

Why are You Weeping?

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 23rd of April 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled, Why Are You Weeping? and is from John chapter 20 verses 1 to 18.

Almighty God, we pray that your word will speak to us and be written on our hearts, that it may bear much fruit for your glory. Amen.

In the last 40 years, we've become very used to the fact that we can see all the major world events, virtually as they happen on our television screens or in our newspapers.

Probably we've all seen footage of JFK actually being shot. Many of us would have seen man walking on the moon for the first time, maybe even live as it happened.

[1 : 07] We certainly all probably remember the graphic film footage of the bombs as they fell on Baghdad with extraordinary CNN coverage.

And I guess for many people, as we see those events, the seeing means that we believe they've happened. Nobody saw Jesus rise from the dead.

They saw his birth. It was heralded by angels and the shepherds went and the wise men and so on went to see him born. Many crowds saw his baptism.

Crowds around the Jordan River, around John the Baptist, and many people perhaps heard the voice from heaven declaring that Jesus was God's son.

And many people saw him crucified in all his public pain, outside the walls of Jerusalem, hanging on a cross in the most public place, so that everybody would see and be deterred from doing the sorts of things that he and other criminals did.

[2 : 16] But the resurrection happened without fanfare, without the public gaze. No angels shouted in the night sky that Jesus was about to rise.

No trumpets played a chorus. Handel's Messiah wasn't on at the Jerusalem town hall that night. And there were no CNN reporters with their intrusive cameras watching the corpse warm up and rise.

By the time that Mary Magdalene and some other women and the disciples got to the tomb, it was empty. It was all over. The stone was rolled away, the grave clothes were there, the tomb was empty, and Jesus had gone.

Now of course an empty tomb, which is an indisputable fact, does not necessarily mean resurrection. There are all sorts of interpretations on that event.

The empty tomb could mean that the people have come to the wrong tomb. They've made a mistake. Although we are told that they took careful attention of where he was laid, and also the fact that the women and the disciples separately, and some other people had gone independently, but all to the same tomb.

[3 : 36] So if somebody's made a mistake, they've all made a mistake. It could be that the Romans took the body. There have been some people who've suggested that over the years. There's absolutely no reason on earth why they should, and we're actually told that they guarded the tomb so that nobody could take the body.

Others have thought that maybe the Jewish leaders took the body. But that's very hard to imagine for various reasons. The Jewish leaders were so concerned not to be ritually defiled during the Passover festival, that they would not go into Pilate's palace.

He had to go out to them in Jesus' trial. They're hardly likely then to touch a corpse, because that would be an even more significant ritual defilement during the Passover festival.

But even if they took the body, why would they do that? They were happy that Jesus was dead. They were convinced he was. And that would be the end of the matter.

So some other people think that perhaps the empty tomb signifies the fact that the disciples pinched the body, which all makes a nonsense of the passage that we've read in John's Gospel.

[4 : 46] But it makes the disciples to be very foolish people indeed. Because they died claiming that Jesus was risen from the dead. I wouldn't die for something I knew not to be true.

If I was one who was involved in pinching the body, and even if I did start preaching resurrection, if it came to the point of my life being under threat, there is no way I would continue the charade.

I wouldn't die for something I knew not to be true. The disciples died for the resurrection. Or perhaps another possibility.

Grave robbers. Well, there were grave robbers around in those days. And they robbed graves to pinch any riches that were buried with people. And sometimes just to take the linen that the body was wrapped in, and the spices that were there.

Linen and spices could be worth quite a lot of money. And we know that Jesus was buried with 75 pounds worth of spices from Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

[5 : 53] So maybe grave robbers is the answer. They'd have to be strong. Jesus was buried in a rich person's tomb. Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy.

And it seems that the stone of his tomb was in a groove, as was customary for wealthy tombs. It would be on a slight incline, so that the stone would roll down the groove and lodge in place.

It would be very heavy. It would be enormously heavy to roll it back up the groove to get into the tomb in the first place, or to take it out of the groove. But it is possible, I guess.

Anything's possible, perhaps. The evidence of the empty tomb by itself doesn't, you see, prove that Jesus rose from the dead. Any event requires some interpretation.

For example, let me give you a completely different event. South Africa loses a cricket match. What does it mean? It could mean that their opposition was a particularly good cricket team and South Africa lost.

[6 : 58] But it could also mean that the South African cricketers have suddenly become very wealthy. Hence, they've lost. Sadly, these days, we can't tell exactly what is the case.

That is, an event is South Africa wins, or loses rather, a cricket match. But what does it mean? What's the interpretation of that event? Take another example.

You walk down the street and you pass me in the footpath. But I don't say hello to you. What does that mean? It could mean that I've been blinded that morning so I didn't see you.

It could mean that I'm totally preoccupied with something else, that I miss seeing you. Or it could mean that I'm being very rude. But it could mean other things as well. That is, an event needs some sort of interpretation to know what does this event mean?

What does the empty tomb mean? Why is the body not there? We should say and note that nobody went to the tomb expecting to find it empty.

[8 : 00] Even Jesus' followers, the women and the disciples, to whom he told them that he would rise from the dead, they didn't go expecting an empty tomb. They didn't go expecting to find a risen Jesus Christ.

They went looking for a cold corpse. Mary Magdalene and the other women went with spices to complete the anointing of the body. The last thing they expected was to find the tomb empty.

Mary, when she finds it empty, immediately goes running to Peter and the other disciples. She doesn't walk. She doesn't sort of sit down and think, well, Jesus is gone, that's great.

She goes running. She's anxious. She's urgent. This is not what she expects. It could even be, in her eyes, a disaster. And when Peter and John, that's the other disciple who's mentioned here, the one who wrote this gospel, when they hear the news, they don't say, well, after lunch, we'll go down and check.

They run. And they run to the tomb because this is surprising news, alarming news. They would expect that the body's still there. So they're anxious, alarmed, surprised.

[9 : 13] They're not expecting the resurrection. They're not expecting an empty tomb, let alone a resurrection. And when John gets to the tomb ahead of Peter, he's too anxious and nervous even to go inside the tomb.

He stays outside. Peter, who's perhaps a bit more rash, races inside. The point is that the absence of the body was for them a complete surprise.

The empty tomb did not immediately signify the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But the next observation changes everything for John, at least. Peter is the one who goes inside and he sees

the empty tomb and the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.

And then the other disciple, that's John, he also goes in and sees what Peter has seen. What changes it for John? Not the fact that the tomb is empty, that's already been obvious.

But the fact that the grave clothes are there and they are where the body had lain. Why does that change it for John?

[10:28] Well, robbers might steal grave clothes and leave a body, but they would never steal the body and leave the grave clothes.

And even if the Jews were prepared to be ritually defiled to try and pinch the body, they wouldn't have unwrapped it and left the linen and the spices, perhaps.

John sees grave clothes. The thing that's missing is the body. What he sees is a bit like looking in a tent during the day and seeing a sleeping bag where somebody's been sleeping.

It's sort of like a little rumbled up cave. That's perhaps what they see with the grave clothes. It's as though the body's just slipped out of them and the grave clothes are just lying there where Jesus lay.

But separate to it was the head bandage rolled up at one end. What sort of a clue is this? John sees, we're told, and believes.

[11:35] John had seen sometime earlier Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. But that was quite different. Jesus stood outside the tomb and called forth, Lazarus, come out.

And he came out wrapped in grave clothes and his friends had to untie them. But this event is quite different.

This is not the resuscitation of Lazarus who later went on to die. This is a resurrection of somebody who would not die again. The grave clothes are no longer needed.

They've been left behind because the body is alive. And live bodies don't need grave clothes. The grave clothes lying there are a bit like the chrysalis shell of a caterpillar or something that no longer needs that body and has become a butterfly and flown away.

John believed what had happened. Both the empty tomb and the grave clothes made him believe that Jesus was risen. Later he would understand more about it.

[12:51] At this point he doesn't know the answer to every question about the resurrection. Verse 9 tells us that as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead. John didn't understand that at that point.

He didn't understand what the Old Testament was saying about the fact that Jesus would rise. not that he might or could but that he must rise. Lots of things were unanswered for John but he believed.

That's a good example for us because sometimes there are people who decline to become Christians because they don't know the answer to every question about Jesus about God about the world about suffering.

But the point is Christians don't either. Far from it. There are plenty of questions for which I haven't the faintest idea of an answer in God's eyes.

But the point is God has given us sufficient information for us to have faith in Jesus his death and resurrection for us. And that's what we need sufficient evidence not every answer to every question.

[14:01] There was lots that John didn't understand but he believed that Jesus was risen. And he and Peter went back home.

Maybe they left Mary there maybe she had come back at another time but Mary is there alone in verse 11 and weeping. Clearly she's either not being told by John what he believes or she doesn't believe what he believes.

she is weeping outside the empty tomb. And then she looks inside the tomb and sees what was perhaps not even there when John and Peter looked inside the tomb.

That is two angels sitting at one end each of where Jesus had been laid. The angels don't sing a song.

They don't tell Mary he's risen. they simply ask her a question. Woman why are you weeping? It's not that they're inquisitive it's not that they're thinking well why would you be weeping?

[15:09] I mean it's a cemetery after all people weep in cemeteries. Their question carries a mild reproof. Woman why weep here at an empty tomb?

there's nobody dead here to weep over. Cemeteries are places to cry. I've seen enough of them at funeral services.

And surely Mary has a right to weep. Death is upsetting enough but for her the bodies disappeared. Thankfully that's never happened at a funeral I've taken.

But I could imagine that if it did there would be double the distress for those who are grieving. Mary says to the angels why they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they've laid him. She has no clue about resurrection at this point. But having said that she turned around maybe she sensed somebody coming up behind her and she saw Jesus standing there but she did not know that it was Jesus.

[16:20] And he said to her the same question plus another. Woman why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for? Again the questions carry some mild reproach.

Why weep? The tomb is empty. There's no dead person anymore. Whom are you looking for? Are you looking for a dead person?

Are you looking for a corpse? Are you looking for a dead Jesus? Then you're looking for the wrong person. That's perhaps the implication of those questions from Jesus.

Mary thinks he's the gardener. She thinks perhaps he's moved the body. She asks him about that. It's puzzling perhaps to us that she doesn't recognize him. Maybe just her eyes are clouded with tears but then she's not the only one who doesn't recognize Jesus after the resurrection.

The disciples on the beach, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the same thing. We've got to remember that though it's the same Jesus and uses up the same body that he lived in before his death, he's still transformed.

[17:32] He's gone from being mortal to immortal, from perishable to imperishable, from a physical body to a glorious body, like from a caterpillar to a butterfly.

It's the same body but it's so transformed that it's not instantly recognizable. But then comes the tender surprise for Mary.

This man whom she thinks to be the gardener says to her, Mary, her name.

and she recognizes who he is. The good shepherd knows his sheep by name, he calls them by name, and they hear his voice.

And here is Jesus doing what he said in chapter 10 he does do and would do. Mary, he knows her, he calls her name, and she recognizes his voice.

[18:35] The evidence for her, you see, is not just an empty tomb, not just the grave clothes, nor even the angels, but seeing Jesus alive.

And her response understandably would be to hold on to him, to grasp his hand, or fall at his feet and clasp his legs. Jesus' response to her is, don't touch me, don't hold me, or maybe even stop holding on to me.

Later, Jesus tells Thomas to touch him. Here he's telling Mary not to touch him. Why the difference? For Thomas, he needed to touch in order to believe.

He wanted to know, needed to know, that this was really Jesus, not just a mirage or a vision. But for Mary, she believes. But she's clasping onto him as though she doesn't want to let him go.

And Jesus says, stop holding on to me. I am yet to ascend to my father. That is, you can't cling on to me because I've got to go, I've got to ascend. I've got to go back to my father.

[19:41] I can't stay here, you can't keep me here. He tells Mary that she's to go to the disciples and tell them what she's seen and what he's told her.

And she does that. The resurrection of Jesus for Christians is a non-negotiable event. It's not an optional part of our creed.

If you don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then you are not a Christian. It's as simple as that. But more than that, the resurrection of Jesus is an event that has implications for every single person.

It's not something that we can put to one side and say, well, it's okay for you to believe it, but I think I'll be happy enough without believing it. Because it is something that will confront us all one day.

It's a bit like the GST. Whether we like it or not, we have to pay it. We can't write to the government and say, look, I think it's alright for some people to pay the GST.

[20:45] It's just not that it's something that I want to do, so I'm opting out of it, thank you very much. We don't have that option. It's true for all of us. Whether we have no escaping it.

And the resurrection is the same for us. It's not just an event of history that we can look at from a remote distance and put aside and think, well, it's got no impact on me.

As the writers of the New Testament make it very clear, the resurrection of Jesus demands that we worship him. It leaves us no other alternative that is viable.

It demonstrates the truth of who Jesus was and the words that he said. It leaves us no other alternative. The resurrection of Jesus declares his sinless life.

Otherwise he would have remained dead. The resurrection of Jesus displays the effectiveness of his sacrificial death. That God has accepted this sacrifice and therefore we know that the things that were said about his death are actually true.

[21 : 49] That it's real and it takes away our sins. And the resurrection of Jesus determines the destiny of believers. For as he rose, so can we be sure that believers will also rise in him.

But there's no ultimate escape from this. Jesus, because the resurrection of Jesus also reminds us that one day we will stand before him risen, as Mary did on the first Easter morning.

Will we be surprised? Will we recognize him? Maybe we will weep before him. Or will we be full of faith and joy?

for on the day when we meet the risen Lord Jesus, it won't be outside his tomb. He'll be enthroned on judgment throne, judging the living and the dead.

Our response to him now will determine his response to us then. They say that seeing is believing. And CNN helps us to believe everything.

[23 : 05] because we see everything. And yet John believed without seeing and Mary didn't believe when she first saw Jesus. John writes this gospel and he tells us that we need not see Jesus now.

Sometimes people say if only I could see Jesus now I would believe. But I doubt that even then they would. We can believe not because we see, but because we've been given enough sufficient even overwhelming evidence for the events of the resurrection.

It's an event that is beyond reasonable doubt. And the only credible interpretation of the event is the one that the New Testament gives us. That Jesus is risen because he is who he claimed to be the son of God.

That he was sinless. that his death was an acceptable sacrifice. And he will judge the living and the dead. People believe all sorts of things in our day and age and usually on much shakier grounds than the resurrection of Christ.

But the resurrection is a firm foundation for our faith. And John tells us about it so that we also might believe. let's make sure that we do.

[24 : 32] Because otherwise we'll be unprepared on the day when we stand before the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.