

John 20:1-18

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 00] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name, Amen.! Yeah, you can be seated. Be seated. Hello, everyone. Hello. Hello. Happy Easter. The Lord has risen.

! He is risen to me. Hallelujah. Yeah, that's right. It's good to see you all. If you don't know me, my name is Aaron. I am one of the ministers at St. John's. We're going to jump straight into this. Jesus. People don't just raise from the dead, do they? They don't just rise from the dead. So it's understandable that there are some folks that would say the early church invented the resurrection just to get the ball rolling a little bit on a new religion.

But of course, the opposite is true. The early church didn't invent the resurrection. You could say the resurrection invented the church. And what I mean by that is without the resurrection, this whole Jesus thing, this small movement would have just fizzled away.

Josephus was this first century theologian, historian, and he said there were dozens of messianic movements back in the day.

[1 : 15] You know, you'd have some charismatic leader, gather a few followers, claim some divine mandate, cause a few dramas, and then the Roman Empire would just shut them down.

Mostly by killing the leader in some gruesome manner. And it would all be over. I can't imagine anyone here could name one of these early messianic leader types.

And there are a lot of them. And we can't name them because the dead. They were flash in the pan. They are footnotes in history.

So what's my point here? Look, if you're here and you are visiting with us and you are not a Christian, but you're curious about spiritual things, let me say something that just makes sense. If Jesus of Nazareth had not been raised from the dead, you would have never heard of him.

In Roman times, crucified people just disappeared. That was the purpose of the crucifixion, just to annihilate them. But of course, the Jesus story is very different because 2,000 years later, here we are still talking about him.

[2 : 23] And there's a couple of billion people in the world who are his followers. Now, let's get to John 20. Let's look at this resurrection. Interestingly, actually, his friends actually thought it was all over as well.

Because the Romans were so effective at squashing rebellion. None of them expected, none of the disciples expected Jesus to rise from the dead. It was so far outside of their worldview.

They actually had to be convinced that it had happened, which is part of the theme of the story here. But anyway, let's get to it. Let's get to it. John 20, 1 to 18, there are two sections.

There are two sections of this. The first half is all about an empty tomb. The second half is all about Mary encountering Jesus. So, one, an empty tomb. Two, Mary encountering Jesus.

And the thing that I love about the story is that it's a quiet story. It's quiet, isn't it? There's no spectacle. There's no crowds.

[3 : 24] So, let's look at this quiet story. It's a story that starts with grief and confusion. So, let's start with this first half. It's been three days since Jesus was crucified. He was beaten. He was whipped.

He was killed. And after the crucifixion, these wealthy people took his body and they prepared it for burial. John 19 talks about this. It says they used 75 pounds of spices, which were mixed together, put over the body, and then wrapped in linen cloth.

And those spices would harden like concrete. And then the body was put into a tomb, which is basically a cave with a ledge, a shelf on it, that the body was put onto.

And then a huge rock placed in front. Three days have passed. Mary arrives at the tomb. What's she doing? What's she doing? And the Gospels tell us that she'd brought spices to properly prepare the body.

There's a sense that maybe it was a bit of a rush job. The Romans were keen to seal Jesus up, get him out of the way. So, she's coming to do maybe like a proper job of it. And she knew that there was a big stone there.

[4 : 27] And she knew it was going to be a problem. It says in Mark's Gospel, she's asking her friends, I don't know, what are we going to do about this stone? I don't know. But she goes anyway. Because she loves Jesus. And she wants to honour him and bury him properly, which was beautiful.

But here's the point, though. She went looking for a body, didn't she? She went looking for a body. Nowhere in her mind was she going to find anything else. Okay, so what happens next?

Well, she arrives. She says, no stone. She looks in the tomb. There's no body. Her brain's probably racing. She's thinking grave robbers, which was a thing.

The Romans have taken him. So, she goes to tell John and Peter. And they arrive. And it describes what they see. And what do they see? They see linen cloths on the ground where Jesus' body should have been.

And lying there also are the face cloths. But they're nicely folded up. Now, the question I ask when I read this is, why all the details? Like, why not?

[5 : 30] Why say all that stuff? Why not just skip to the good part? Why not skip to the fun part? The happy part? Why do we need all of this stuff? Why do we need to know about it? Because it does actually mention those linen things a couple of times in verse 5 and 6.

Both times the guys looked in there, they say what they saw. So, why these details? You know, I've thought I've got four reasons, I think. I think there are about four reasons why. So, let's go.

Here's one reason. It's to put aside the idea that Jesus faked his own death. Which is an idea that lots of people have had in history. But to think that Jesus had faked his own death.

Here's what you'd have to believe. You'd have to believe that Jesus pretended to be dead on the cross or fainted. And then rested a little while in the tomb. Suddenly felt better. Broke out of 75 pounds of concrete cocoon.

Pushed back a giant stone. Overcame the Roman guards. And was well enough to convince his followers. Like, we're all good. Everything's good. Is that plausible?

[6 : 35] It's not plausible. It's not plausible. Can we just put that one aside? So, that's one reason why these details. Another reason why these details. People might say, well, it's simple.

Like, somebody just stole the body. Like, that's kind of Occam's razor, right? Like, it's like, somebody just took the body. Like, grave robbers, for example. But this is also so unlikely. Grave robbers steal things that were worth money. Like linen. Like spices. It doesn't make sense. Why leave the stuff that's worth money there folded up?

Why take the whole body? The tomb scene is calm. It's ordered. It doesn't sound like a crime scene. His body wasn't stolen.

The third reason is it's supposed to show us that something has happened to this body that's just not normal. And I think we're probably supposed to think of Lazarus.

[7 : 37] The story of Lazarus. When we read this. Because it's the only other place in John's gospel where the linen thing is talked about. Linen around the body. Linen around the face. The only other place it's talked about.

Let me remind you of one line from John 11 where Lazarus is raised from the dead. It says, The man who had died came out. His hands and his feet were bound with linen strips and his face wrapped with a cloth.

The point of that detail in John 11 is that death is still a hold of Lazarus. Death is still on him because he will die one day at a later stage.

But something different has happened here in John 20. Death no longer has a grip on Jesus. He's left those things behind. He's left death behind. Death has been defeated.

And why does this matter? Like why does this matter to us now? Now, Philippians 3.20-21 has a wonderful promise for us.

[8 : 38] Here it is. So here's what matters for us.

It's because one day your body will be like his body. It will be death proof. And that's a wonderful promise.

Let's keep going. The fourth reason these details matter and why they're so oddly specific is it reminds us that these were real living witnesses to all of this.

It says, Mary came out when it was still dark. It says, John outran Peter. Like a weird detail. That Peter was the first one to go into the tomb.

Strange detail. The linen cloth stuff. These are the kind of details you remember if you were there. Because this doesn't read like a metaphor.

[9 : 48] It doesn't read like a fable. It reads like somebody explaining something that they actually saw. And John was actually there and he actually saw this. I remember when I was a young man traveling around Europe, backpacking around Europe.

And I was in the Czech Republic and I remember noticing that all the police cars were these horrible old eastern block cars called Trabants. And all the taxis were Mercedes. And I remember thinking this is interesting.

This is odd. It's a funny detail. I remember about it. And I'm telling you this. Not because somebody told me that this happened. Or I read about this before going.

I just noticed it because I was there and I saw it. These things written in this gospel, they really happened.

So this is the first half of the story. The body they expected to find is missing. And the evidence here says Jesus didn't fake his death.

[10 : 47] And it wasn't stolen. So where's the body? That's the question. We go into the second half of the passage now. So let's go to the second half of the passage. Where is the body? This is on Mary's mind.

So Peter and John, they leave the tomb area. They go back to where they were hiding. Mary stays. She's alone at the tomb. She's sobbing. She's confused. It says in verse 11. She couldn't do for Jesus what she wanted to do for him.

And then she sees these two angels sitting in the tomb. And they go, why are you weeping? And she turns and sees another person. Same question. And then Mary sort of accuses this other person she sees of actually stealing Jesus' body.

She doesn't recognize the person she sees accusing of stealing Jesus' body is actually Jesus. Because she's so overwhelmed by grief. So overwhelmed that she could not get it in her head that Jesus was alive.

Despite the fact that Jesus talked about the fact that he would come alive again. So how would you summarize her faith at this point? I'd say this. Despite her immense devotion and love, her estimation of Jesus was small.

[11 : 56] Now Jesus was very kind and gentle with her. He simply responds in verse 16 by just saying her name, Mary. And in that moment, her world is turned upside down again and her grief and confusion become joy.

And at this point, something very interesting happens. She grabs him and she hugs him. And it's all very understandable. And Jesus says, do not cling to me. And what a difficult thing that must have been to hear.

And he goes on to say, Jesus, he says, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, I'm ascending to my Father and your Father to my God and your God. What does all that mean? It means a lot of things. I'm just going to mention one thing. She's thinking, Jesus, it's you. This is awesome. We're getting the band back together. It would be like the good old days. She wants to hang with Jesus.

She wants to be as close to Jesus as possible. It's very understandable. But at this point, she has to physically let go of him so she can be obedient to what Jesus has asked her to do.

[13 : 02] Jesus says, in a house not far from here, there are some very broken and devastated men and women. Hiding, fearful, disillusioned.

Go to them. Don't just stay here and this is not our time to just have a thing. This is not our time but just to be close and hang out for a while. And she does.

She goes and she says to them, I've seen the Lord. You know, in the Gospels, when people meet Jesus, they're given a mission. You know, the Christian faith is not just hunkering down.

It's not just me and Jesus and my problems. Me and Jesus and my issues. You know, we embrace Jesus. We get as close as we can to Jesus. But we also remember that Jesus calls us to be useful for him.

So that other people can know Jesus as well. I'm going to finish up shortly-ish here.

[14:03] I do want to say this. If you are here and you are not Christian, you have a healthy skepticism. I don't know what you've thought about.

I've said some wild things. I don't know what you've thought about all of this. But I do want to address one thing that may have popped into your mind as you're trying to deal with the idea of like, look, people just don't rise from the dead.

It's not a thing. Some people have said, look, can't this whole thing just be a giant metaphor? Okay, I understand.

Reasonable, right? Reasonable question. Can it not just be a metaphor? And people have recast this whole story as the resurrection as being a spiritual resurrection. Jesus died. He stayed dead. But he gave us an example of self-sacrifice. So he lives on in our hearts. So he didn't rise bodily, but spiritually in the hearts of the disciples.

[15:03] And they did cool stuff and started some cool things. Folks, I'm not being pedantic. This story does not let you come to that conclusion.

It reads like an eyewitness account of people seeing a real living person. Spiritual resurrection metaphor is not an option.

The American Pulitzer Prize winning author John Updike is a surprising defender of this. He wrote a poem about Easter called Seven Stanzas. And Easter, I'll read one stanza, the fourth stanza, the fourth stanza for you of this poem.

It says this. Let us not mock God with metaphor. Isn't that great? Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping transcendence, making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages.

Let us walk through the door. Love that. Jesus really did rise from the dead. And if you're here and you're not a Christian, I'm telling you the body wasn't stolen.

[16:18] He didn't fake it. And it wasn't a spiritual resurrection. Friends, I'm encouraging you. Walk through the door. Ask yourself, if this is true, what do I do with it?

I mean, Easter does leave us with a decision, doesn't it? Because if it's true, if Jesus really did walk out of the tomb, and he's not just a teacher to admire, and he's not just an example to follow, and it's not just a story that we reflect on each year about self-sacrifice, then he is the Lord, and he is alive, and he is present, and he's calling us into his service.

You know, Mary goes from weeping to running, from the tomb to telling, telling, I have seen the Lord. And that's an invitation for all of us.

Not to just ideologically or theologically analyze the resurrection, but to respond to it. Because if Jesus is alive, then hope is alive, then sin is dealt with, then death is defeated, and your future is not the grave.

Your future is resurrection. Now, again, for those of us here that are exploring faith, if all of this is just wild to you, and you have lots of questions, let me invite you to something.

[17:44] You know, part of our job is to help people think this stuff through. And Chris Lay, he's awesome, he's one of our ministers on staff here, he's running a discussion group called Introducing Jesus, which will start in a couple of weeks.

It's on consecutive Tuesdays. It's a space to ask questions, hear more about Jesus. And I really encourage you, you can ask him, he's just sitting over there, or you go to the events page in our website. Because remember, if any of what I said is true, it's certainly worth your time finding out more, isn't it?

Okay. Richard. Richard. Richard is going to come and pray for us now. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.