

# The First Christian

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 05 April 2026

Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

[ 0 : 00 ] Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel according to John, chapter 2, verses 19-22, and chapter 20, verses 1-18, as printed in the liturgy.

A reading from the Gospel according to John. Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.

They replied, It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days? But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. 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.

[ 1 : 14 ] 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 came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head.

The cloth was still lying in its place, 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 where they were staying.

Now 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.

[ 2 : 18 ] They asked her, Woman, why are you crying? 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. He asked her, Woman, 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 have put him, and I will get him.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher. Jesus said, 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. 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. This is the gospel of the Lord. Happy Easter to our Christ Church family and friends.

[ 3 : 34 ] It's a delight to join together today with brothers and sisters around the world and mothers and fathers in the faith throughout time to say that Christ is risen indeed.

And today we're especially thankful to the Lord for our beautiful new cross that we have behind us. So grateful to Amy and Betsy and Jim and Ray and Balen for bringing this amazing project to completion during Holy Week of all weeks.

You should know about me, my name is Jonathan, and you should know about me that I grew up in a Christian family. I grew up going to church, but I did not seriously explore the evidence for Jesus' resurrection until my mom died.

She was 50 years old and I was 19 years old. Prior to her death, I had spent no time in cemeteries. And after her death, I found myself spending time among tombs and graves of people who had

gone from this life and into death.

And so I was plunged into this kind of dark night of the soul. And during those years of my early 20s, I was just full of heartbreak. It was full of crushing and deep grief.

[ 4 : 51 ] And I found myself experiencing a new kind of fear that I'd never had, a fear of death, a fear that I had suddenly lost my mom and perhaps suddenly I would lose my dad too.

I'd lose my siblings. And that maybe the same life-threatening diseases that took my mom away would be diagnosed in me, a fear that I too would die young before my time.

And so in those years during college and graduate school, I began to ask for the first time some serious questions about what happens after we die.

What hope do we have beyond the grave? And I especially began to examine whether or not I really believed. I knew that other people around me believed, but whether or not I really believed that Jesus' crucified body in that tomb was raised by God, not metaphorically, but physically, literally, historically, was raised to a new and glorified life on Easter Sunday.

And I began to ask myself, I was a history major, and I asked myself, are the Gospels reliable eyewitness history? Or are these just religious myths?

[ 6 : 08 ] Are these pious legends and feel-good, but not ultimately true stories? Did Jesus' heartbroken and grieving disciples just convince themselves that perhaps they had seen visions of Jesus in their attempt to console themselves and their attempt to honor their master and to keep his memory alive among them?

Did they say, yeah, we know that his body is still in the tomb, but for us, he's spiritually alive. Somehow, he's mystically alive in our hearts.

And so, I began to search the Scriptures as a young person in my early 20s. And I quickly realized that Christianity hangs, everything hangs, on the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

This is from the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. He says, if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith, you are still in your sins.

If only for this life, we have hope in Christ. We Christians are of all people most to be pitied.

Fortunately for me, in 2003, when I was in seminary about five years after my mom died, a book was published.

[ 7 : 27 ] And it's really the book. I've got it down here. It's about 800 or 900 pages by a guy named N.T. Wright, one of the great New Testament scholars, called The Resurrection of the Son of God. You don't need to read this book.

You just need to know that it exists. And you need to know that deep and serious scholarship has been carried out on the questions we're talking about today. And what I want to do today is walk through John 20 and just share a little bit of what I've learned and seek to persuade you that the resurrection of Jesus is not fake news, but that it's true news.

It's good news. It's the kind of news that can change the course of your life. And so I want to talk about three things. I want to talk about the evidence, the encounter, and the enterprise. Okay? Three E's. The evidence, the encounter, and the enterprise. And when we talk about the evidence, just know that I was on jury duty earlier this week and was actually down at the Alameda County Courthouse on Monday.

So I've got evidence on the mind. And what I want to do is present nine exhibits, nine pieces of evidence to the court this morning. And if you look at verse one, it says, 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.

[ 8 : 45 ] And this is exhibit number one. This disc-shaped boulder that weighed two to four thousand pounds, which in that culture was rolled downhill in order to seal the tomb.

It was rolled into this groove. And so once it rolled downhill and hit in that seal, it was very hard to dislodge and roll back uphill. And so the question is, who came in the night to remove this stone that was protected by a guard of fierce Roman soldiers?

That's exhibit number one. Exhibit number two, verse two says, so she came, Mary 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.

Exhibit number two is that the tomb where Jesus' dead body had been laid is empty and the body of Jesus is not there. And either people came and they stole the body, which is what Mary thinks, or something even more strange has happened.

Look at verse three. So Peter and the other disciples 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.

[10:08] This is exhibit number three, that this empty tomb is actually not totally empty. There are these strips of linen grave clothes that are lying there and why emphasize this?

Why emphasize the burial wrappings of Jesus? Well, it goes on in verse six. It says, Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight to the tomb and he saw the strips of linen lying there as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head.

The cloth was still lying in its place separate from the linen. What you need to know is that the crucified body of Jesus had been wrapped in linen cloth with about 75 pounds of spices that were carefully folded into the folds of the linen.

And three times here it says that Peter and John, they saw the strips of linen lying, which means that they were lying undisturbed. That they were in the shape of Jesus' body and yet they were empty as if Jesus had passed through his grave clothes.

If the body had been stolen, either these grave clothes would not be here at all or the thieves would have unwrapped and scattered the grave clothes like a bunch of gauze bandages just laying everywhere.

[11:31] But the clothes, it says, are still lying in the place where Jesus' body was laid and they're in the shape that Jesus' body had given them. It's like an empty cocoon.

It's like a collapsed balloon with all the air gone out of it. And in verse 8, it's so fascinating. It says that finally the other disciple, John, who'd reached the tomb first, he also went inside and it says he saw and believed.

Earlier in verse 5, John bent over outside the tomb and he looked in at the strips of linen from a distance. And then it says in verse 6 that Peter went into the tomb and it says he saw the strips of linen up close and the Greek verb there is *phareo* where we get the word theory.

Peter saw these strips and he's theorizing to himself. He's wondering to himself, what is this? He's trying to make sense of it all, of what he sees with his eyes. And then it says that John, here in verse 8, he goes all the way inside the tomb and the Greek verb there is *orao*.

And *orao* means to see with your mind, to see with your understanding. And John sees with his mind. He's grasping the spiritual truth of these empty grave clothes that his eyes can see and it says that he believes.

[12:53] And what does he believe? Well, he believes that Jesus' lifeless body is now a living body. It's a resurrected and glorified body that has literally passed through these empty grave clothes.

And the question for us as readers is, do you see with your mind? Do you see with your understanding? Jesus' body that passed through these empty grave clothes is a body in which the process of death, decay, and dissolution has been reversed.

Death, as Paul puts it, death no longer has mastery over him. Death no longer has dominion over him. That Jesus' body is unlike any body there's ever been.

It's an imperishable and incorruptible body. It's a powerful and glorious body that Jesus has gone on through death and he's gone out into a new creation and a new life.

He's gone out into this place where death itself has been defeated in life. Sheer life. Life in all of its fullness and all of its abundance. Life indestructible and life everlasting could begin at last.

[14:18] Not just for Jesus but for us as well. That's what John saw with his mind. That's what the first Christians and the early church saw with their understanding and believed.

You guys with me? Okay. So this is exhibit one through three. The heavy stone has been removed. The tomb is empty. The grave clothes are lying there empty.

Exhibit number four is the meticulously recorded appearances of the resurrection of Jesus, the resurrected Jesus to the eyewitnesses. The New Testament records for us a dozen or more distinct appearances over the next 40 days to individuals like Mary Magdalene which we'll look at in a moment to small groups of people at one point to a gathering of over 500 people and all of them reported this.

They did not say we think that we may have seen a vision of Jesus but what they said is that we definitely heard him, saw him, touched him and ate with him and we are absolutely certain beyond the shadow of a doubt that he is alive.

Exhibit number five is the creation of an entirely new worldview overnight without the typical kind of slow evolutions and developments that are involved in the structure of scientific revolutions and of paradigm shifts.

[ 15 : 53 ] So like when you think of Copernicus to Newton to Einstein that took place over many many years. It took a long time for people to come and embrace a new structure of scientific reality but here something completely different is happening all of a sudden overnight out of nowhere radically monotheistic Jews are somehow worshipping a human being as Lord and God and that is an unthinkable thing.

Exhibit number six is the dramatically changed lives of these eyewitnesses that how did these disillusioned cowards hiding behind locked doors overnight become fearless evangelists and martyrs.

Did they go out and die for a group hallucination? Did they go out and die for legends that they actually fabricated? Exhibit number seven is that what we read of in the New Testament is that the early church experienced the resurrected Jesus as alive and powerfully present whenever they would gather that they couldn't really explain it to themselves but they knew that somehow Jesus was exalted to God's throne and yet he was continuing to be powerfully with them as the living Lord and when they come together they knew that it was Jesus who was teaching them Jesus who was nourishing them Jesus who was healing them Jesus who was encouraging them Jesus was leading them exhibit number eight is the existence of the New Testament documents themselves that somehow without any imperial sponsorship whatsoever a persecuted minority produced in prison cells and in exile the best attested literature in the ancient world by far how did that happen and exhibit number nine our final exhibit is the explosive growth of the

Christian church that somehow this obscure marginal movement became the dominant force in the Roman Empire after three centuries of intense persecution just pause here to make some application how do you account for all the evidence exhibited before your eyes and before your ears I haven't even given you all the evidence but can you provide a historically plausible alternative explanation for this evidence what I'm advocating today is called abductive reasoning or inference to the best explanation it's a logical method used to determine the most plausible explanation for a set of historical data historical observations and evidence and if you come to this and you say well my hypothesis is that the first Christians had visions and they convinced themselves they saw Jesus and then they created legends in order to persuade other people you're actually creating way more problems than you're solving with that hypothesis and my contention is that if you will thoroughly go through the evidence then like John you may very well see with your mind see with your understanding and believe but very often unbelief happens not because the evidence is lacking or not because the evidence is not convincing but unbelief happens because a resurrected Jesus means that you are not in control a resurrected Jesus means that someone greater and more authoritative than you is standing above you and that given his position he demands that you surrender your life to him and call him Lord and most people just don't want to do that most people like having control of their lives most people like being their own lord and their own savior and their own master but my question for you is if Jesus body actually did pass through those strips of linen there lying undisturbed if he emptied the tomb if God rolled away that stone not so that

[ 20 : 49 ] Jesus could get out but so that we could look in and observe if Jesus is alive today is it possible that he's searching for you is it possible that he is standing there waiting to be in a relationship with you and I want to show you one example of a person whom the resurrected Jesus comes looking for her name is Mary Magdalene I want to turn to her story I want to shift from the evidence which we absolutely have to have and I want to talk about the encounter you can have the evidence but not have an encounter but you need both the evidence and the encounter and as I mentioned there are dozens of appearances a dozen appearances of the resurrected Jesus to the disciples recorded in the New Testament and John focuses our attention on one such appearance one such encounter with the leader of

Jesus female disciples and before we get into the details I just want to remind you of how radical it was for Jesus to include women in his ministry prior to Jesus there were no women disciples of any Jewish rabbis or teachers and Jesus has created this amazing counterculture full of female disciples and here he comes to make one of those disciples the first witness to his resurrection now we know that Jesus gave nicknames to his disciples he called Peter the rock or rocky right and he called James and John the sons of thunder or thunder boys and Mary Magdalene either means

Mary from Magdala which is her hometown but Magdalene also means the tower Mary Magdalene Mary the tower how did she become this person well she's a you can read about her in the gospel she was an aristocratic woman of great financial means and we don't know how but somehow she came under the influence of dark powers that were enslaving her and dehumanizing her and Jesus came and he found

Mary and he powerfully liberated Mary and this dramatic life transformation planted in Mary a heart a fierce devotion to Jesus and she became this strong powerful towering disciple but we see here in this story that her towering strength begins to crumble because her greatest hopes and her dreams have been absolutely crushed she saw Jesus breathe his final breath on the cross she heard the rolling stone slam shut on his tomb and the fact that Mary is leading the other women disciples in the dark back to a tomb that's guarded by intensely fierce Roman soldiers shows you something of her strong devotion and her fierce determination right Mary's amazing but adding insult to injury she comes to the tomb and she finds the body of Jesus is stolen or so she thinks and it's no wonder that she's now standing there just absolutely weeping outside of the tomb crushed in spirit and broken hearted because she saw the violence and the brutality of an empire unleashed at the crucifixion she she experienced the finality of burying her beloved friend she has now been denied the opportunity to pay her last respects and she's weeping because of the hopeless sorrow of this world in which we live anybody relate to that there's a kind of hopeless sorrow to our world and she's weeping because this sad old world is full of pain and it's full of misery she's weeping because she's alone she's weeping because she's been abandoned in despair she's weeping because she's been separated from the only one who truly has understood her and loved her she's weeping because this man who has delivered her from bondage and given her new life is gone how can she face the future without him

Mary I would say is in the deep darkness and anguish with the problem of evil but something prompts her and for whatever reason she stoops down and she looks back inside the tomb and through her tears she saw something unbelievable she saw these two brilliant angelic messengers of God and they're sitting on either end of the stone shelf where Jesus body had been and their question to her is why are you crying and that question is soon echoed by the voice of a stranger behind her who says why are you crying and who are you looking for and just pause here because the contrast between this lamenting and despairing woman and this resurrected triumphant Lord in the garden right there together is quite striking and I think it's a picture of the world in which we live the risen

Lord is right there and he's ready he's able to dry her tears but she does not know who he is friends it's possible to be in the presence of the living Lord and yet not realize that he is with you and you are with him and so in verse 14 it says that this she turned around and saw Jesus standing there but she did not realize that it was Jesus and so verse 15 he asked her woman why are you crying who is it you're looking for and thinking he was the gardener she said sir if you have carried him away tell me where you have put him and I will go get him this woman of towering strength she says I will go get his body and I will carry it back on my shoulders with the dead weight on me and that is how much I love him just tell me where he is and

[ 27 : 27 ] Jesus says to her in verse 16 Mary Mary Mary the one who created her the one who redeemed her the one who gave her a new identity just simply speaks her name and that is enough Mary in John chapter 10 Jesus said I'm the good shepherd and I call my sheep by name they know my voice and they follow me Mary Mary it says she turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic Rabboni which means teacher and Jesus said do not hold on to me for I have not yet ascended to the father I think we all know that being reunited with those that you love is one of the happiest experiences on earth right you come up that escalator in the airport you arrive on the threshold!

the door you see that familiar face you hear that reassuring! you feel the comforting embrace but imagine what it would be like to be reunited with someone that you thought you lost forever not just somebody who took a new job not somebody who moved to another city but someone you thought you never see again when we think of the friends and the family that we lost it's devastating isn't it to think that they're gone that however hard we no medical or industrial advance can stop death from winning and yet here is one man the one person in history who's demonstrated absolute power and authority over death and when Mary turns she grabs hold of Jesus for the sake of her life she has Jesus in a bear hug and is not going to let him go and

I just want to pause here and make a little bit of application for those of you who may be exploring Christianity what other world view what other life system addresses our greatest problem like this addresses it because the reality is your story along with all the stories of everyone you love is going to end in death you know human history is going to end in the collapse and death of the universe but if Mary's encounter with Jesus is true if he has a resurrected voice that can speak your name if he has a living body that can be held if he has a powerful presence who can come and meet you and ask you tender questions in the midst of your deepest despair and hopelessness then your story and human history is not a tragedy it's been turned into a comedy that in this moment the world has finally turned a corner that in the midst of this old creation a new creation has been launched in the midst of this old age a new age has begun and

Jesus resurrected body is the first prototype of many bodies to come you see in the resurrection of Jesus God has said yes to Jesus God has said yes to all that Jesus is and all that he's done and all that he's said and he causes Jesus to be alive and so when Mary hears Jesus speak her name she in this moment is getting aligned with God's cosmic yes to Jesus right she turns herself to Jesus and she grabs hold of Jesus and she begins to put all the weight of her trust on Jesus she's saying yes to Jesus the apostle Paul says it this way in Romans chapter 4 he says he was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification and he goes on in chapter 10 he says if you declare with your mouth that

Jesus is Lord and you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved all you have to do is turn and say yes and if you consider yourself a Christian a point of application for you if you have encountered the resurrected and living Jesus not physically at the garden tomb like Mary but truly through the scriptures and if you've heard him speak your name not audibly!

[ 32 : 17 ] like Mary but truly by the Holy Spirit in your heart if you turned and been restored to a personal and deeply intimate relationship with Jesus like Mary and if you've grabbed hold of Jesus by faith my question for you today is are you living out of the new life and the new power that Jesus has put inside of you the apostle Paul goes on in Romans 6 he says we were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the father we too may live a new life and in Romans 8 he says if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living inside of you he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his spirit who lives in you friends if you consider yourself a Christian every

Sunday since Easter Sunday people have been coming back to the risen Lord that Mary has taken hold of and every morning since Easter morning the disciples of this risen Lord have been coming to him again and again and again why because they're asking him give me more of this new life give me more of this new power Lord if you're alive I want everything you have to give to me and the question for us is are we coming to Jesus like that have you taken hold of Jesus like Mary has taken hold of Jesus and said give me more I'm not letting go give me more you can't just have the evidence you have to have the encounter but I want to conclude by talking not just about the evidence and the encounter but I want to talk finally and briefly about the enterprise the enterprise Jesus said to Mary he said the strangest words he says do not hold on to me for I have not yet ascended to the father again Mary has Jesus in a bear hug and Jesus I think initially welcomes! the towering strength of her love but he gives her this firm negative in other translations do not touch me do not cling to me do not hold on to me no writer of fiction could have come up with this part of the story it's the first of many commands that Jesus the resurrected Jesus gives what does this command mean well I think when Jesus says don't hold on to me number one he's saying that the me you're holding on to is not an ungraspable ghost it's not a disembodied spirit the me is a real me it's a historical me right I'm gloriously alive in this body that now has undreamed of powers that no one has ever seen in this world so you can't just hold on to me like the relationship we had before secondly I think Jesus is saying Mary you and the disciples you're going to see me now and then over the next 40 days but soon it's going to be time for me as

Jesus says to ascend to the father I've got to go up I've got to be enthroned at the majesty of God's right hand because I'm no longer the humiliated Jesus of Nazareth I'm the exalted Christ of glory so you can't hold on to me and the third thing I think Jesus means here is now please Mary let me go just for a minute so I can tell you how to go to others and tell them about me Mary you can't keep holding on to me because I'm going to rule and reign with my father over a worldwide enterprise over a worldwide mission and Mary I've got a job for you I've got a job for you to go and be my first

messenger and so he says do not hold on to me for I have not yet ascended to the father and then he says go instead to my brothers and tell them I am ascending to my father and your father to my God and your God Mary your assignment is to go and tell others when any of us meets he says go and tell others and you know up to this point

[ 36 : 52 ] Jesus has called his followers his disciples he's called them his servants he's called them his friends but he's never yet called them his brothers and up to this point Jesus has talked about the father and he's talked about the father who sent me and he's talked about my father but he's never called God your father but all that has changed and he says go and say to those guys who denied me and abandoned me and failed me my brothers all is forgiven my brothers and go tell them that I'm going up not just to my father but to your father to my God and to your God and you see God is Jesus father by nature and by right but what he what he's saying here is that now he can be your father by grace and by adoption that because of the resurrection you can be

God's forgiven and intimate child that you can be his beloved son and his beloved daughter and that therefore you can be a little brother and a little sister of Jesus friends is this news of Easter this news of the resurrection is that good news to you because it certainly was for Mary Magdalene she knew in this moment that she was not going back to the way that things were before she knew in this moment that the resurrected Jesus was catapulting her and catapulting the entire disciple community into a whole new enterprise a whole new world mission in the power of the Holy Spirit and that she knew that she had a new relationship with God where he is father and I am his child she had a new relationship with

Jesus because he's the risen! And I'm his ambassador and she had a new relationship with all the people around her because she knew they desperately need this good news that has just been entrusted to me she had to let go of Jesus in order to go tell others the good news she had to stop holding on to Jesus so she could go and hold on to others with the gospel and it says in verse 18 that Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news I have seen the Lord not I think that I've had a vision of the Lord but I have seen the Lord and she told them that he had said these things to her she immediately obeyed and she went out bold with a new found towering strength and she shared the message of Jesus in Christ church the question for us is are we willing to be like Mary will you say yes to this new enterprise this new mission will you too be an ambassador of the risen king will you go out and tell others and share with them the news that has been entrusted to you the best news that the world has ever heard friends the resurrected Jesus is alive and that means that all that he said is true and it means that you are now his brother and his sister it means that now God is your father and you are his child and it means that one day the risen Lord who has ascended to the father and is ruling over all things he's going to set this world right he's going to cause all that's sad in our lives and all that's sad in this world to become untrue and he's going to make this whole world new friends Christ is risen he's risen indeed in the name of the father son and holy spirit amen!

to be to be