

John 20:1-18

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[0 : 00] Lord, may the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, and filled with the hope of the Lord Jesus by the power of your Holy Spirit.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. May you have a seat. Christ is risen. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. I have a question for you. Is there anything more powerful than death? It's a question I was asking myself on Monday from the 11th floor of Vancouver General Hospital. The view was stunning. It was a day much like today. A magnificent view of the downtown high-rises of Vancouver, glistening in the beautiful morning sun, surrounded by the blossom of cherry trees and magnolia trees.

And yet I had this view from the bedside of somebody who had died 30 minutes prior. And this moment of stark juxtaposition between the grandeur of Vancouver and the silence and stunning devastation of death made me ask the question from the 11th floor of VGH, is there anything more powerful than death?

[1 : 25] A number of years ago, a Times Magazine article was written that essentially answered no. And therefore, our only option is to befriend death, that it shouldn't be a stranger to us.

In the article, it says, death is the one great adventure of which there are no survivors. Have you heard that thing? There's only one thing. There are two things that are certain in life, is death and taxes.

And this person, this article goes on to say that death by definition is what happens to somebody else, right? And yet for each of us, it is more certain than love and more reliable than health, says this article, end quote.

And the question is, is that the inevitable option that we're left with when we face death? That we can't avoid death. It's the most powerful thing in the world. So in the end, we ultimately have to embrace it.

We have to befriend it as the only certainty in life. Because death, after all, is the only reality that will never let us down because we know it will come for all of us. So as we look at John chapter 20 this morning, we are invited into the tomb of Jesus to face death head on.

[2 : 36] Death has done its work on one who said he was greater than death. And now three days after his death, in the early hours of the morning, news has spread that his body has been stolen, that his tomb has been robbed.

And the whole story revolves around a response to this shocking news. What has happened? And an investigation ensues. And in our passage, we have two parts to this investigation.

The first part, Peter and John enter into the tomb of Jesus, and they discover that it isn't empty, but Jesus isn't there. And then the second part of the investigation is Mary Magdalene.

She stoops and looks into the tomb, and she discovers that it isn't empty because Jesus is there.

So let's begin with the first part. What do Peter and John and Mary discover in the tomb of Jesus?

They discover first that death is dead. Death is dead. Did you notice here that Peter and John are racing to the tomb? It seems that John is very intent on telling us that he was there first.

[3 : 45] A little bit of friendly competition between the apostles. That's nice. But more than just friendly competition, this is a reminder. John wrote the gospel. The beloved disciple is the author of the gospel.

And it's just a reminder that what he saw was something that no one had arranged or no one had staged. Like, in other words, he was there first. He was the first to look inside the tomb.

His eyewitness testimony is crystal clear and valid. So what did John and Peter see in the tomb?

Not Jesus, but the passage tells us over and over and over and over and over again.

They saw not Jesus, but his burial clothes and two sets of burial clothes. Did you notice that? Two sets. The first set are linen cloths used to wrap the body of Jesus.

In that time, Jewish custom around burial was that you would wash the body. You would make sure that it stayed perfectly straight. You would rub the body with kind of perfume or ointments or special spices that would make it smell good.

[4 : 43] And then you would wrap it in cloths and bury it. And so here, the first cloth is a linen cloth used to wrap Jesus' body. And the second set of burial clothes that we see is the face cloth.

So a separate cloth that was on Jesus' head. It was not what the linen cloths were told. Nice little eyewitness detail. It was folded up in a place on its own.

It was in a different drawer in the cupboard. So what's the point? Why all this detail? And the point is this. Jesus is no longer in the tomb, but the symbols of death are.

The point is this. Death has been left to die. In his resurrection, Jesus has buried death. Now, if we compare this with the other resurrection in the Gospel of John, which is Lazarus' resurrection, the point becomes even clearer.

It's stunning in its power and beauty. Because at Lazarus' resurrection in John chapter 11, it's the only other time in the Gospel of John where we hear about these two sets of burial clothes.

[5 : 46] Those around the body and those around the face. And it's when Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb. Remember the scene. Jesus is weeping and praying beside the tomb of his dear friend.

Devastated over his death and angry at death, Jesus suddenly cries out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out! And Lazarus walks out of the tomb.

But John's very careful to tell us that his hands and feet are still bound with the linen burial cloths. And his face is still wrapped with the burial face cloth. And so Jesus says to his disciples around him, Go unbind Lazarus and let him go.

In other words, Lazarus is still wrapped in the symbols of death even as he comes to life again. Now we know this by experience as well.

That any miracle in this life, any healing, any health is just a temporary fix, right? Like it's good to have doctors, friends. But anything the doctor can give us in the hospital in the end is not going to last.

[6 : 50] Because we will still die. And no matter how great our health or our vitality in this life, we are still like Lazarus, wrapped in the clothes of death.

So Lazarus comes out of the tomb wearing his burial clothes, and he still needs to be unwrapped from the wrappings of death. Whereas Jesus, on the other hand, when he comes out of the tomb, he no longer is wrapped in the grave clothes.

They are left behind in the grave. The grave, the power of death, no longer has a hold on Jesus. He no longer fits inside those clothes because his life is bigger than those clothes.

It's like my son. He's growing very quickly at eight years old. And every six months, it feels like he doesn't fit in the clothes that he has anymore. You've got to fold them up and put them away, and you've got to get a new set of clothes.

Neatly folded like laundry. It served its purpose, but now has intentionally been put away. Jesus' burial clothes are no longer needed.

[7 : 54] So this is the key difference with Jesus. Jesus' burial clothes. He has not gone into death and come back from death into a life where he will one day die again. Rather, Jesus has gone into death and gone through death into a life where he will never die again.

Let me see if I can say that even more strongly because I think it's true. Jesus has gone into death, and he has gone through death into a life where it is impossible for him to ever die again.

He cannot ever die again. He is beyond the threat of death and beyond the power of death now. What's the point?

The point is this. Something has happened to death on this morning. When Peter and John look into the tomb, we're being shown that the resurrection of Jesus has done something to death, and that death is losing its power.

It's losing its grip on us. It's losing its sting. Now, the only person experiencing this in all its fullness right now is Jesus himself. But those who believe in Jesus will get to experience this one day, too.

[9 : 05] Because we're told that when you believe in Jesus, you are united with him, not only in a death like his, like, yeah, we will die, but you are united with him in a resurrection like his.

You will live as he lives and reign over death, never to be touched by it again. And so the point of the first half of our passage is that death is dead.

On Easter Sunday morning, it is the beginning of the death of death. Now, in 1888, there was a man named Ludwig Noble who died in France.

Isn't that a great name? And if any of you are having kids, you should go for Ludwig. It's a wonderful name. And he died, but one of the local newspapers in France mistakenly thought it was his brother Albert Noble who died.

And so Albert, one day, was reading the local newspaper and started reading his obituary while he was still alive.

[10:08] And even more shocking than reading his obituary while he was still alive, he discovered that the title was The Merchant of Death is Dead. Now, for a little context here, Alfred was the person who invented dynamite and a whole bunch of other explosives.

So he had a bad reputation for becoming rich as somebody who created weapons for war and destruction. And so his death was actually seen as a victory for peace and for welfare in the nation. Interestingly, he was so shocked by this experience that he went on to give most of his fortune to fund what we now call the Nobel Prizes. That's beside the point, but that's an interesting point. The point is simply this. In John 20, we are reading the obituary of death. Death is dead through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the second point is this.

Jesus is alive. See, the significance of the burial clothes had only begun to dawn on John so far. And there isn't much indication that Peter really got it yet.

[11:13] And Mary is still weeping. She's not leaving Jesus' tomb. And we're told that Mary is weeping. It's mentioned four times in five verses.

Verse 11 and verse 13 and verse 15. Because Mary is lost in a spiral of grief. We know what this is like. We know what this is like when loss consumes us.

I was reading a book this last week on grief. And it talked about the death of a loved one being like a hole that's been punched in your life. That you often walk around during the day, but sometimes at night you fall into it.

So death punches a gaping hole into our lives that we can never fully fix, but only learn to live with in this life. And Mary is lost in this spiral of grief.

And in the midst of it, her tear-filled eyes catch a glimpse of something that is unexpectedly sublime. There are two angels sitting there in the middle of the tomb. One perched where Jesus' head used to lay, and the other perched where Jesus' feet used to be.

[12:20] Isn't that an interesting little detail? See, the significance of this little detail has to do with the fact that in Jerusalem, where the disciples are very close to right now.

They're just outside of Jerusalem. In the middle of Jerusalem, there's something called the temple, which was the major place of worship there. In the middle of the temple was something called the Holy of Holies. Where they would bring the sacrifices that were offered for the sins of the people and sprinkle the blood before the Lord.

And at the center of the Holy of Holies was something called the mercy seat. That one sacrifice for sin had been made, blood would be sprinkled on that mercy seat.

And it would represent the fact that the sins of the people had been covered, meaning God is going to unleash his mercy on his people. And on either side of the mercy seat, which is in the middle of the Holy of Holies, in the middle of the temple, in the middle of Jerusalem, on either side of that mercy seat are two angelic figures called cherubim.

Here in the tomb, we have two angelic figures on either side of where Christ's sacrificial body lay. As if to say the tomb of Jesus Christ has become the mercy seat of the world.

[13:32] Because Jesus has done everything that is needed to be done in order for the sins of the world to be taken away and the mercy of the Father to be unleashed.

Which is one of the reasons why just a few scenes later, Jesus is going to appear to his disciples. He's going to show them his scars. Remember, I died. He's going to breathe his Holy Spirit on them.

And then he's going to send them out into the world with the message of forgiveness. Because Jesus' empty tomb has become the mercy seat of the world. But the angels are not all that Mary sees in the tomb that morning.

She sees Jesus unexpectedly but alive. She doesn't recognize him at first, though. You see, Jesus is not something that comes naturally to us.

And seeing Jesus is not something that we can figure out on our own. And Jesus, in some sense, has to show himself to us in a way that we can see. In a way that grips our hearts.

[14 : 33] In a way that will pierce our grief and turn it into joy. And it's something that only Jesus has the power to do for us. Because as we're discovering, only Jesus has the power of life over death.

And so the movement of Jesus' life into Mary's grief begins with this simple yet stunning question. Why are you weeping? And yet, did you notice that Jesus takes the question one step further than the angels?

He then says, who are you seeking? Recognizing that underneath all our grief is a sadness over the absence of the one we love.

And Jesus, of course, wants to draw her attention to himself. She's seeking him, and yet she can't see him yet. And so Jesus, standing right in front of her, wants to show her that he is in her midst. And so his question morphs. Morphs from a question to a name. Notice how he began with a question, but he clenches her heart with a name.

[15 : 35] Mary. Mary. And as soon as Jesus calls her name, boom, she comes alive. And as Jesus calls any of us by a name, we come alive. He must call each of us by name if we are to come alive.

And when he calls us by a name, our dead faith is resurrected, and we can see that his presence is right in the midst of us. It's not that he isn't there. It's that we need to recognize that he's there.

And we need to recognize who he is. The Lord Jesus is alive. And right away, Mary clings to her with all her might. And I love this image, isn't it? You can imagine Mary just holding on to him and saying, I'm never going to let you go again.

Clinging to Jesus with all your might. We read earlier, love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. This is the supreme picture of faith clinging to Jesus. But Jesus has to remind her in this situation of his mission and of her mission.

He is not here just to continue doing life as it always had been lived before his death and resurrection. He's not here just to do life as usual with her.

[16 : 49] He is reminding her that he is on his way to the Father. He said this many times. That his mission and his glorification includes his crucifixion, his resurrection, and his exaltation.

To be at the right hand of God where he will pour out the Holy Spirit on the world. And where he will reign over all things until they reach the new creation. And so Jesus is saying, I am the resurrected one, but I'm still on the move.

I'm on the way to my Father. And clinging to me, although it's not bad, is not what this time is about, Mary. I am on the way to the Father.

And Mary, it is time for you to share the good news about me. So go. Go and tell them. And so we read in verse 18 that Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen.

I have seen the Lord. And that's where our scene ends for now. Did you notice that? It begins with Mary seeking Jesus.

[17 : 55] And it ends with Mary seeing God. The implication is Jesus is God. And if you want to see God, you have to seek Jesus.

And if you want others to seek Jesus, you have to tell them that Jesus is alive. See, we were not there to see the tomb or the burial clothes or Jesus that morning.

But we are lucky to have these eyewitness accounts of those who did. Other places were told that not just Peter, John, and Mary, but all the disciples, actually over 500 disciples of Jesus saw him alive.

And the question is, is that enough evidence for you to believe that Jesus is alive? Is that enough evidence, if he is alive, for you to believe that he is Lord?

And is that enough evidence, if he is Lord, for you to believe that he has snapped the power of death? And death will not have the last word on your life if you believe in him. See, one of the things I find most encouraging about this story is that Jesus' closest followers didn't get it right away.

[19 : 04] I mean, they were there. They were the first to see these things with their own eyes. And yet, most of them had no clue what was happening around them. It took them time to clue in and time to see Jesus clearly.

And time for the aliveness of Jesus to grip their hearts and make them alive in him. And so I see in this passage an open invitation to anyone, to all of us, to join Peter, John, and Mary, and to do our own investigation, to come and see who Jesus is.

There's an opportunity for any of us, no matter whether we're skeptical, or whether we've been a Christian for 70 years, or whether we have no clue who Jesus is, there's a question for us to discover what it means for him to be alive.

What it means for him to be Lord. What it means that he has conquered death. And this is the promise of the passage. If, like Mary, you seek Jesus, you will end up seeing God.

And if you really see God, you will find yourselves bowing before him in belief. And if you really believe in God, that Jesus is Lord, you will end up receiving a peace that the world cannot give, a joy that the world cannot take, and a life that death cannot defeat.

[20 : 24] And one day you may find yourself on the 11th floor of Vancouver General Hospital, and yet still saying, this is the day that the Lord has made.

Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Because Jesus is alive, and Jesus is my Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen.