

Journeys to the Tomb, Journeys to Faith

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[0 : 00] Stop and think on Easter about the empty tomb and the risen Jesus Christ.! Of course, Jesus, the tomb is empty all the year round, and Jesus is risen all the year round,! But we have the opportunity to focus upon that at Easter.

Good Friday, we were thinking about the cross of Jesus Christ and his finished work. Today, we haven't forgotten that, but we link it up with his resurrection.

And I would like first to read to you what I read at the beginning, how the Apostle Paul summarizes the Christian message. I'm going to read from his first letter to the Corinthian church, chapter 15, where he says to them, Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, and on which you have taken your stand.

By this gospel you are saved. If you hold firmly to the word I preached to you, otherwise you have believed in vain.

So what is this message? For what I received, I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the twelve, and so on.

[1 : 34] This is what we're thinking about is fundamental for the Christian message, or the gospel, as it was called. What is the gospel?

The gospel is a statement of events in history, plus an interpretation, and implied in that is a challenge. The challenge of how this relates to us personally.

So, for example, it said, he died. It's a fact of history. For our sins, that's the meaning and interpretation. And according to the scriptures, tells us how we arrive at that interpretation.

Paul says it was essential that he was buried, and it was essential that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures. These are the fundamentals of Christian faith.

By this we are saved, if we hold on to it, and if we don't, then we're not. So I just, by way of introduction, say that the assertion is that these things are true.

[2 : 43] It's not a myth. It's not a cunningly made-up story. And also that these things are not negotiable. You can't say, well, tell you what, can I be a Christian if I do something else, but I don't believe Jesus died for my sins?

No, you can't negotiate it. That is, as it is, it is non-negotiable. This is to be relied upon. This is to be, we are to lean the full weight of our souls on his death on the cross that he was buried and raised again on the third day.

And there's a whole lot of things that we could say. There's a whole lot of theology to do with this. For example, it shows that Jesus was right all the time.

It vindicates Jesus, which, among other things, is a cause for praise. Because if he only had the cross, he dies under condemnation. And you might say, well, is that the last word?

And, of course, the resurrection is the last word, and it reverses the previous judgment. Previously, he was seen as guilty. But the resurrection says, no, he was right all the time.

[3 : 55] The resurrection is a basis for the future. And like I was trying to do in that illustration of the DVD, there's a whole new age and a whole new set of possibilities for humanity based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And there is, for our present, comfort in that we are not praying to a dead and gone saviour, who is simply a memory, but we are praying to a living Lord, who even now rules and reigns.

So something there about all the connections, and I can't say everything this morning. I'd like us to look at the way it comes across in this particular story.

So please turn to John 19, and let me tell you some of the features of the text before we actually get into it. As we found when it's being read, it's a very moving text, and it's a very human text.

It tells how real people like us came to grips with, or came to be gripped by, the fact of the resurrection. So let me tell you that in the text, there's lots of present tenses.

[5 : 15] In the text, there's lots of present tenses. So you know what I mean when a past tense is when you say, he went, or he said, so this is in the past.

But the way the text is told, it uses lots of present tenses, in the way that you might tell a story when you say, I went down the market, and I says to him, and then he says to me, so you're using present tenses.

And this story uses lots of present tenses. It's not the only story in the Bible that does that, but the fact that it does is interesting. So for example, in verse 2, the translation says, so she came running to Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved.

But the text, in its original, it's present tense. It says, so she comes running to Peter. And it's as if you're there at the very time, as if it's happening now.

That's a feature of the text, and I might mention that a few more times, because it's all over the place. And I don't know whether you notice this feature of the text. There's lots of things that they don't know.

[6 : 24] Did you notice that? So in verse 2, we don't know where they've put the Lord. And in verse 9, they didn't know from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

And in verse 13, we don't know where they've put him. And in verse 14, she didn't know it was Jesus. And it's interesting that the text has got a lot about how difficult it is to understand the resurrection of Jesus, and how strange it is.

And there's lots of things that we don't know, and we have to get to understand. And that's certainly what was happening here. You actually see them. You can almost hear their brains ticking as they try and work out, what does this mean?

What does this mean? And so on. And one other feature of the text, which I'll try and explain as we go along, there's lots of taking and putting and lying.

The English translation makes them into lots of different words, but actually there's a relatively small number of Greek words. So for example, in 19 verse 41, it was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid.

[7 : 32] No one had ever been put there. And in verse 42, since the tomb was nearby, they put Jesus there. And in verse, chapter 20, verse 2, we don't know where they've put him.

And in verse 6, they saw the strips of linen. Now is it putting? I think it's putting. They'd been put there. And actually in verse 7, the cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen, is the English translation.

Not put with the linen, is what the Greek says. So there's lots of things put in place. And that's part of the way the story works. And one thing which I forgot to write down, in some ways, the hero of the story is the tomb.

As we go through, you find that a tomb is mentioned lots and lots of times. You'd think the focus would be it keeps on repeating Jesus, but actually it keeps on repeating tomb.

Well, there's some features of the text and maybe if we notice them as we go through, it will add a little bit of color to what we're thinking of.

[8 : 48] So that was introduction. Let's get to the text. And I think what we have here is journeys to the tomb and journeys to faith. Let's look at the different people who went to the tomb and what we're told about them and what happened.

So the first people who go to the tomb are Joseph and Nicodemus, taking with them the body of Jesus. Let's look at the text, verse 38. Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus.

We're told about Joseph. He was a disciple of Jesus. And we're told he was a secret disciple of Jesus. And we're told he was secret because he feared the Jews.

We're told quite a bit about Joseph. With Pilate's permission, so he had to go and ask because it wasn't the normal thing to do. Normally they would put the bodies of criminals into a common grave because they didn't want them mixed up with other people.

They'd put them in a common grave. But Joseph goes to ask for permission and Pilate agrees and Joseph takes the body.

[10 : 00] It's one of those taking words. There it is. So here we have Joseph who asks to take. Let me just check that I'm telling you the right thing.

It's actually, it is actually the word to take up or to lift, to take away, to lift down, I suppose.

And we're told about somebody else. Verse 39. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus by night.

The word for earlier is the word for first. And I don't know whether John just put first in because that was a nice word which means earlier or whether he's getting us to think there's some firsts being mentioned.

Anyway, because it certainly is a first, isn't it? He was the one who had first visited Jesus at night and Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes about 75 pounds.

[11:03] I looked this up. It seems to be a sort of a powdery spice and the Jewish burial custom is to layer that in with the bandages and it's really not to prevent decay but just to make it, to combat the smell.

It's an awful lot, isn't it? 75 pounds. It's a very big bag. I think they must have had help carrying that. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it with the spices in strips of linen.

This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. So what have we got? We've got Nicodemus and they have the spices which I've put in a big jar and the bandages and the body of Jesus which we presume would be in a blood-stained body.

Whether they cleaned it up very well, presumably Mary would have had her doubts but they have the blood-stained body. And in verse 41 we're told, at the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden, probably quite a big garden, more like an orchard, something like that.

There was a garden and in the garden a new tomb. Notice the word new, I think, sort of just getting us to think subconsciously. There's something first and something new going on here.

[12:28] It's a new tomb and it's an empty tomb. No one had ever been laid in it. Because it was the Jewish day of preparation and since the tomb was near, they laid Jesus there.

So here's the garden and there's the tomb which is a new tomb and they put Jesus in there. It doesn't tell us about a stone to seal it up, like a doorway stone, but presumably there was one because it talks about that later.

So here are the first people on their journey to the tomb and of course it's before the resurrection but I think we can say some things about them. I can think they're very brave to do that because Joseph previously was too scared to say he was anything to do with Jesus, wasn't he?

That's what we're told. He was a secret disciple. I think it was very brave of him to say, right, this is my one opportunity. I'm not going to miss it. I'm somebody who's got Pilate's mobile number on my phone and we've met before a dinner party or something.

This is my opportunity and he's brave. He says, right, I'm going to do this and he goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Jesus. And I think he's not only brave but I think he's very honourable.

[13:48] I think he's trying to do the right thing. He's trying to honour Jesus in the best way that he can, in the position that he's in and I think he's a great example for us. He's a good man to do this.

And there's something providential about this. By providential, I mean God's providence by which I mean the way God arranges things sort of behind the scenes in terms of timing and in terms of things that have been happening for years that just happen to meet a need at a certain time.

And it's providential that Joseph has access to Pilate. He's high enough class to do that.

And it's providential that he has access to this tomb nearby. The other gospels say he owned it.

Maybe he had to buy it specially. I don't know. But there he is and there's his mate Nicodemus who's also a high up in Jewish society who is willing to help him.

And so I think there's something lovely about this. Something good about it. Brave and honourable and providential. Well, providential in terms of the influence they had.

[14:59] Providential perhaps in the amount of money they had. They could suddenly acquire this amount of spices. Providential perhaps in that they had staff who could help carry.

I don't think they would have done this all on their own. And providential in terms of the position in society that they'd been put. So here are the first people on their journey to the tomb. And this is Good Friday.

And that's all we can say about that. Let's go two days on. Into chapter 20 now. Early on the first day of the week while it was still dark Mary of Magdala Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.

Notice we've had tomb twice already. She went to the tomb. And she sees that the stone has been lifted away. So let's get Mary coming in here.

So there she is. There's Mary. It's very early. He tells us it's still dark. And I wonder if by that he's almost referring us to their state of mind.

[16:13] They're still in darkness. They haven't got this figured out at all. It's still dark. Do you remember that Judas went out into the darkness went out and it was night.

I wonder if he's thinking like that. There's the tomb. It's not full height. It's lower than full height. Because people have to stoop to look into it. So I've drawn it rather flattened out. And this is as far as her journey gets. Because she sees the stone has been removed from the entrance.

So she runs verse 2 present tense. She runs to Simon Peter and the other disciple the one that Jesus loved. We presume that's John. And she says they've taken the Lord from the tomb as a taking word.

And we don't know there's ignorance where they put him. And there she is. She hurries back. There she is going at full pelt. She hasn't got very far has she?

[17:15] She's just got to the edge of the tomb. Sees there's no stone. And runs back. And I think there's something marvellous about these accounts which are so eyewitness.

I reckon people must have sat down with her time and again and said to her what did you do then? Well I got as far as the tomb. What did you do then? Well I saw the stone was rolled away. What did you do then? Well I ran back. Why did you do that? Well of course I wanted some help. Or whatever. It just has such the hallmarks of somebody telling us how it was.

And it's even told to us now isn't it? In the present tense she runs back to Simon Peter and this is her that is what she says they've taken the Lord and we don't know perhaps the we means that she was not on her own but John can't tell us everything otherwise the book would be massive.

So he just tells us about the one person they've taken the Lord out of the tomb we don't know who they are we don't know where they've put him and that's as far as she gets.

[18:26] And I think we can learn something from that even so that she showed courage didn't she? Going off in the dark perhaps with some of her friends but perhaps on her own she goes off in the dark well why?

Because she loves Jesus and she wants to do for him what she can I think what she's thinking is those men they know nothing about sorting out dead bodies I bet they've wrapped him up in a terrible way I bet they haven't cleaned him up properly I'm going to do what I can for him and that's what she's thinking I'm going to do my best for a dead Messiah and of course there's no such person it's a great motive isn't it it's a great aspiration I'd like to do my best for a Lord who's dead and gone but there's no such person but anyway she shows courage and devotion and the journey just gets as far as that full stop let's go on to some other people then so now let's look at Peter and John so they've been told did I mention that she's told

Peter and John there they are being told and being surprised and not knowing what to make of it so they run off so this is now verse three so Peter and the other disciples started for the tomb they're running it's very undignified for a grown man to run in an ancient society but these guys are running a bit out of condition at least one of them is so Peter and the other disciples started for the tomb you notice we've got tomb again both were running verse four but the other disciple whom we presume is John out ran Peter and reached the tomb first so there we are we're running to the tomb and John gets to the edge and he stops I don't know what you would have done I don't know whether you would have poked your nose in but he stops but he bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying but did not go in so he stops he looks and he sees the strips of linen another of these words placed there and as

John tells us this this seems to be an important detail he bent over looked at the strips of linen lying there not lying there but placed there this is very strange you look inside the tomb the corpse isn't gone but the linen which we know was wrapped up around the body is placed there placed and then Simon Peter who was behind him arrives and he went into the tomb so he tries to avoid banging his head must have still been somewhat dark so he goes in and this is typical Simon Peter because he always jumps in with both feet have you noticed that about Simon Peter so he is doing this again he goes in went into the tomb verse six he sees present tense he sees the strips of linen lying there placed there as well as the burial cloth the sudarion this is the bit for the head the burial cloth that had been around

Jesus head the cloth was folded interesting word it was folded it was folded by itself separate from the linen the lying word is not placed with the linen and I'm quite fascinated by this detail because he is giving it to us blow by blow isn't it what did you see next well I looked in and I could see the cloth and then Peter went in he actually went in I stopped at the edge he went in Peter what did you see I saw the two piles I can see it as it were now folded!

[23 : 15] two separate places so the two piles I'm just thinking of folding so I'm thinking of our drying up towels drying up tea cloths I better not give you away too many details of our domestic arrangements but we did have a student who actually every time she used a tea!

cloth would fold it into three and lie it over the hanging things whereas not all of us do that some of us just chuck it but the idea of folding it is very deliberate isn't it and it has a certain sort of tidiness of mind to fold something and they enter the tomb and they see it folded in two separate who is going to do that and presumably the spices are still involved with the bandages so if you were a grave robber of course they did have grave robbers you would have taken the valuable stuff wouldn't you you would have taken the cloth you would have taken that valuable spice you would be at home picking it out with tweezers and putting it into ready to sell it but now it is folded and you can see the cogs beginning in verse 8 finally the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also went inside he saw it's not a present tense it's a one off he saw and believed isn't that interesting he looks in and he says this isn't what I thought it was something amazing has happened here he still doesn't fully understand it but the beginnings of faith are there so that it can be said he had faith he believed it's an imperfect faith he didn't yet know the scriptures

I'll quote it in a literal translation they still did not know the scripture that Jesus must rise must stand up from the dead he didn't know he hadn't made all the connections but he still had faith maybe you're in that situation maybe in your own situation you're beginning to believe but you can't quite see how it connects up with everything but you know there's something there and perhaps that's a little bit like the situation John was in it's faith it's not at its fullest or its highest please either come back this evening or read for yourself the rest of the rest of the rest of faith is Thomas who in verse 28 says my lord and my god and that's that's the highest position that faith gets to in the new testament to say of Jesus he is lord and

I worship him my lord and my god we haven't quite got as far as that it's not the highest yet and the reason being that he's not connected up so what he's got is Jesus and he loves Jesus and then he's got this empty tomb and then there's the scriptures which he would have known as a Jew but he hasn't yet connected them all up but he's in a position to if you actually read John's gospel there's lots of places where it said they didn't understand they didn't understand they didn't understand why this scripture applied they didn't understand why he did this until Jesus was glorified and then looking back on it when you've got the cross and the resurrection you say of course yes and that's when faith comes to its fullest maybe you're in a situation a bit like that and I would encourage you to keep seeking and to keep traveling and to keep asking and looking for those connections to be made so that the Christ that you're trusting in is the Christ of scripture and you've got all the dimensions of what is said about him and all the richness of it and that really is where faith is meant to go let's look again at Mary so we're now in verse 10 the disciples went back to their homes I suppose there wasn't anything else for them to do what else would they do but Mary stood outside the tomb weeping and she sees present tense she sees what does she see this time well this time it's not a focus on the folded cloths but this time she sees two angels in white angels are sort of the accompaniment of God's big big actions so they're rather like if you had a nuclear explosion you'd get sort of shock waves and all sorts of things like that and when [29 : 03] God does something really big like making the world or sending his son into the world or raising Jesus from the dead there's angels there and here are two angels clothed in white am I reading that correctly she stood outside the tomb crying as she wept she bent over you notice the reference to the height of the tomb she bends over and looks in and sees two angels seated where Jesus body had been laid I think one at the head and one at the foot and I'm not quite sure how they would have done that because the tomb let's imagine it's a sort of cave maybe it has shelves to put bodies on or maybe some ledges and perhaps they're sitting at either end of the ledges and they ask her present tense so they ask woman why are you crying it's very direct form woman and it's a good question why are you crying now the angels don't say very much in this case they just ask a question and sort of wonder whether they're angels in the

Jewish tradition because there's a Jewish tradition of asking questions isn't there it's a very good question why are you weeping because I'm upset why are you upset because Jesus has been taken away why do you think Jesus has been taken away what do you think has happened to him well I'm here at the tomb I can't find his body why do you think that might be they're asking questions in the hope of getting her thinking well this is what she says and she is a little bit of a repetition isn't it we haven't got beyond this they've taken my Lord away she said I don't know

where they've put him that's just what she said before she hasn't made any progress on this this is my problem they've taken whoever they are have taken my Lord my Lord they've taken my Lord away and I don't know where they've put him so there she is you can imagine her sort of stooping down to talk to these angels and perhaps she hears a foot something and she turns round and she sees present tense she sees

Jesus standing there but she doesn't know it's Jesus so we've got a present tense and a don't know there she is eyes filled with tears Jesus asked her a question woman why are you crying can we get to that why are you crying and who are you looking for she doesn't actually answer the question but if we were to take it on why are you crying because I've lost Jesus who are you looking for I'm looking for a dead Jesus there's no such person as a dead Jesus and you haven't lost him so those are good questions why are you weeping who do you seek but she doesn't take the cue really from the question she thinks he's the gardener and she says present tense sir Kyrios which is actually lord but she probably doesn't realise how appropriate it is lord if you have carried him away tell me where you've put him and

I'll lift him up I'll get him if you carried him tell me where you placed him and I'll lift him actually that's a very silly thing to say how she by herself going to lift the corpse of a grown man and put it somewhere sensible I mean what is she thinking perhaps she isn't thinking but you can see why she's taking that line please tell me if you've carried him away tell me where you've put him and I'll get him and Jesus answers with this one word Mary isn't that wonderful he just addresses her personally individually Mary she turns towards him and although the NIV says she cries out as far as I could find out it just says she says and she says in the first language that comes to her mind Rabboni which means teacher John's always telling us the translation of things what a wonderful encounter he wasn't dead he was alive he was there why are you weeping who are you looking for well he was right there so let's just comment on Mary she has got a stickability hasn't she I don't know whether you say she has stickability or she got stuck because this thing they've taken him away we don't know where they've put him what's the problem they've taken him away we don't know where they've put him who's this person they've taken!

[34 : 40] him away we don't know! where! she she has a wonderful stickability and the reward for this stickability is that she sees the Lord the blokes don't see the Lord do they the disciples as yet have not seen him the first person to clap eyes on the risen saviour is Mary of Magdala Mary Magdalene in the Bible says in another place she was a woman out of whom Jesus cast multiple devils so she hadn't had a particularly hygienic life but she's the one that sees him and she hears him and let's look at what he says this isn't telling us everything but it's telling us something verse 17

Jesus said don't hold on to me for I have not yet returned I have not yet gone up to the father go instead to my brothers and tell them I am going up I am returning to my father and your father to my God and your God so that's the that's the conversation and some questions might come to your mind because Thomas later is told that he is to touch the Lord so why is Jesus saying to Mary do not hold on to me and I I'm pretty sure the answer is not that Jesus could not be touched because he could be and he makes that point several times but he's not to be clung to he's not to be hung on to there on earth in that situation don't imagine you can constrain me and keep me here

Mary you can talk to me for these few minutes and for this period of days but afterwards I'm going out of this world to my heavenly father and I'm going up to my father and your father to my God and your God and then Mary returns back and says to the disciples I've seen the Lord I've seen the Lord amazing so let's comment on this and we'll make some conclusions so my first comment is that this lady goes down through history as the first eyewitness man and she's a woman with a particularly messed up past and isn't the Lord gracious the Lord doesn't pick out the great and the good to use in his service he uses the humble believing devoted sinner whatever their past life might have been it's the person who's seeking the

Lord and seeking to serve the Lord and she has this honour of being the first eyewitness Mary of Magdala she's the one who saw the Lord and then I also comment that this our ear witness eye witness encounter is not meant to be permanent so that no matter how hard we prayed Lord when I'm going round the corner to the Duke of York please can I see you and touch you the Lord says it doesn't work like that anymore that was for then that was for those ear witnesses and eyewitnesses they were on the scene they heard they saw their hands touched that's the way it was it's embedded in history it's a one off and what happened was that she told other people and their their

duty their place was to believe her because she went and told the disciples didn't she she gave faithful reliable true testimony so those are the journeys and let's make some conclusions they're journeys to the empty tomb and they're also journeys of faith so

I've got a few conclusions in a random sort of order so my first conclusion is these people made journeys of faith didn't they they began by saying we don't understand we don't know we don't get it but as the Lord dealt with them they came to faith and I would like to encourage you if you think well I'm a bit like that myself actually there's some things that I really want about Christian faith there's some things that I get there's some things that I I've got the hang of but there's other things I haven't yet got I want to encourage you it is possible to bring such a journey to a conclusion when you can say I know whom I have believed and persuade that he is able to keep what I've committed unto him until that day or whatever it was that Paul said it is possible to come to a completed definite assured faith and please don't stop until you've got to that point it's possible to make journeys of faith and get to the point where like

[40 : 16] Mary said I've seen I've got it second observation second point the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the fixed basis of Christian faith in other words if there's no resurrection there's no Christianity and that's why it's said about John he saw and believed and I want to encourage you if the resurrection isn't part of your Christian faith then please lose no time in making it so if you're not sure about it read it through pray about it but it is absolutely essential it's not a negotiable here's a third observation what we're talking about is physical bodily resurrection we're not talking about like Robin

Hood who whether or not he lived doesn't make any difference and whether he whether he's buried somewhere we've still got the idea of Robin Hood and that lives on in our psyche this is saying there is no place in this creation where the dead body of Jesus is there is no grave there is no rubbish heap where the molecules of Jesus body reside the tomb was empty Jesus is not a ghost he's not an idea he's not a memory but a physical body like we're physical bodies but his has been upgraded and you see this about his body as we shall see later that it's physically in many ways the same but it's also it has powers that our bodies don't have people don't always recognize Jesus straight away and of course his resurrection as I was trying to say earlier is the first stage of a much wider project he's broken through the barrier as it were to bring us through as well so that's of great significance to each one of us if you're a believer in Jesus Christ you too will be raised you too will not just die and then be forgotten and you won't even die and become like a spirit wafting round the future destination is that we will have resurrection bodies and the implications of that are huge a new heaven and a new earth nothing less than that here the resurrection confirms Jesus well it confirms him in his teaching because the things he said came true it confirms

Jesus in his person so he wasn't just a failure and a loser he was the son of God as he said confirms him in his innocence he wasn't the condemnation he deserves to die was not the correct judgment and we see a little bit of it here that that Mary I mean she could have said more but what she said was teacher and Jesus says yeah that's right I am the teacher and you can see by my resurrection a great big tick against all my teaching see they were right and my final thought here from the text is that the resurrection is followed by his enthronement with the father so we haven't finished the story we just got to a certain point but Jesus is saying I am ascending I'm going up I won't be here now permanently there'll be a period of time then I go up to be enthroned with the father he's in heaven now and you notice that Jesus makes this point what I'm going to do or what I've achieved is such that I can now announce to you that my father is your father and my God is your God what's he saying he's saying that I have a closeness to the father and a relationship with God which I have now done all that's necessary that you too can have this closeness to the father and this relationship with God I carry you with me in a sense so as the father I can say father such and such you too can pray our father in heaven such that Jesus says as I'm the son of God you too are adopted as children of God and we could enlarge on that but that's that's the that's what he's saying and I can ask are you a beneficiary of that are you in the position of faith whereby you could say yeah it's an amazing thing but just as Jesus can call God his father so can I and just as Jesus calls on God as his God he's my God too that something has been as it were cemented into place through the cross and resurrection of Jesus something fantastic journeys of faith we'll continue that this evening let's close by singing you you