

# Seeing Is Believing?

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[ 0 : 00 ] All right, well, this morning we've finally come to the moment that many of us have been waiting for in the story of Jesus, the resurrection. John chapter 20.

The last two Sundays we heard from John about what happened the day that Jesus died. We heard his testimony about how they crucified Jesus. We heard how the actions of the soldiers confirmed his death and at the same time fulfilled God's ancient words.

We heard how Joseph and Nicodemus prepared Jesus' body for burial and laid it to rest in the tomb nearby. All of that on the day of preparation just before the Sabbath began in the evening.

Let's now continue the story this morning reading from John chapter 20. 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've taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they've put him.

[ 1 : 14 ] So John tells us that it was early on the first day of the week. Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus' followers, she goes to the tomb and she discovers that the stone, which had been rolled in front of the entrance, had been removed.

And what's surprising is just how brief John's description of all this is. The other three gospel accounts tell us in much more detail what happened there at the tomb that morning.

Now John is writing his gospel much later and so perhaps just felt, you know, it's already been said and so I'm not going to focus on that. John instead seems to focus his account on what he witnessed that day.

And for him, it all started when Mary Magdalene arrived early in the morning with some shocking news. But for those of you who maybe aren't as familiar with the story, let me just briefly explain what the other accounts tell us about Mary Magdalene and what happened at the tomb that morning.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us how a group of women, including Mary, went out to the tomb very early in the morning. Luke tells us that prior to this, on the evening that Jesus was crucified, these women had gone home and prepared spices and perfumes.

[ 2 : 42 ] These were to put on Jesus' body to honor him. But because Jesus died quite close to the time that the Sabbath began, they didn't have the chance to anoint Jesus' body with them.

And so they came together to the tomb on the first day of the week. There was a discussion among the women. How are we going to roll the stone away so that we can get access to Jesus' body?

But then, when the women arrive at the tomb, they find that the stone is already rolled away.

According to Luke, at least some of the women entered the tomb, but couldn't find Jesus' body inside.

And then after that, angels appear to the women. And they announced that Jesus has risen from the dead. The women, of course, were terrified, yet they were also filled with joy.

Matthew tells us that they go running to report all this to the disciples. But now as we look closely at John's account from that day, it seems that there was one woman who had a different experience from the rest that morning.

[ 4 : 08 ] John tells us that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, saw that the stone had been rolled away, and because of what she saw, she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, that's John, the author of this account.

And Mary says to them, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him. So Mary doesn't say, guess what, guys?

We went to the tomb, and we saw angels declaring that Jesus is alive. And then on the way there, here, we saw him. She doesn't say that.

Instead, she says, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him. So what does Mary Magdalene know at this point?

She only knows that Jesus' body is missing. And she suspects that the reason is because someone has taken it. Perhaps thieves.

[ 5 : 11 ] Or Jesus' enemies. And where? We don't know. So it would seem then that as we bring these accounts together, that the women, they get to the tomb, they see that the stone has been rolled away.

Some of them go in. They can't find the body of Jesus. And immediately, Mary Magdalene runs to tell the disciples. And it seems she must have left them before the angels appeared to declare the news to the rest of the women at the tomb.

So this is the first thing that John remembers that day. It's Mary Magdalene showing up to the door of the house, saying, someone has stolen Jesus' body.

I know it's probably impossible for us to imagine how Mary might have felt in those moments. But let's try. She's just witnessed the horrific death of the wonderful man, Jesus.

The one that she's come to believe in as her Messiah. His death alone had brought her to anguish and grief like never before. But now, can you imagine this?

[ 6 : 30 ] Just days later, she goes to the place where he was buried and finds that his remains are gone. Can you imagine this?

How would that make you feel if you went to the cemetery three days after the death of a loved one only to find that the headstone is out of place? There's a wide open hole in the ground.

The casket is open. There's no body inside. So Mary Magdalene's mind is racing. She's running. Who would do such a thing? Somebody's taken his body. Now let's try Peter and John. Can you imagine what it was like from their perspective?

I doubt they got much for sleep on the nights following Jesus' death. Probably the horror of what they had witnessed was just replaying again and again in their minds. Tears.

[ 7 : 29 ] Questions. Wanderings. For Peter, I tried. I tried to fight in the garden, but he told me to stop. He told me to put my sword away.

And again and again, I imagine the memory of Jesus' piercing gaze in the courtyard right after he had denied having known Jesus.

And then all that followed as they brutally beat him and killed him. For John, the memory of those words that Jesus had spoken to him while up on the cross, here is your mother.

And the other words too, I am thirsty. It is finished. And the spear. And the blood.

Can you imagine after all that and sleepless nights waking up to the sound of someone knocking frantically on the door and you open up and here is Mary Magdalene out of breath fighting back tears and frantic saying, somebody has stolen his body.

[ 8 : 46 ] So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

That's, by the way, one of the clues that John is the one writing this. Only he would have known if he arrived a split second before Peter. The other disciple outran Peter, reached the tomb first.

John bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there, but did not go in. There's this moment of pause as John arrives at the tomb and we don't know what John is thinking here.

He's looking in, he's seeing the strips of linen lying there where Jesus' body was and it's like he just doesn't know what to do. He freezes.

Who knows? Maybe he was thinking about whether it would make him unclean to go in there or was he just processing like, whoa, Mary's telling the truth. His body, it's gone.

[ 9 : 47 ] Verse 6, 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. You've got to love Peter. He may not have been able to outrun John, but he was going to get into that tomb first.

Picture him jumping down in there and then just staring, speechless. There's the strips of linen that his body was wrapped in.

There's the head cloth. Quite literally, not in this translation, but in most of the other ones, the head cloth folded up in a place by itself.

Hmm. If this is the doing of thieves, this is strange. Why would they have unwrapped the body in the middle of the theft?

[10:48] Why not just take the body wrapped as it was if that's what they were after? And if it was the valuables that may have been buried with the body, wrapped with the body, I mean, why not take the head cloth as well in the custom of the day?

That was one of the most valuable things buried with the person. Often very ornate, high-quality cloth. And did they fold up the head cloth during the theft?

Or was that one of the women who were here earlier that did this? Like, what's going on here?

Finally, the other disciple, John, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside.

He saw and believed. And then John has this side comment here that he makes.

He says, 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.

[11:57] So John finally goes into the tomb after seeing Peter do it and he sees for himself, yeah, there's nothing in here. There's nobody in here. No body. The cloths lying there.

The head cloths still there. And in that moment, John says, he believed. Now there's lots of speculation here about what John believed.

Believed what? Some suggest that he just believed that the body was stolen. But it can't be. It's got to be more. I think John's side comment in verse 9 gives us a clue about what he believed.

They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. Rise from the dead. That's what John believed.

He saw. He saw. And he believed. Jesus really had risen from the dead. He really had come back to life.

[12:59] And I think the side comments there, you know, it's kind of an admission. You know, up until that point, even though Jesus has been talking about rising from the dead a lot, I'll be honest, me, Peter, the others, we still hadn't got it.

We still didn't see that that's how his story was going to go. He would die and then rise back to life. So John tells us that this moment as he goes down into the tomb and looks at where the body was laid, that's the moment.

I believed it. Now at this point, I want to zoom out and switch to camera 2, as it were. The Gospel of Luke tells us a little bit about what we just read from a different angle.

There's a man named Cleopas later this very day walking to a town nearby called Emmaus with his friend and according to Luke, Jesus appears to Cleopas and his friend and walks with them on the road to Emmaus.

But Cleopas and his friend don't know that it's Jesus. They don't recognize him. And this is what Cleopas is saying to Jesus, even though he doesn't know who he's talking to, about what happened earlier this morning.

[14:16] He says to Jesus, in addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive.

Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said. But they did not see Jesus. So this is what Cleopas and his friend remembered.

Notice the sequence here. The women go to the tomb early in the morning. They don't find his body. And before some of our companions go to verify it, that's Peter and John, what happened?

The women, plural, came and told them that they had seen this vision of angels who said that he was alive. So there's another angle here.

There's a context that Luke supplies. Before Peter and John run to the tomb, they heard from the women, plural, about the angels saying Jesus was alive.

[15:28] Now Mary Magdalene never said anything about angels or about Jesus being alive. She just said, they've taken his body and I don't know where. So it would seem that before any of the angels appeared to the women at the tomb, Mary left and ran.

But then it would also seem that before Peter and John came to the tomb to verify, the women had caught up hot on her heels and they shared what they had seen on their way.

Now look to John chapter 20 verse 8 and I think it makes a little more sense. As John went inside the tomb, he saw and believed.

Believed what? He believed what the other women had been reporting right before this that they had seen angels, that Jesus was alive. He really had risen from the dead.

So Mary Magdalene, it seems, missed out on the angels, on seeing Jesus alive with the other women on the way according to the Gospel of Matthew.

[16:49] Or did she? Verse 11. Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. Interestingly, John doesn't even tell us that she came back to the tomb, but it's implied that she must have followed after Peter and John.

Peter and John obviously ran there full tilt. Mary had already done a fair bit of running and probably just got there after. Peter and perhaps Peter and John had even left.

At any rate, Mary gets to the tomb and John tells us that she 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? They've taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they've 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've carried him away, tell me where you've put him and I will get him.

[18:23] 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.

So Mary Magdalene didn't miss out. God had something special just for her. Moments earlier, Peter and John had been in the tomb.

They didn't see any angels. They never saw Jesus. But now Mary Magdalene takes one more look into the tomb, and can you imagine the shock on her face as she sees these two angelic figures clothed in white?

[19:35] Yes, in white, sitting there on the place where Jesus' body had been laid. The angels ask her why she's crying, and Mary still doesn't seem to know the truth of what's really happened.

She says, they've taken my Lord away. I don't know where they've put him. She still seems to think that somebody's stolen Jesus' body. And for some reason, maybe, we don't know, maybe the angels are looking at her, and then they look up behind her at Jesus.

For some reason, Mary turns around and sees Jesus standing there. John tells us that she doesn't recognize him. The man says, why are you crying?

Who is it you're looking for? We don't know why she didn't recognize Jesus. There's all kinds of thoughts about this. Was it Mary's tears? Was it just the excitement of the moment?

Was it that Jesus' appearance after he rose was slightly different than before? We don't know. Whatever it was, she didn't recognize him, not at first. And she thought, well, maybe he's the gardener that looks after this place.

[20:50] Maybe he took the body. Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him and I'll get him. I'll take him. Now, we don't know what she was thinking here, but everything changes in an instant when Jesus addresses her by name.

Perhaps in the same way he always had said her name before. Mary. Instantly, it's like the scales fall from her eyes.

All of a sudden, she realizes that it's Jesus right there in front of her and she grabs onto him, clings to him, and won't let go.

Can you imagine how sweet this moment must have been? The man she watched die, now alive, right here, in my arms.

Jesus says, do not hold on to me or cling 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.

[22:09] Again, there's a lot of conjecture about these words as well. How come he tells Mary not to hold on to him? Is he about to ascend to his father right now? Some people kind of see two ascensions, that he goes up to heaven now and then he goes up again 40 days later.

There's a lot of speculation. Is it, or is it something else? Is it that Jesus hasn't yet been glorified and it's not appropriate for her to touch him, but then why is it okay for Thomas just a week later? And I'm not going to go into all of that and the speculation there, but maybe it's just something as simple as this. Mary doesn't want to let go of the one that she felt she'd lost and she's just hanging on for a long time and maybe Jesus is basically just saying, you can let go of me. I'm not going anywhere yet. I'm going to be around for a little while. Go tell my disciples. And Mary does.

She heads back to where the disciples are with this news. A totally different message, a totally different report than before. I have seen the Lord. Big change.

[ 23 : 24 ] Well, this is the first encounter with the resurrected Jesus that John tells us about in his gospel. And it's a very special moment, a very personal, private moment between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Jesus shows himself alive to her even before he shows himself alive to Peter and to John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. And this is just the beginning.

All the disciples will see him alive as well, but we're going to save that for next Sunday. In the couple minutes that we have left here, what are we to make of all this?

What are we to do with this? What should our response be? Well, when we compare John's account of the resurrection to the other accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, we see that it's quite different.

I'll be honest, I love Matthew's account best. Right off the get-go, early in the morning, Matthew invites you right into the action, the angels appearing, the excitement.

[ 24 : 31 ] You can just feel the joy. You can feel the fear. You can feel the adrenaline as they run to tell the news. things. And then, to see Jesus on the way, and they worship him.

I love Matthew's account, but John's account is so different. John invites us to consider things from his perspective. Instant surprise and joy all at once right there in the morning wasn't how it felt for everyone.

There were some of us that day who never saw the angels. angels. Think about this. At what point here does John see Jesus alive?

We haven't even got to it yet. It's coming. We'll talk about it next week. It's later the same day in the evening. For Peter, it will be later this afternoon.

What does John remember most from that morning? He remembers Mary Magdalene finding him early in the morning, telling him that the body had been stolen.

[ 25 : 46 ] He remembers running to the tomb with Peter, finding it empty. And then, after going back to where he was staying, he remembers Mary Magdalene coming back again with a totally different report.

I have seen the Lord. there was joy, but it didn't break into John's day in the same way. There was joy for Mary, but it was different than for the other women.

For John and Peter, I mean, they had, think about this, they had heard what the women were claiming. They went to the tomb. No angels. No sight of Jesus.

Luke tells us that after Peter went in and saw the linens lying there, he went away wondering to himself what had happened. John tells us, though, that when he saw the linens lying there, he had a different response.

He says, that was the moment he believed. There's a saying in English that we have, seeing is believing. And usually what is meant by that is that until a person actually sees something unlikely for themselves, doubt and disbelief are to be expected.

[ 27 : 06 ] There's something powerful about seeing something with your own eyes, about witnessing it firsthand. And yet God in his wisdom decided that not everyone would experience the resurrection of his son the same that day.

The men never saw the angels, only the women. And it seems Mary Magdalene at first was forgotten, missed out. You know, sometimes we may wonder, why is my life going so differently from that other person's life?

How come this particular area of my life is such a struggle, but for that person it seems so easy? And yet God in his wisdom has arranged our lives differently for a reason.

And at the end of the story, nobody misses out. Most of the women, on the one hand, they couldn't deny that they'd seen the angels saying Jesus was alive.

And yet here on the other side is Peter and John and Mary. Could this be true? They hadn't seen it. John tells us here with his own personal testimony though, that seeing is not required for believing. [ 28 : 30 ] In fact, that's what faith is. It's trusting. It's believing the truth that God has revealed even when you can't see it. Even when you don't feel it.

Sometimes God gives us the opportunity to see things all at once. Just like the women saw, the angels and Jesus. Other times God arranges our lives differently so that we learn to trust him before we see, before it all makes sense, before we feel as we're supposed to feel, like Mary and John.

As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5 verse 7, he said, we walk by faith and not by sight. What about you? What are the things that are going on in your life right now that you wish you could see?

You wish you could see God's purpose for it. You wish you could know firsthand how God is using this. Why is he allowing this?

Why doesn't he do it different for me like he's doing it for someone else? Let me encourage you. Think of Mary Magdalene's story that day.

[ 29 : 49 ] Could it be that God has something special for you like he did for Mary? Something just for you? Think of John's experience.

In the meantime, while you wait for your turn, while you wait for Jesus to appear, to answer your prayer, to act in this circumstance, will you trust him?

Will you believe? This is John's invitation to you. To do what he did. To put your trust in Jesus, the risen Lord.

Even though you can't see him. And he's going to have more to say about that. One final thing that really just struck my heart this morning as I was reflecting on all of this again.

I was touched. You know, you look at the other accounts of Jesus' resurrection and in almost every other case, Jesus appears to a group. Or in the case of Emmaus, to two men, a couple, a couple of guys.

[ 30 : 54 ] Now he does appear to Peter by himself at some point in the afternoon, but it's not described in detail. This is the only resurrection account, appearance account of Jesus to an individual.

And I got thinking about that. What's the significance of this? What's the meaning of this? Was it because Mary was extra special? Prominent?

Influential? Well, not really. I mean, she's not mentioned that much in the gospel accounts, in the story. In fact, in these days, the men were regarded as the more prominent in that culture, in that society.

She was a woman. And who was she? I mean, we don't really know all the details of her life. All we know is this little snippet that's told us that she was one who Jesus had cast seven demons out of. I got thinking about this. Jesus made a point of appearing to her one-on-one. Sometimes we may be in that place where we just, we believe that Jesus loves the church, the group.

[ 32 : 15 ] But what about me? The individual? Just me. Insignificant me. Who am I? Does he really care for me?

That Jesus took time out of this day to appear to Mary one-on-one, I think answers the question for us. She never missed out. She was not forgotten.

Says to us, to each one of us as individuals, yes. He cares for you. He loves you. He desires relationship with you.

Even if your feelings are telling you the opposite or something else, not a single one of you is forgotten or will miss out. This is the kind of love that Jesus, the good shepherd, has for his sheep.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for this account that you've preserved so well for us.

[ 33 : 26 ] And I pray that you would press it into each of our hearts. Lord, you alone know the deepest part of the struggles that we carry with us. The hard things.

The moments where we feel alone and confused and don't know what's going on or why this is happening. And I pray that you would speak your love and your grace to each of us.

Just as you did to Mary. As you made yourself known to her, would you reveal yourself to us?

Would you let us know of your love again and your care? We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.