

Easter Sunday Sermon

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Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] Can you turn with me in your Bibles to John chapter 20, page 1089.

! Now we're going to think about these journeys of this first Easter Sunday morning.! I imagine many of us over the last couple of weeks have been making journeys for holiday, to visit family, to try and find some sunshine.

And journeys, of course, play a big part in our stories. Maybe you can still remember the first journey that you made to your school or to your new school, or the journey that you made in order to become a student at university, or taking that journey, moving location to find work.

We take journeys that are often routine. If you regularly come to church, you probably made the same drive, or the same cycle, or the same walk as you did this time last week. But sometimes, our journeys are life-changing. They represent a new chapter in our lives, perhaps.

And as John puts the journeys of Easter under the spotlight for us, the journey of Mary Magdalene, or the journeys, the journey of Peter and especially John, we recognize for them that first Easter Sunday, the visits to the empty tomb are going to change everything for them.

[1 : 38] But John is also reminding us that Jesus has been on a journey. And we've been following that journey for the last few weeks as a church. We've traced it from His arrest. We've seen Him stand trial.

We have seen Him face suffering and abuse. If you're here on Good Friday, we reflected on Jesus' death on the cross. But that wasn't the end of His journey. Now, this first Easter Sunday, He has risen from the dead in victory. And as we'll see, He is returning to heaven in glory. And it's this great journey that has the power to change everything for you and for me, just as it did for those first disciples that first Easter Sunday. John writes his gospel for a very particular reason. As he tells us in verse 31, all of these signs that he writes, and the resurrection is of course the great sign, these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in His name. So, Easter Sunday is an invitation to believe, and to find true life.

So, let's get into our journeys. We're going to see some evidence that we're invited to examine.

There's an emotion that we are invited to experience. And there's an explanation of events designed to encourage our hearts. So, let's begin with the evidence. If you turn with me to the first 10 verses, we read an eyewitness record of this first Easter Sunday. And it sounds and it feels like an eyewitness report. This is being written maybe 50, 60 years after the event. But for John, as he writes it, it's an unforgettable day etched in his memory. So, he records the honest reaction of Mary, who presumes Jesus' body has been stolen. There's the physical scenes, there's the running, there's the bending, there's the evidence, the physical evidence. There's a stone that's been rolled. There are burial clothes that are not needed. There's an empty tomb.

But as we begin our story, we see Mary on her first journey. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed.

She's walking with sorrow. She is in the dark. Literally, it's still dark. But also, her understanding is still dark. She doesn't understand that Jesus died and would rise again. She has come to the tomb to honor a dead body, so she thinks. But she discovers this huge stone has been rolled away.

This stone which was, on the one hand, a seal for the tomb to keep the smell and predators in and out. But it was also a stone that had been sealed by Rome. There was a false report spreading that someone might come and steal Jesus' body. And so, there were guards there at the tomb in front of the stone to prevent it. But nevertheless, as Mary arrives, the tomb is now empty. And that leads her to take her second journey. Verse 2, she came running to Simon, Peter, and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they put him. This is her best guess.

[5 : 23] She looks at the evidence she has so far, and her presumption is grave robbers. It was a problem around that time. The Roman governor had to issue a decree just a few years later to basically give the sentence of death for grave robbery. So, it was an issue. That's what she presumes has happened. And I think this reminds us. Nobody in the circle of Jesus, nobody anywhere really, was expecting Jesus to rise in the middle of history. And it reminds us as well, because sometimes people say, oh, the people in the first century, they were really naive. I think they saw and understood a lot more, especially about death than we do, because we have hospitals and they don't. Mary was one of many who heard Jesus' words, but until the evidence of resurrection, couldn't see how his words could be true. So, there's another journey that takes place. There's the journey of Peter and John. We find them running. They hear the surprising news, and they get running. John, who is younger, he arrives first.

In verse 5, what does he do? He bends over and looks in at the strips of linen lying there. Okay, so he sees that the burial cloths are there that had wrapped Jesus' body. They're still in place, but Jesus isn't there. And then we find Simon Peter arrive, and he's always bold as a disciple. And so, he goes straight into the tomb, and he saw the strips of linen as well as the cloth that wrapped Jesus' face, which has now been laid to one side and neatly folded up. And so, John examines the evidence.

There's a stone that's been rolled away. There's a tomb that's empty. There's burial clothes that are still lying in place, and there's a face cloth wrapped up. And he concludes, Jesus is risen. He has seen that Jesus has passed through the grave clothes. The same Jesus who has passed through death into new life. He has folded up the face cloth. There is no need of it any longer. Death has no part of Jesus' life. And so, he sees this evidence, and he believes. Now, he doesn't understand fully.

He still has to understand the significance, but he knows that this changes everything. Just before going on holiday, I was on a phone call with someone, and on the course of the call, he was telling me how his dad had come to faith. He spent a weekend a number of years ago listening to talks on the evidence for the resurrection. And after these few days, this gentleman concluded, this is true. And since this is true, Jesus is Lord. And because this is true and Jesus is Lord, this has to change everything. And it did for his life. Everything changed because the resurrection is true. And in a sense, isn't that the same journey of discovery that John is making? He comes and he sees and he believes. And it reminds us that the resurrection of Jesus is the great fact that our faith depends on. Without resurrection, we have nothing. But because we have a risen Jesus, we have a guarantee of forgiveness. We have the certainty of peace with God. We have the hope and promise of life with God now and eternal life in the future because our faith is in a risen Savior.

[9 : 14] And so, John presents the evidence that he has seen for himself so that we too might believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. As John looks in at the empty tomb, he sees that the resurrection is proof that Jesus is who God says he is. Here is this verdict being reversed. The world said, Jesus is worthy of death. He's a blasphemer. He makes false claims. God the Father raised him from the dead, vindicated victorious, calling us to believe in trust today. So, I wonder as we come to think about the evidence of this first Easter Sunday and as we think about this these journeys, I wonder if you've ever had this experience where you come to a fork in the road or a crossroads moment and you take the wrong turn. Some of you must have had this experience, it can't just be me. And you're going and you have that recognition, do you know what, this is not the right way to go. And there's that part of you that wants to keep going because we're kind of stubborn and resistant. But we know, don't we, that the way to make progress, if we take a wrong turn, it is to turn back and get on the right road.

As we're here today, maybe you've been invited along, you might have doubts and questions about Jesus and the Easter story. Perhaps your understanding of the message of Easter is more shaped by kind of vague ideas from culture, maybe influencers on social media, rather than by the eyewitnesses who wrote the Bible. Let me encourage you to do what John did, to make that journey, to consider the evidence, to ask God to help you, to ask God to help you, make use of the resources at the back.

And here's why. If Jesus really did rise, if Jesus really did defeat death, then He really is Lord. And that really does change everything.

So, that's the evidence that we are invited to consider. But the next thing we're going to look at is an emotion that we are invited to experience. And that's here in Mary's story, verse 11 to 18.

18. But before we get to that, I was chatting to a guy in a coffee shop just around the corner this week. And as we were chatting, he started telling me his story. He saw I was reading the Bible and so he wanted to tell me his story. He was a man who'd been in and out of prison over a number of years.

[12:07] And the last time he was in prison, he picked up a book by Charles Dickens. And in this Dickens book, I'm not sure which one it was, there was a reference to Jesus. This man had never really thought about Jesus before. But just the mention of the word Jesus persuaded him that Jesus is someone that he needed to consider. He started reading his Bible and he spoke about this being a start of a whole new direction for his life. Encountering Jesus in prison. I was just reading Mary's story and so I was telling him, this reminds me a lot about Mary's story. When we think about the story of Mary Magdalene, she was met at a very different low point in her life. For the first time Jesus met her, actually, she was possessed by demons. That's a really low point in life. But Jesus came and saved her.

But Easter Sunday, another low point in Mary's life, because she thought she lost her friend forever. But Jesus came to her, met her where she was, and the risen Jesus gave her joy.

I imagine this will be true for many of us in our own stories. That it is this remarkable kindness and ability of Jesus to meet us where we are often at our low points. Whether that's illness, whether that's suffering, whether that's confusion, whether that's loss, whether that's despair, it can often be those moments where we come to an end of ourselves, that Jesus steps in and reveals himself to us, either for the first time or in new ways. Through his word, speaking love and power, through one of his people, coming to encourage us, point us to Jesus. Well, let's follow Mary's emotional journey just for a moment. We have already seen something of her grief at the beginning of the day. And we see this grief continue. Verse 11, verse 15, we find Mary outside the tomb crying and weeping. We need to recognize who Jesus was to Mary. As we already said, Jesus was her Savior, the one who rescued her from demon possession. Mary considers Jesus to be her Lord. It is Jesus who reveals the glory of God to her. She calls Jesus her teacher. He is the one whose wisdom she trusts. He is the one who has brought the way of salvation to her. And for Mary, Jesus was a friend who welcomed her, who honored her, who honored her at a time when others honestly would probably run in fear from her.

And so, her grief is real. As verse 11 continues, she weeps and she bends and she looks into the tomb and notice what she sees, two angels seated where Jesus' body had been. And they ask her a question, woman, why are you crying? And it's really striking that so deep is Mary's grief that she is unable to grasp the significance of what's happening. Whenever angels turn up in the story of the Bible, we know that God is doing something significant. God is present in power, but she doesn't see it. And so, she rehearses the idea that someone has stolen Jesus' body. And even when Jesus comes, verse 14, she turned and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't realize it was Jesus. And Jesus asked the same question, woman, why are you crying? And she doesn't know who He is. And we don't know, is that because she's blinded by tears? She's still blinded by a lack of understanding because Jesus needs to speak truth? Is it in a sense because Jesus' body, while being the same, is somehow different so it still has the wounds but now it's glorified? We don't know. But at this point, she's still lost in that sense of grief at Jesus' death. What changes? Verse 16, as we said to the children, Jesus speaks her name. The Good Shepherd speaks and the sheep know His voice and listen to

[16:43] His voice and instantly, grief turns to joy. She cries out with joy because she sees her teacher is a lie.

If you've ever had those, I thought I'd lost you moments, then you'll have a tiny insight of what Mary must have experienced in this instant. What is it? What is this joy that Mary experiences?

What is this joy that you and I are invited into today? Well, isn't it that the joy of reunion, the joy of relationship, here beyond death stands her Lord, her teacher, her Savior, her friend, speaking to her. And there is the promise from Jesus that the one who came to be with Mary at the tomb is the one who will always be with His followers as He sends the Spirit from heaven to live in our heart. And so, we are invited into the joy of knowing regardless of circumstance, when our faith is in Jesus, He always loves us, He is always with us and for us. And that's tied to the second reason for joy that's hinted at here in the gospel, it's the joy of new life. Again, John loves to make the point that all this happens in a garden. So, he says that Mary thought that Jesus was the gardener. So, we said this a while ago, John likes to go back to the book of Genesis, where it all began. First

creation, Adam and Eve placed in a garden and they enjoyed true life with God, the joy of living in God's place, enjoying Him walking and talking with them. That was all lost because of their sin, because they turned their back on Him because they didn't believe His words. But Jesus comes and in this garden where He is raised to life, there is the promise of restoration. There is the promise, there is the hope of new life, of a relationship re-established, of love restored, because sin and death have been defeated by Jesus at the cross. Now, the way is open for us to have true life through being forgiven. And so, as we think about the joy that Mary has that first Easter Sunday, it's an invitation for you and for me to experience this for ourselves.

Our emotional lives are often very complicated. If I was to ask you, how are you feeling this Sunday morning, this Easter Sunday morning, I imagine many different answers. Some of us would perhaps struggle to give the truthful answer, because things are really difficult.

The wonderful thing is, regardless of how our life is, regardless of how our circumstances are, this is true, that we can have deep down, everlasting, unbreakable joy and our joy through knowing Jesus as our Lord and our Saviour. We can have today what Mary had, Jesus speaking to us through His Word, as we read it, as it is preached.

[20 : 44] We can have the presence of Jesus with us, as He would give us His Spirit to live in us. We can have Jesus teach us good news, the good news of forgiveness, the good news of peace with God. We can have Jesus as the Lord who rules over our lives for our good, so we can gladly obey Him. We can have Jesus as the friend who meets us wherever we are, however we're feeling, to give us comfort and to give us hope.

And not only is this a joy for us to experience, it's also a joy for us to grab hold of and to value. As we would recognize that what Jesus offers, the one who conquers death and lives forever, what Jesus gives is far better than anything else. So, we are invited to put Him first.

We are invited to the joy of meeting with His people, to worshiping with Him. And when we have that joy, there is a sense in which that's always going to be overflowing.

That's a joy that's going to be evident in the way that we live, in the things that we choose to speak about. And what we value becomes what we share. And so, this features then in our ongoing mission, that we are called to speak the good news of Jesus to one another. Because we know that we don't always feel instinctively joyful. And we are given to one another that we might support and encourage and build each other up. But we also know that there's a world around us that maybe doesn't know anything about Jesus. And maybe in God's wisdom, He places us exactly where we are, so that the good news of Jesus might be known through us. So, it's a joy for us to value and to share, and that's something that we can start even today. Well, having thought about the evidence for the resurrection, having thought about the emotion that we're invited into, we need to think for a few minutes about the explanation that Jesus gives to Mary in verse 17. He says to her, do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

[23 : 36] For those of us who make long journeys, many of us do that regularly, I wonder if you have a favorite stopping place. For us when we're heading south, it has to be T-Bay Farm Services. If you don't know the delights of T-Bay, next time you're heading south, you won't, well you might regret it, but I don't think you would. And then for so many of us when we head north, House of Brewer, it's got a nice waterfall walk, it's got very plush toilets, it's got very nice chips. It's a great stopping off point, and we often have these in our journeys, we kind of need them most of the time, but what we never do when we're on our long journeys is we get to a stopping point, we get to a service station, we say, ah, this is it, I've reached my destination, let me forget the holiday, let me just stick here in the service, we just don't do it. We stop, but we know there is still a journey to be taken.

Think about the journey of Jesus here. Mary's joy is such, Matthew tells us, she takes hold of Jesus' feet. There's this posture of worship, but I think also there's that sense of I don't want to lose this moment, and I don't want to lose Jesus again. And Jesus says, don't hold on to me. Why? Because his journey is not complete. He hasn't reached his final destination. For Jesus, there is more glory to follow, and this ongoing journey of Jesus actually is really good news for us. Think about three aspects.

Think about Jesus' glory. He's returning, I am ascending to the Father. The journey of Jesus can be described, it has been described by some as a J-curve, sorry, leaving the glory of heaven to become one of us is a going down. His suffering kind of reaches the bottom with his death. But then

with his resurrection, there begins that path to glory. He's risen from the dead, and now as he says, I'm going to ascend to return to heaven. And when he returns into heaven, there's going to be that great triumphal entry that the angels, the saints would be worshiping Jesus as he returned from his battle, from his victory over the powers of darkness. He is welcomed to the throne of heaven as conquering king.

And Jesus right now sits in glory, King of kings and Lord of lords. And one day, all of us, everyone will see his glory when he returns as judge. And Mary needs that journey to continue.

And we need that journey to continue because this glorious King Jesus is still for his people at his Father's right hand. There is more that Jesus can do for his church now that he is seated on the throne of heaven. He now sits in heaven and what's he doing? Right now, Jesus is praying for us. [26 : 56] As he sits on the throne of heaven, Jesus is sending the Spirit to us. As he sits in the throne of heaven, Jesus is speaking to us through his word and he is building his church and he has the power to guard and keep his church and he is at home in heaven, preparing a home for all his followers. And so, it is good for Mary and it's good for us that Jesus continues that journey. Truly, Mary would never lose her relationship with Jesus and nor will we, if we believe and one day we'll be with him in glory.

Another aspect of the goodness of Jesus' journey is it reminds us of Christian privilege. Jesus says, I am ascending, tell my brothers this, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Isn't it amazing that Jesus would call his disciples, his brothers? They failed him miserably. They ran away at his point of need. But here is the loving heart of Jesus. He's not ashamed to call them brothers, even when they were ashamed of him. And the emphasis on Jesus' words falls on this privilege that comes because Jesus' followers are vitally connected to him. The emphasis falls on union with Christ. The good news for Mary, the good news for these disciples, the good news for all of us who believe is that we too are loved by the Father. We too have this wonderful relationship where we call the living

God our Father in heaven. And that when we are united to Jesus by faith, we also share his journey. We're actually heading to go to our Father's home in the end. That just as Jesus died to sin, we have died to sin. Just as Jesus has resurrection life, we have new life in him. Just as he has gone home to glory, so will we. And this is good news.

And this journey also reminds us again of our mission. Notice that Jesus says, don't hold on to me, but rather go and speak to them. Go and tell them the good news that he is alive.

The good news is not limited to Mary. Indeed, the good news is not limited to those first disciples. Because those first disciples, as they receive the Spirit, these eyewitnesses will write the story of Jesus, will write the gospel that we have in front of us, will tell us the wonderful news that Jesus became one of us to pay the price to forgive us, to exchange our guilt for his perfect righteousness, to rise again as the light overcoming darkness, to give true life to all who believe.

[30 : 05] And so Mary's go and tell mission becomes the disciples' go and tell mission, which becomes our go and tell and show and tell mission. This is our calling to make clear the difference that Easter makes. By our lives, by our words, it is good news that our guilt is removed, and that we have peace in our conscience and peace with God. It is good news that we know every day life with Jesus, and that we have the certainty of life with Him when we die. That is good news for our world.

Some of you would have seen the news this week of a report produced by the Bible Society of England and Wales. They called it a quiet revival. We've been hearing the same stories in Scotland, a growing number of young people coming to church, asking big questions, exploring the Bible perhaps for the first time, wanting to know answers to the big questions of life, and coming to put their faith in Jesus. And this is what really gives a purpose for our life as a church, that we are here to enjoy a relationship with God and to tell others about Jesus so that they might come to have a relationship with God too. We go and tell to invite people to a direct living encounter with the most significant figure who ever lived, who is none other than the Son of God, who died and rose again, who truly is the answer to all life's questions, to all life's longings. And so, the journey of Jesus at the end of the day, from death to resurrection to ascended glory, is the journey that has the power to transform us, to transform our emotions, to transform our lives, to transform our purpose.

Yes. Because we have seen the Lord and we have discovered that He is alive. May that be true for all of us today. Let's pray together. Our God and Father, we thank You for the wonderful truths of Easter.

And we thank You for the resurrection of Jesus. We thank You for His return to glory. And we thank You for the wonderful things that we have to be here today. And we thank You that He continues to speak words that give comfort and joy and hope and life and love to us today and to people all around the world. We pray that You would give us that deep joy in Jesus that would lead us to encourage other believers and to share with the people around us that they too would find that living hope that we have come to find for ourselves. Please speak Your Word and press Your Word deep upon all of our hearts and lives. In Jesus' lives we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Now let's close with a hymn that again gives us the journey of Jesus as we sing together, come behold the wondrous mystery.

Jesus' name.

[33 : 55] Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!