

I Have Seen the Lord (Easter Evening Service)

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[0 : 00] Right, well, hello again. If you're a guest with us this evening, if somebody's brought you along to church, welcome, thanks for coming, it's great to see you. We're living at John 20, it's fantastic.

I dropped my daughter off at the school in the mornings, most mornings, and Sadie, that is, and this week a couple of parents have said to me, they've said, big week for you, eh? Big week.

And I say, I say yes. Yes, I say the, and then in my head I do a quick assessment of the situation, and then I just go, yes, right, here we go.

Yes, the resurrection of Christ is a very big deal. And I think they expect me to stop at that point, but I continue. Yes, without the, I've said this twice this week, I say, yeah, without the resurrection of Christ, what do we make of the fact that Jesus said that he would rise again?

What do we do with that? I mean, and I'm talking to this person, and I'm like, I mean, is either, like, I mean, is he crazy? Is he deluded? What do we do with this? And then I go, yeah, I mean, the whole Christian thing, it hinges on the resurrection, doesn't it?

[1 : 09] Doesn't that make sense? And without it, I'm still going at this point, I go, without it? I mean, why bother going to church? Why do I do the job that I do? I'd be better off joining a tennis club, at least I'd get a bit of cardio in, you know?

So that's been my response. And they laugh nervously, and it's slightly, it's quite awkward, actually. But yes, it is a big week.

It is a big week. Now, all that to say, if you were here this evening, and you're a bit like maybe these parents, somebody who's brought you along to church, and, you know, the conversations around Jesus are slightly awkward for you, I'm so glad you're here.

And I'm glad you're here, because I think John 20 in particular, I think you are going to find very helpful. If you are, let's say, a healthy skeptic, you'll find John 20 very, very helpful, I think.

Now, if you are a regular Christian, you'll also find it very healthy. Because I think what it does for both groups, for the people that are healthy skeptics here, what it does for you, is that I think it actually gives you reasons to believe in the resurrection of Christ.

[2 : 15] Because when Christians believe in that, it's not a giant leap in the dark. It's not like, I know it doesn't make any sense, but I'm going to believe it. That's actually quite reasonable.

And John 20 gives us some reasons to believe it. And folks here that are Christians, what it does is it widens our understanding of what the resurrection means for us now.

Now, doesn't that sound great? So let's get into it. First of all, let's begin with talking about a few evidences found in the passage for the resurrection, acknowledging that this is a very unique event. So what are some reasons we should believe this account of the resurrection? Now, what I'm going to say first is slightly bonkers, okay? But you just have to stay with me. All right. One of the reasons we should believe that Jesus rose from the dead is because women are regarded as intellectually unreliable in the ancient Near East.

Okay, I know, I know. Let me say it again. In the ancient Near East, women were regarded as intellectually unreliable. Jesus' time was a time that was deeply patriarchal, deeply misogynist.

[3 : 24] And for example, like a woman's testimony couldn't be used in the law courts back in those days. They only trusted what men had to say. Yet, in all of the gospel accounts, that's Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, the first person to see the empty tomb, according to these gospels, is Mary.

And not just any woman. A woman that, in previous chapters, they said had been delivered from seven demons. Now, I don't know what you think about demonic possession. I don't know where you're at with that.

But when the Bible describes people like this who are possessed by demons, they're crazy people. They're taking off their clothes. They're living in cemeteries. They're screaming and yelling. So at the very least, the first person to see the empty tomb, the first person to see the risen Christ, according to all of the gospels, was a woman who, in previous points, everybody thought was crazy at best, evil at worst.

So in summary, the Bible's first witness to the empty tomb and the risen Christ was someone culturally regarded as untrustworthy. Right.

Now, stay with me. In case you think I'm trying to, I'm going to arrive at this huge, big point out of this really small sort of idea here, let me give you an example of what a big deal this actually is.

[4 : 47] Throughout history, people have denied the resurrection of Christ and their reasons have been varied. For example, and this is the example when I come to here, Celsus was a Greek philosopher.

Big deal. Second century Greek philosopher. His big objection, wait for it, his big objection to the resurrection of Christ was that it was Mary who saw it first.

That was his big objection. He said, quoting, translated, how can we trust the testimony of a hysterical woman? That was his big argument.

We can't believe it. Hysterical woman. How can we trust them? He wasn't particularly misogynist in that culture. He was just reflecting the thinking of the day. So now, think about this as I arrive at the point here.

If the early leaders of the Christian faith had made all of this stuff up, right? Had made up, let's say they're sitting around, Jesus had died, he'd stayed dead and they're sitting around and they're sort of talking about the good old days going, we had something pretty good here.

[5 : 47] You know, we got there, we traveled a lot, people were nice to us, mostly nice to us. We got free food. You know, it was fantastic. People thought we were pretty cool. So why don't we just keep it going? Let's make up, let's pretend that Jesus rose from the dead.

We'll write a story about it to give it a bit of a nudge and we'll see how it goes. If people, if these guys had made this whole thing up, if they'd invented it, you wouldn't put a woman in the account as the first witness.

It makes no sense. The only plausible explanation for doing this is that it really happened this way.

There's no other reason for writing the account in such a way except that it actually happened.

That's one piece of evidence. Now, let's assume, let's say that that's reasonable. Okay? Now, let's assume Mary did find an empty tomb. What happened to the body? People say, what happened to the body?

Maybe, you know, maybe, well, people who are uncomfortable with the resurrection have suggested lots of ideas through the ages. Some people say, well, perhaps the Romans did it. Perhaps the Romans took the body out just to kind of mess with the Christians.

[7 : 01] Perhaps the Jewish leaders took it just to mess with the Christians. You know, perhaps grave robbers took it to sort of gain some sort of money here. Now, these are very unlikely. Here's why.

In the passage, did you notice three times it talks about linens lying in the tomb? Three times. It's interesting, right? Three times linens, like, why would it mention that detail? So these linens were things that are wrapped around the body.

They sort of, you know, they sort of made the body smell nice and they wrapped one linen around the body, one separate sort of piece of linen around the head, which means that the Shroud of Turin is nonsense just as a side, as a side issue.

You're welcome. The purpose of the linens was to contain the smell of the body. Why would somebody steal the body but take the linens off first?

It makes no sense. Grave robbers would have taken the linens. They were worth money. They would have taken the embalming stuff. This stuff is worth money. Like, another thing. Did you notice how the disciples were huddled away in a room behind the locked door, it says in verse 19.

[8 : 09] Why was the door locked? They were terrified. They were freaked out. Remember, they had abandoned Christ. They'd fled. They were terrified. And yet, six weeks later, these same folks were on the streets preaching the risen Christ.

Something happened between them being locked away, scared in a room, and then, six weeks later, on the streets preaching, and then almost all of them being martyred for their faith.

Something happened. Now, just from the standpoint of logic, it would seem that without the resurrection, you take the resurrection out of this equation, the chances of those folks becoming these amazing martyrs and street preachers, the chances of the Jesus movement continuing after Jesus had died were pretty minimal, I would say.

Something happened, and the Bible says here's what happened. Christ rose, and he appeared to them. It seems the most reasonable way to explain the existence of the church.

It seems the most reasonable way to explain the actions of the disciples. Now, I don't know if that's helpful to you. If you're here and you're a healthy skeptic, I don't know if those things are helpful to you, but there's some evidences that Jesus did actually rise again.

[9 : 22] Let me give you just say one more thing about that. There are some folks who wouldn't say they're healthy skeptics. They would say, no, I mean, I sort of believe generally in Christian things, and they might identify as Christians, might even be ministers, might even be bishops, but they think the idea of the resurrection is silly.

And so what people have done, sort of in the last hundred years in particular, is they've recast the whole resurrection as a spiritual resurrection, a.k.a.

Jesus didn't rise bodily, he rose spiritually in the hearts of the disciples. They sort of say, well, what happened is he died and he stayed dead because people don't rise from the dead, but his ideas lived on in the disciples' hearts.

Now, folks, I'm not trying to be pedantic, but you simply can't arrive at that conclusion reading this passage, John 20. It reads like an eyewitness account of people seeing a real person, a real body, and even in verse 20, John says, look, Jesus says, look, let me show you my hands.

Let me show you my, look at that scar. Look what, they stabbed me right here where the spear went in. It doesn't read like a spiritual resurrection, does it? It reads like a bodily resurrection. The American Pulitzer Prize winning author John Updike is a surprising defender of the bodily resurrection of Christ.

[10 : 47] He wrote a poem about Easter called Seven Stanzas at Easter. And let me read one of those stanzas to you, the fourth stanza, actually.

It's a response to people who try and spiritualize the resurrection and say it was just a spiritual thing, not a physical thing. He says this, he says this, let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping transcendence, making the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages.

Let us walk through the door. Isn't that great? Let us not mock God with metaphor. Folks, he's right. It was a bodily resurrection or it was nothing.

Okay. The next logical question is, if that's true, so what? So what? If Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, what does it mean for us as believers?

And that's the question that it's at the heart of John's account of the resurrection. So let's get into it. So you have these people that are racing to the tomb. Mary goes, you have these people racing to the tomb.

[11 : 58] It's an empty tomb. And then we have two sections in the text. We have Jesus with Mary and then we have Jesus with the disciples. All right? And these are amazing interactions. And what's amazing about these interactions is Jesus is not content to leave these people in a happy frame of mind.

It's not just, hey, I'm alive. You thought I was dead, didn't you? Isn't this great? I'm actually alive. No. Now what does Jesus do? He takes them from sorrow to joy. Yes, He does that. He takes them from sorrow to joy in that scrap.

But He does so much more. He completely reframes their understanding of the world. He blows their mind. He helps them to see and He helps us to see that the resurrection is so much more than just I'm alive and you get to go to heaven.

I mean, that's amazing. That is great. Praise God for that. But that's not the focus of John's account of the resurrection. Jesus says, He goes, let me tell you what this whole resurrection business means for you right now.

So, He throws out some pretty big ideas. Big ideas and that's where we're going. We'll spend a few minutes on them here. Let's get into it. Jesus and Mary verses 11 to 18.

[13 : 11] So Mary is alone at the tomb. Again, we don't know how the interaction worked but the disciples have taken off and they've left her alone probably. She's weeping. She's howling. I've been told the Greek means this deep, deep sobbing and she sees these two angels and they say,

why are you weeping?

And she turns and she sees another person and he asks her the same question, why are you weeping? And she doesn't recognize Jesus. She's so overwhelmed by grief and all she can think about is that somebody has stolen Jesus and she just wants to be near even the body.

Even the body would be okay if I could just be near Jesus. It just wasn't even on her radar that Jesus could be alive despite the fact that he talked about rising from dead.

So how would we summarize her faith at this point? We would say this. We would say, despite her immense devotion, despite her great love for Jesus, her estimation of him was small.

She had a small estimation of Jesus. It never occurred to her that he could rise. But then Mary, then Jesus says, Mary.

[14:20] And whatever was blinding her, that single word was enough to remove it. And Christ did say earlier, actually in John, he said this words, he said this, he says, the good shepherd calls his own sheep by name.

And the sheep follow him because they know his voice. Mary recognized her name, recognized his voice. And all the pain that she felt is swallowed up. But she still doesn't grasp it, I don't think, completely.

Because she refers to him as teacher. And then it would seem she grabs him and she hugs him and she doesn't want to let him go. And Jesus says these very hard words to hear. Woman, do not cling to me.

Goodness, what a thing to hear from Jesus. What a difficult thing to hear from Jesus. And he goes on to say to her, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. So, go to my brothers and say to them, I'm ascending to the Father and your Father and to my God and your God.

It's quite remarkable, eh? Here's what, you know, what does all this mean? Jesus wants Mary to know that the whole relationship's changed. He wants her to know this is a whole new situation now.

[15:31] She's thinking, Jesus, it's you. This is so great. It'll be just like the good old days. We can cruise around and you can do your stuff and I can sit at your feet and listen. See, in her mind, the big one is Jesus is not dead.

Let's go back to the good old days. It's a narrow view. It's a flat view. And Jesus is saying, Mary, you do not get what's happened here.

The relationship's changed. I'm not alive in front of you to resume what was happening before. I'm going to the Father soon and something much bigger is going to happen, Mary.

Something amazing is going to happen. It's going to be wonderful. And we get these clues. Jesus says, now go tell my brothers. That's a family language in here.

You'll notice it's a family talk. He goes, go tell my brothers. That's the disciples. He says, go tell them. She becomes the first evangelist to the risen Christ. And then Jesus says in verse 17, my father is now your father because of the cross.

[16:35] Jesus says to Mary, he says, I'm going to give you the father. The relationship that I had with God, I'm going to give that to you. He's your father. That relationship has changed.

So she comes with a small assessment of the situation and Jesus blows her mind. He gives her purpose and he gives her mission and he says, tell people about me.

And he says, I'm going to give you the father. My father, your father. It's like he's pulling heaven down to meet her. It's beautiful. It's a beautiful picture. He reframes her whole world.

So let me say this is a bit of a summary here. We celebrate the resurrection of Christ. It's joyful. It's wonderful. But it's not enough for us just to be happy he's alive.

Jesus wants to reframe our life. He wants to redirect us. He wants to repurpose us. And you might be thinking, you might think, if you're really being honest, you might think, well, goodness, that just sounds a bit constraining to be honest.

[17:43] You might be thinking, I actually don't want Jesus to define my life. I don't want Jesus to repurpose my life. And we think that because letting Jesus define our life, our purpose, our identity, what we're about, it crashes, it crashes right into the modern way we find meaning in life.

See, the major cultural narrative today in the West, I should say that, the major cultural narrative in the West is this, we decide who we are on the inside and we assert that on the world.

So I'll say that again. The major cultural narrative today in the West is this, we decide who we are on the inside and we assert that on the world. And Jesus in this passage, he calls Mary and the

disciples, he calls them out of that way of looking at life.

He says, no, come on. He says that to Mary and we see it in his conversation with the disciples. Have a look at the disciples' interaction there. So Jesus turns up, he just sort of appears in the middle of the room, I don't know what to do with that.

He's obviously, in terms of the resurrected body, there's sort of continuity, he's recognisable and discontinuity, he can do new things. But they're huddled away and terrified, he appears in the middle of the room and he looks around and he doesn't say, hello, yes, you people, right.

[19 : 12] No, he says, peace. Isn't that so great? First two phrases out of his mouth, peace, peace, peace, peace, peace to you. And then straight after peace, he says, as the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you.

See what he's doing there. The risen Christ doesn't come back and say, I'm back, it's so great. He doesn't come back and say, I'm back, you're in a lot of trouble.

He doesn't say either of those things, does he? No, he sends us. He gives us life, he gives us an identity that's bigger than ourselves, that goes beyond our small dreams, beyond our small hopes and he says to us, be my ambassadors in the world.

He goes, your churches, let them be my embassies. This is God's great plan for us. We are God's diplomats, his workers in the world and you might say, I just can't even, I can't do that.

I can't, that's too weighty for me, that's too big for me. But look at verse 20. Jesus says, receive the Holy Spirit, he not only calls us, he equips us. He gives us the very life of God to equip us to do the thing he's called us to do.

[20 : 29] Now, I'm going to finish up here. This passage, you could say, actually summarizes the whole gospel for us. Don't you love it?

I do. I love it that Mary can't see Jesus, that she just completely misses him. See, she didn't discover him. He made himself known to her.

And it's the same with the disciples. They're terrified. They're not hunting around trying to put it all together thinking, okay, yeah, all right. No. He appeared to them. He went to them. He certainly didn't choose any of these people because of their pedigree or their bravery.

He chose the weak and he gives them a new direction and he gives them a new purpose and the purpose is not live moral lives, be nice to people. It's mission.

It's be my ambassadors to the world. See, when we say he has risen, what are we saying? We are saying, I have a purpose in this life that transcends, transcends anything I could come up with.

[21 : 33] It breaks through all my small purposes to something so much grander. That's what the resurrection means for us now. Amen.