there's no way to, again, with all due respect, there's no way to disprove Muhammad's claim of revelation.

There's no way to disprove Joseph Smith or the Buddha or Confucius. You either take them at their word or not, but there's no way to falsify objectively what they're saying because there were no witnesses.

Christianity, friends, is completely different. Christianity does not hinge on private revelation. It doesn't hinge on even the things that Jesus said.

[12:07] Christianity hinges on the very public things that Jesus did. Very unique. Jesus had a very public ministry. He had a very public death.

He had a public burial. He had a public resurrection. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that after the resurrection, there were over 500 people, many of whom are still alive when he's writing, who were witnesses of the resurrected Jesus.

Now, if you're trying to make a story up to get a religion going, you're not going to say, if over 500 people saw this, go ask them because those people are still alive when Paul's writing this.

You know, in Acts chapter 26, Paul says to King Agrippa, they're talking about the resurrection, and he says to the king, he doesn't say, you're just going to have to take my word for it, O king. He says,

you know that these things are true.

He says, you know that this didn't happen in a corner because this is public knowledge. The whole, everybody was buzzing about it. The debate in the first century was not about whether or not this happened.

[13:14] The debate was how to make sense of it. It was so public. It was so, you have, there were many powerful people who were doing everything they could possibly do to discredit Jesus and the disciples.

But you never see them saying, oh, it didn't happen. It's all, they're making it all up. They're attributing these things to demons. They're trying to discredit it in other ways because the fact is, there were too many witnesses for them to even try to argue that it didn't happen.

So that's the first thing. These eyewitness accounts that we have with all kinds of details and footnotes challenging us. Hey, go out. We're making our religion openly falsifiable.

Go, check for yourself. The second reason, or just the second of many, we don't have time this morning to go through all the evidence, but another thing, given the passage that we're looking at this morning that I think is relevant, one of the other reasons why I think the claims of the resurrection are credible is that the primary witnesses were women.

And that's a big deal. In this culture, if you wanted to make up a credible story to launch a religion, to begin to have influence or whatever your motivation might be, you would never use women as your primary star witnesses.

[14:32] And it's hard to say that in our day, in our culture, but Celsus, the second century critic of Christianity, so here's another person in the second century trying to discredit Christianity and Christians.

he openly mocks the idea of Mary Magdalene as an alleged resurrection witness. He refers to her as a hysterical female deluded by sorcery.

And I would love to be able to tell you that he was an outlier. That reflects some of the broadly held assumptions about the credibility of women's testimony. So if you wanted to make up a credible story to convince the world of something like the resurrection, you would never use women as your star witnesses.

So then we say, well, why do Matthew and Mark and Luke and John all say that women were the first and primary witnesses of the resurrection? I mean, I hate to say it, but they're probably saying, oh, nobody's gonna believe this.

So why would they do it? Well, the only reason it's there is because it's true. It's because that's what happened. And so they're writing it down, maybe even cringing while they do it. This is gonna hurt our case.

[15:40] So if you're here and you're not sure what you believe about the resurrection, let me ask you this. Are you open to a little honest inquiry? Are you open to following the evidence wherever it leads?

A lot of people I would say, and even conversations I've had, and again, this was my experience at one point, a lot of people reject Christianity not because it lacks evidence, but because they've never examined the evidence.

Years back, NPR played an April Fool's Day prank. You may remember this. They posted a fake headline on social media and the headline said, why doesn't America read anymore?

Okay. And if you actually clicked on that headline link, it would take you to a page that said April Fool's, right? It wasn't a real article, but guess what happened online, right?

People, it was a feeding frenzy and people were posting all kinds of things in response to this article and all the, you know, they were just tearing into it. The society's falling apart and nobody reads. And, but of course, they're saying, but I read, but other people are worse and they don't read.

[16:44] And so there's all kinds of virtue signaling that just takes off, right? And of course, it was this beautifully ironic joke on the people who only read the headline and then made all kinds of assumptions.

And I love that kind of joke. It's a wonderful prank. Honest inquiry means that when it comes to the empty tomb and the resurrection, you don't just read the headline and make your assumptions. You consider the evidence. You consider the claims. Read N.T. Wright's Resurrection of the Son of God. Read Richard Baucom's Jesus and the Eyewitnesses.

Consider the evidence. N.T. Wright's book is a doorstop. It's about that thick. It'll be good summer reading. Read it. He's one of the foremost Bible scholars in the world right now.

If this is true, friends, if Jesus has opened the way to God, if he has conquered sin and death, isn't that worth your full attention?

[17:50] Now, having said that, honest inquiry is not the only component of genuine faith. It's necessary, but it is not sufficient for genuine faith.

There is also a role played by divine grace. Divine grace. Mary's standing by the tomb. She's weeping. But then she turns and she sees Jesus, but she doesn't recognize him, which is very interesting.

She doesn't recognize him. She's looking directly at the answer to her question. She's looking directly into his face, but she doesn't see it.

Until what? He speaks her name. And as soon as he speaks her name, Mary, her eyes are open, she realizes who she's looking at, right?

She's filled with joy. Everything changes. Here's what this means. Faith is not just something you can reason your way into. I know I just gave you a whole bunch of evidence, but that will not get you all the way there.

[18:55] There's a lot of amazing evidence, but you cannot reason your way into faith because ultimately, we're dealing with something spiritual. Ultimately, this is something that God has to awaken in you.

You can examine the evidence. You can read the scriptures. You can talk to Christians who have strong arguments for their faith, but at some point, Jesus has to call your name. There's something in us, and maybe you have experiences, there's something in us that is resistant to the truths of Christianity.

There's a kind of spiritual resistance, maybe even a spiritual blindness. In other words, we're not coming from a spiritually neutral place. I love reading honest atheists, and I love the honesty of Aldous Huxley, and he has a book of essays called Ends and Means, and he says essentially, he kind of confesses in one of his essays, he says, you know, all of my friends and I, all of us who hung out, all these kind of smart academics who were all atheists for the most part, he says, if I'm really honest, we were all motivated to reject the idea of God or that the world has any meaning because by rejecting that, it was a way for us to avoid any kind of accountability to anything bigger than us.

As soon as you start to believe that there is something out there, that there is a God, that there is a reason that you're here, that there's a purpose to your life, then you're accountable to something. Outside of your, there are all of a sudden standards that matter that are bigger than you, that you don't get to determine.

And he says, you know, my friends and I, if we're totally honest, we didn't even consider the idea of God because we didn't want to be accountable to that. If Jesus rose from death, it means he is the most important being who ever lived.

[20:45] It means every single word of his is more important than any word ever spoken by anyone ever. It means that God has made us for himself. It means our lives, your life, is never going to make sense until you know that you were made for him.

And it means that we're no longer in charge. And I think some of us are terrified of that. You know, again, that was me at age 22.

I wanted to be able to live how I wanted, do what I wanted, be whatever I wanted. I did not want Christianity to be true. I was actually, at the time, I was reading the Bible to try to develop arguments to argue against the faith of my Christian friend.

And the entire thing backfired. I was reading the Gospel of John. I was reading a few chapters earlier before John chapter 20. And I just literally felt something inside me shift.

I felt something give way. I felt something sort of collapse in me. And with that came the crushing realization that it's all true.

[21:50] And I was so sad. I was so embarrassed. Despite my best efforts to deny it, Jesus was undeniably the Son of God.

And I think that, in a way, Jesus called my name that day. And I didn't know it then, but it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't know it then. I thought, now I'm going to have to admit to my friend that I was wrong.

I'm going to have to admit to people that I was wrong. And I was so embarrassed. I actually kept it a secret for months. Here's what this means for those of us gathered here this morning.

If you're curious about Jesus, if you're open to the possibility of seeking to understand more about Jesus, I don't know how this is going to strike you, that probably means that He's already seeking you.

If you find that you're open, if something in you is stirring, that's not an accident. That's not a coincidence. That may be the voice of Jesus calling your name.

[22:51] So my word to you would be, don't ignore it. There's nothing to lose here. There's nothing to be afraid of. Either you follow it to a dead end or you follow it to something that radically changes your life.

Wouldn't that be a good thing? So let me apply this to a few different people who might be here this morning. And then in a few minutes, we're going to celebrate a baptism and it's one of our favorite things to do on Easter.

But let me just say something to those of you who are here, depending on where you're coming from. If you're here and you're a skeptic, if you're not sure what you believe, we're delighted that you're here. All I would say to you is don't stay on the sidelines with this one.

I would just encourage you to investigate and wrestle and ask and push back. Consider the evidence of the resurrection. Do a little honest inquiry. You've got nothing to lose and a whole lot to gain.

If you're here and again, with all due respect, you're kind of more lukewarm in your faith. You know, maybe you're the kind of Christian and you come, you know, maybe it's like Easter and Christmas.

[23:56] You know, you come for the big ones when your family's in town. You know, there's some of us here who I think believe this, but it hasn't really changed our life. We believe in the resurrection, but we kind of still live as if it's not real.

We're still dominated by fear. We're still dominated by anxiety and guilt and shame. We're sort of functionally atheistic. Here's all I would say to you. Imagine this coming week.

What would actually change about your day-in, day-out life if you lived as though Jesus is alive? If you just live a few days as if Jesus is alive, what would change in your life?

What priorities might shift around? If you're here and you're in pain, if you're here and you're wounded, if you limped in this morning and you cleaned up well, but inside you're falling apart, if you're struggling, I mean loss, disappointment, prayers that feel unanswered, I want you to understand that in this story, Mary came to a tomb and she came expecting death and instead she met the living Christ.

And we see again and again and again in the Gospels, especially the Gospel of John, that Jesus meets people powerfully in places of grief and pain.

[25:22] And it is often those places of grief and pain where he most transforms us. And I would say if that happens with Mary, it can happen with us.

And so in your pain, in your grief, you did the right thing by coming here. And it may very well be that Jesus is trying to speak to you in that place of pain.

Right? That famous saying, I think also by Lewis, God shouts to us in our pleasure, or God whispers to us in our pleasure, but he shouts to us in our pain. It is those times of pain when we can most clearly sometimes hear the voice of Jesus calling our name.

And then finally, for those of us who are here, you're a part of a church, you're fired up about Easter, you're ringing your bell, you love this, you're like, yes, I believe this.

I want to remind us that Mary's first instinct after seeing Jesus is not, I need to go process this privately. Her first instinct, and Jesus encourages this, tells her to do this, is to run and tell others what she has seen.

[26:27] I have seen the Lord. And based on everything that we shared, it's very clear, I hope to you, that Christianity is not meant to be a privately held religion. I don't care where we are in our culture.

If this is true, why would we not share it? Penn Jillette, the famous magician, you know, Penn and Teller, Penn Jillette, he says this, he's an atheist.

Again, I love honest atheists. He says, I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. He says, if you believe in all of this and you think that's not really worth telling people because it would make it socially awkward, how much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them?

So I would say that Christianity is meant to be public knowledge, public truth. It's meant to be shared. Again, what's the worst that can happen? Somebody laughs in your face? Get used to it. Get used to it.

Isn't it worth it? And this is news that needs to be shared. And I'm not saying that you have to go and open a doorstop of a book and make all the arguments and put your slide deck up and all it requires is the willingness to say what Mary said.

[27:40] I have seen the Lord. Come and see. Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are here with us and we thank you for the many of us here who have had our hearts and minds and lives changed when we have encountered you at the tomb.

And Lord, we pray for those who are seeking you. We pray that you would continue to open their hearts, Lord. Lord, we pray for all of us in whatever way we need to be encouraged by you.

We pray that you would give us that living hope that only you can offer. And we pray all this in the name of the risen Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen.