

John Ch.20 - Disbelief to Belief

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[0 : 00] John chapter 20 verses 1 to 18. We're taking a break for a few weeks from our series in 1 John, so we're looking at the Easter story today. Next week we have a guest, Seth Lewis.

Seth Lewis? It's not Lewis. It is Lewis, yeah. Seth Lewis from Yaw will be coming to speak and then the following Sunday we'll be looking at the big question of yes or no, the marriage referendum and then we'll get back to 1 John. But we're not taking a complete break from 1 John, it's the same author. John's Gospel also wrote the letters of 1 and 2 and 3 John, so we're going to look at this together and I've asked Joe, it's good to have Joe back with us as well, from his studies and Joe is going to read for us this morning. Thank you.

Hello. John 20 from verse 1. 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 from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him. So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb, both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there, but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

They still did not understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying.

As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, Woman, why are you crying?

[2 : 48] They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him. At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

Woman, he said, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him. Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher. Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news, I have seen the Lord. And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Thanks very much, Joe. Well, please keep your Bibles open there in John 20. We're going to pray and ask that God would help us to understand perhaps a familiar story to us, but that would be fresh and that it would encourage us. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for this true story, this eyewitness account, this record of those who first came to the empty tomb and encountered the risen Jesus.

Father, we thank you for this true story, this is our prayer. And it is our prayer that as we listen, as we read and engage with your word, that we too, by the power of your Holy Spirit, would encounter the risen Lord Jesus.

[5 : 04] that he would meet us where we are today. Whether we believe, whether we doubt, or whether we don't yet believe.

Lord Jesus, would you please come and speak to us and teach us what this resurrection means for us today.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, Jesus has already died.

He's been buried. And we read this in chapter 20, verse 10. Then the disciples went back to their homes, But Mary stood outside the tomb, crying.

I think we can all identify with Mary because we've all been there. We've all experienced the heartache and pain of losing a loved one.

[6 : 31] With family and friends, we've stood round the grave as we've said goodbye to those we deeply care for. For Mary, this is the end.

All she has left are memories. It's the tragic end of a life that has been cut short, 33 years of age. And her friend, the one who had healed her life, restored her life, is gone. Death is always painful because it robs us of our friends and it steals away our joy.

Now, while tears are understandable, we do not need to grieve like Mary. You see, on at least three different occasions, Jesus had said that he must suffer many things, that he must be killed, and after three days, rise again.

Jesus could not be clearer. Three times we know he said this publicly, I will be killed, but I will rise.

[8 : 02] So if Mary knows this, why is she still crying at the tomb? You see, while we all want the resurrection to be true, like Mary, we can struggle with disbelief.

And even if we do believe, we can still have doubts and wonder if this is just a made-up story. For Mary, the resurrection of Jesus simply could not have happened.

You see, Mary came looking for a dead Jesus. Look at verse 1. 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 from the entrance.

Now we might think, as we follow along with Mary, that she was on her way to see if the resurrection had happened. But we've got to get into the head of Mary because she didn't have a belief in the resurrection.

Mary was actually just like another character in John's Gospel, Martha. Keep your finger in John chapter 20 and go back to John chapter 11.

[9 : 31] John chapter 11. Here we meet a different Mary and she's with her sister Martha.

And their brother Lazarus has just died. And Jesus has arrived. And this is what Jesus says to Martha.

Let's read verse 23 of chapter 11. Jesus said to her, Martha answered, Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

You see, Martha was a Jew. She believed in a general resurrection. A resurrection that would only happen at the very end of time, or as it says there in verse 24, on the last day.

Jews, even Greeks, Romans, they didn't believe that a person would rise from the dead in the middle of history. Religious or non-religious people at that time did not have in their thinking a resurrection in time.

[10 : 58] It wasn't part of their belief. So go back to chapter 20. So here's Mary arriving at the tomb.

She's not looking for a risen Jesus. She's looking for the dead Jesus. And even when Mary does see Jesus, look at verse 14.

At this she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. Even though she was there in his presence, it was just outside of her thinking that he could be there. There was simply no hope of a resurrection.

In fact, Mary's only conclusion is that the body has been stolen. So look at chapter 20, verse 2. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him.

[12 : 16] It's quite clear, Mary had no belief in a resurrection. Someone must have taken the body. In fact, when she does see Jesus, she thinks he's actually responsible for the theft.

So look at verse 15. Woman, he said, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for? thinking he was the gardener, she said, sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you've put him and I will get him.

It's just a comical scene, isn't it? The risen Jesus is being accused by Mary of stealing the dead Jesus. You see, Mary is not yet a convinced believer.

She is just like people like us. She's like the person we work with who sees death as the end but has no category of thinking of life beyond the grave.

To them, it's just not possible. People we work with, people that we know, they may have some kind of confused thoughts about becoming part of the material world, but a physical, bodily resurrection

is simply not part of their thinking.

[13:44] Mary's also like the person who is just anti-God. They spend their time thinking of reasons why the resurrection can't be true. They are sceptical.

Jesus didn't die. Jesus didn't rise again. His body was just simply stolen. They make up things. So the question for us here is, are we like Mary?

Are we looking for a dead Jesus? Or do we just think that the body was stolen? Do we disbelieve what has been written?

And even if we do believe this story, do we have a little nagging doubt in the back of our heads that somehow this has just been made up and it's not really true? Well, like Mary, we can know with absolute certainty that the resurrection is true.

We have evidence to believe. First, the body was not stolen. Have a look at verse 5. Mary is gone to tell two of her friends.

[15:02] In this account here, it's Peter and John. And we pick it up in verse 5. This is John. He bent over and he looked in at the strips of linen lying there, but he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there.

Now, in the first century, burials are very different to what they are now. But what you did then was that you would wrap the dead body in strips of layered cloth.

One layer would be put on and then it was covered in spices and perfumes to help with the process of decaying and the bad smell. Then there would be another layer, then more spices, another layer, and so on and so on.

So tell me this. Why would anyone stealing a body take the time of unwrapping it all? It doesn't make sense, does it?

[16:07] Why would they leave, as it says in verse 6, the strips of linen lying there? And as Peter looks into the tomb, the way that it says he saw, he's thinking, he's pondering, what?

No body, strips of linen, what's going on here? A stolen body, you would take the strips of linen cloth with you, all wrapped up, especially a body like Jesus's that had been battered and bruised and pierced with a spear.

A body that had been mangled like Jesus, you wouldn't want to unwrap that. But look what else Peter sees in verse 6 and 7.

He saw the strips of linen lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.

Now again, think about it. If you're a thief, why would you go through the whole intricate detail of folding up the cloth, placing it all neatly in a pile?

[17:22] Thieves don't hang around. They get in as quick as possible and they get out as quick as possible. They're not concerned about leaving things nice and tidy. So the theory of the stolen body doesn't stand up.

In fact, if we're going to accuse the disciples of stealing the body, then we have to deal with the fact that nearly all of the disciples suffered a martyr's death, crucified some of them, killed because of their belief in a resurrection.

And why would you allow yourself to be killed over something you knew wasn't true? It doesn't weigh up. It doesn't stand up. In other words, the evidence points to a resurrection.

The other piece of evidence for the resurrection in this story is that the first witness to the empty tomb is a woman. In fact, it's the same in the other gospel accounts.

She is the first witness, Mary Magdalene, as she comes to the tomb. Now, why is this important? Is it because women never lie? Don't think so.

[18:41] It's important because a woman's testimony was not acceptable. Listen to this historian, Josephus, who was writing at the time.

This is what he writes. He says this, But let not the testimony of woman be admitted on account of the levity and boldness of their sex, since it is probable that they may not speak truth either out of hope of gain or fear of punishment.

I don't agree with it. I'm just stating that was the way it was. In the first century, a woman's testimony was not admissible evidence in court. You didn't have a woman say, oh, I saw that, because they didn't trust them.

In other words, if you wanted to prove the fact of the resurrection, you would never use the witness or testimony of woman. That would only undermine your evidence. Writers of that time never used women to back up their case.

So why does John do it? Well, the only reason John would tell it like this is because Mary was the first witness. Because it was true.

[19 : 56] She was the first eyewitness to the tomb. The tomb was empty. Jesus was raised. You see, faith in the resurrection is based on facts.

Christianity is not subjective. It is objective. It is based on reality. People say religion is something that takes the place of facts.

That's not true. Christianity is built and founded on the truth of the historical, personal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. So the message from this story is believe in the resurrection not because it's a nice story or because it feels right or we'd like it to be true but believe it because it is true.

But we need more than just evidence. We also need grace. Like Mary, we need an intervention from the living Jesus.

First, we need a personal intervention. Have a look at verse 11. There's Mary outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

[21 : 29] They asked her, Woman, why are you crying? Now this is not a sympathetic question. They're not handing out the tissues here.

It's a rebuke. Mary, why are you crying? You don't need to be. Jesus asked the same question in verse 15.

Woman, he said, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for? You see, if Mary was left at the tomb crying in verse 11, if that's where the story ends, she would never, ever come to believe.

On her own, she would not have understood. She had heard the words of Jesus saying, I'll die and I'll rise again. She's seen the empty tomb, but she still doesn't understand.

It still hasn't triggered inside her mind. It hasn't hit her heart. It took more than just evidence. It takes a personal intervention from the risen Lord Jesus.

[22 : 36] And that's what happens. At first, in this very comical scene, here we have Mary crying her eyes out and this person arrives in verse 15, says, why are you crying?

Who is it you're looking for? And she thinks it's the gardener. It's the caretaker who looks after everything and says to him, well, why have you taken him away?

Or sorry, verse 15, sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him and I'll get him. But then Jesus called her personally by name.

Verse 16, Jesus said to her, Mary. Mary. Jesus takes the initiative and he comes to this disbelieving, doubting woman and he calls her personally by name, Mary.

She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher. teacher. This is the personal intervention into her life that causes her to see that this is Jesus.

[23 : 58] And this is the intervention we all need in our lives if we are to believe. well, you might say that's great.

Wasn't Mary lucky to have been there? Because if the risen Jesus turned up right here, right now and he walked through those doors and he called me by name, Johnny, I'd believe.

Would you believe? So do we expect Jesus to turn up and sit beside us and call us by name? Well, listen to what Jesus says.

Have a look at verse 29. It's a little further on in the story. Here we meet a different person who was disbelieving and doubting.

His name was Thomas. And he encounters the risen Jesus too. And we pick it up in verse 28.

Thomas said to him, my Lord and my God.

[25 : 02] Then Jesus told him, because you have seen me, you have believed. You've seen me and you believe. Now look at this. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Jesus says, even though you can't see me, even though you cannot hear an audible voice, you too can still believe.

And it's all because of my gracious intervention in your life. You see, as we follow Mary on her journey, as we watch her get closer to the tomb, as we watch her look into the empty tomb, name, as we see her crying, as we hear Jesus call her name, as we follow along with Mary, we too are

looking at the evidence for ourselves and we are also hearing the call of Jesus into our lives. Through this story of Mary, Jesus is calling each one of us by name, personally calling our names so that we will follow him and trust him.

Blessed are those who do not see, but yet believe. You see, most of the time we think that we can get through life all on our own.

[26 : 35] If I want to believe, well, I'll believe if I want to. If I want to follow Jesus, well, then that's something I might do when I'm a bit older. But that's not how it works.

It takes the personal intervention of the risen Lord Jesus by his Holy Spirit to open up our spiritual ears and our eyes so that we see and that we hear the call of Jesus calling us personally by name. Follow me. Mary heard the call. she saw the evidence and it changed and transformed her life.

And this is what happens, and this is what happens to us as it happened to Mary when we believe the resurrection, when we put our confidence in the risen Jesus. We're going to look at four things really quickly, four things that happen when we believe that we can take away with us.

Here's the first one. God is present with us. Look at verse 17. Jesus said to Mary, do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father.

[28 : 04] Don't hold on to me, Mary. You see, when Jesus returned to the Father, he promised that he was going to send the Holy Spirit.

You can have a look back in John chapter 14 or just simply listen. In John chapter 14, Jesus is speaking and he says, I will ask the Father and he will give you another counsellor to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth.

He says, I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. And then he says this wonderful, comforting and reassuring words.

Jesus says in verse 23, My Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him.

So Jesus is saying to Mary, as she grasps who Jesus is, you don't need to hold on to me, Mary. You can let go of me because you're never going to lose me.

[29 : 07] I am going to return to the Father and when I return to the Father, the Father and Jesus by the Spirit, we will come and live in you.

We will not leave you as orphans. God will be present in your life, dwelling within you, making your life his home. The resurrection means that Jesus is present with us in our lives.

God's God's God's God's God's God's life. The second thing is that we can enjoy a personal relationship with this living God. Back in chapter 20, verse 17, let's read it again.

Jesus says, don't hold on to me, for I've yet to return to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

Jesus enjoyed the most intimate and personal relationships with the Father. The Son enjoyed the Father and the Father enjoyed the Son. They were one together in that perfect intimacy.

[30 : 22] And that is what we now have if we believe in the resurrection. Look at what God, Jesus, says to Mary. I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

We have a living God who is not only with us, but he is speaking to us through his word. He communes with us by his spirit and he's listening to us as we pray.

We can enjoy a relationship with the living God. The third thing that we have because of the resurrection is we've got a new purpose for life.

Look at verse 18. Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news, I have seen the Lord. I have seen the Lord.

And she told them that he had said these things to her. Before we saw Mary at the tomb crying. She had no hope. She had no purpose.

[31 : 27] This was the end. There was no meaning for Mary beyond the grave. That was it. It was all over. But now all of that has been completely changed and transformed. She now has a life to live.

She has been given a commission. She has been sent by Jesus. Go and tell them that you have seen me, that I am alive, that I live. And followers of Jesus who know the presence of Jesus, who have that personal relationship with him, have this wonderful privilege of bringing this news that we know the risen saviour.

The risen saviour is the hope for our broken, suffering world. He will come again and judge the world with justice and he will raise up all those who love him.

That is our future. That is the hope for our broken worlds. And the final thing that we have because we believe the resurrection is the promise that death is not the end.

Surely this is the big point of the resurrection, that death has been defeated, the grave has been destroyed. Death is not the end.

[32 : 51] Because Jesus lives, we who believe like Mary will also live. There will be that great reunion of all those who love him gathered together from throughout all of history.

And we will share with the Lord Jesus in his eternal kingdom where there is no more suffering, suffering, no more pain, and there is no more death.

There will be no more funerals to attend, and there will be no more crying, because Jesus has risen. Listen to these words that Jesus spoke at the funeral of his friend, Lazarus, and he speaks those words to us.

Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? Let's pray.

[34 : 14] Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Our Father God, we thank you that we have a risen Lord, a risen Saviour.

The evidence is there before us that he rose from the grave, the folded grave clothes, the eyewitness accounts.

We thank you too that you call us by name, speaking to us personally, saying, see and listen. We thank you that this is all true. And we thank you that because this is true, we have a personal, living relationship with our eternal God, present, living within us, his power at work within us, providing us with this purpose to bring hope to a broken world, and the guarantee of life to come. We thank you that life is all sorted from beginning to end because Jesus lives. Would you please help us if we disbelieve to see clearly who you are?

[36 : 06] And would you please, if we do believe, ground these truths into our hearts so that we live with confidence, trusting you every step of the way.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. We're going to sing as we close our time together. It's really a song about the story we've just looked at together. See what a morning, gloriously bright, with the dawning of hope in Jerusalem.

The second verse, see Mary weeping, where is he laid, as in sorrow she turns from the empty tomb. Here's a voice speaking, calling her name, it's the master, the lord, raised to life again.

Let's celebrate this wonderful truth that Jesus is alive. Amen. Daunting of hope in Jerusalem.

[37 : 39] Home is a great road to fill with life. As the angels announce, Christ is risen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Thank you.

[40 : 00] Thank you.

Let's pray. Father, we give you our thanks for the risen Lord Jesus. We pray that you would help us, like Mary, to declare to others that the Lord is risen, to tell this true story so that others may have the hope of life to come, the presence of God and the relationship with him.

Father, go before us and help us, we pray. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

Amen. Amen.

[42 : 44] Amen. Amen.

Amen.