

When Morning Broke

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[0 : 0 0] The basic message of Easter is that Christ is risen. He is risen from the dead. And the passage of Scripture that we're looking at today is from John 20, verses 1 to 9, and it starts very early in that day.

Some people think as early as 3 o'clock in the morning. Sorry. All right. All right. And it's a very simple narrative story that we're looking at today.

The thing is, I've heard it. This is one of the sermons I remember as a child listening to. So I've known it a long time. I've known the story, and certainly it's been the Easter Gospel over and over again from John's Gospel, this story of Mary Magdalene coming early to the tomb.

But in order to put this little story in context, I'd like to just make some comments on something that happened this past week when Maclean's magazine published their cover story was, God is alive.

Now that's somewhat different than He is risen. But nevertheless, it was perhaps encouraging to see it. If it had been the cover story on the Mennonite Weekly or the Presbyterian Record or the Anglican Journal or the Catholic New Times, nobody would have thought much about it.

[1 : 5 3] But when it comes on the cover of Maclean's Canada's national magazine, then it becomes quite intriguing and interesting to note.

It was not a cover story that was based on some private research enterprise by Maclean's to discover whether in fact there was an infallible proof for the existence of God.

And they from their laboratories had been able to demonstrate that that in fact was the case. And they were going to bring you the evidence that they had found.

Brother, and it wasn't a special revelation that was made to the editor of Maclean's in the privacy of his study in the small hours of the morning that it suddenly came to him.

You all know that it came as a result of Angus Reid, I think, and their polling 4,510 Canadians to find out what they thought and using them as a test sample for the whole nation.

[3 : 0 9] They came to some very surprising conclusions in saying that Canadians are believers. And it was to my mind gratifying that on the front page, on the front cover, there was a Bible open at John chapter 19, which if you read the front cover of Maclean's would give you a good lead-in to the passage we're looking at today, John chapter 20.

And then it had a wooden cross in front of that. So that this was the story, and I think if you remember last year, their story was the sort of Easter story in the front of Maclean's had a lot more questions to ask about Christian faith.

This one was prepared to say that God is alive quite affirmatively. Now, what I'd like just to remind you, though, that if 80% of the people in Canada say Brian Mulroney is to be prime minister, that means that Brian Mulroney will be prime minister.

Now, I don't want to stir your political loyalties by that remark. I just want to make it in passing. But God doesn't require the same kind of majority vote.

And that if he is God, then the fact that 4,501 Canadians think so doesn't either affirm him in his office or threaten him that it will be taken away.

[4 : 49] The interesting thing about the comment that the managing editor made when he talked about it, he said that he talked about the naysayers and the doomsters that pervade so much of our national life.

He said there is a growing sense that the people are not listening to the negaholics. You'll have to stop and think about that. You may never have heard that word before.

But people are not listening to the negaholics. The referendum outcome, in the face of the doomsday that the sky is falling, there's a clear rejection of all elements, he says, of the Canadian elites.

In other words, Canadians as people are not listening to the elite. Political corporate media chattering is being ignored.

Now that's a fascinating thing to me because I spend most of my life a bit like Don Quixote, at least my private life, with my spear firmly in hand, you know, charging the windmills of the modern political and media thought, saying, you guys are wrong.

[6 : 17] You're leaving something out. But it's nice to know that nobody's paying attention to them anyway. I am. But it does suggest, and he suggests in his letter, that there is a great gulf between the national propaganda, the headquarters of official dictums, and the grassroots reality of personal human experience.

The special difficulty with the existence of God, from a biblical perspective, is that from the beginning, the question is not, do you believe in God, or where is God?

But the heart of our faith is not us asking the question, where is God? But God asking the question, where are you?

And, you know, that's what the Bible is all about. It doesn't, the Bible doesn't spend any time trying to prove the existence of God. What it tries to do is to establish who you are and where you are in the light of the fact of God.

There is a delightful story in Isaiah chapter 44, which you're perhaps familiar with, and I'm going to read it to you just to remind you of it.

[7 : 47] When Isaiah writes and says, the blacksmith works on it over the fire, beats it into shape with a hammer, he works on it with his strong arm till he is hungry and tired, drinking no water, he is exhausted.

Then the woodcarver, taking his measurements, outlines the image with chalk, carves it with chisels, follows the outline with dividers, he shapes it with human proportions, gives it a human face, or it is to live in a temple, he cuts down a cedar, or else took a cypress or an oak, which he selected from the trees of the forest, or maybe he planted a cedar and the rain made it grow.

For the common man, it is so much fuel. He uses it to warm himself. He also burns it to bake his bread.

But this fellow makes a god of it and worships it. He makes an idol of it and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire.

On the live embers he roasts meat, eats it, and is replete. He warms himself too and says, I am warm and I have a fire here.

[9 : 14] With the rest he makes his god his idol. He bows down before it and worships it and prays to it. Save me, he says, because you are my god.

Well, what I think, I mean there's nothing wrong with being a blacksmith and there's nothing wrong with being a woodcarver or a carpenter as it's translated, but somehow their function moves beyond the practical necessities of a blacksmith's work or the practical necessities of a carpenter's work to them creating with their skills an idol which they then worship and then call on it to save them.

Well, I think that what Angus Reid has done, because we're not strong on carpenters and blacksmiths at this stage in our social development and our cultural achievements, but we are strong on computers.

So what you have done by Angus Reid is to create a kind of Canadian idol by computer. by showing us this is what we Canadians believe and you can subscribe to that or not.

Now, I'm grateful for the article in Maclean's, I want you to know, and I'm grateful for the fact that it may help the elite of our country to be in touch with the grassroots of the faith in our country.

[10 : 48] I hope it will break the domination of the elite in the thinking of our country, and I'm grateful for the focus on the scriptures as the word of God.

But, you see, what I think is difficult for us and perhaps deceiving to us is this kind of idol that is created by statistics.

It has no reality at all. The God in whom we believe is simply a computer projection of a lot of private opinions and what shape and form it would take, I can't imagine.

But it's in the business of manufacturing of fantasy for us to understand ourselves. And one of the things that is at the heart of our Christian faith is the fact that what we need to do, what we need to understand is that the existence of God is there no matter what we believe.

It has to be. God is not created by our believing in him, nor is he created by our collecting statistics about him. And so you have this sort of strange anomaly that exists in our culture and in our society where we can say Canadians believe in God, but they steer right away from the kind of basic understanding of who is the God we believe in.

[12 : 44] You know, what is his name and how do we identify it? And obviously the purpose of faith, I mean the validity of faith, is not measured by the enthusiasm you pour into it, but by the object that it has.

Who is your faith in that you believe is not particularly surprising as a compensation for the vast areas of ignorance that exist in our lives.

We can perhaps believe in something in order to cover up our ignorance, but believing what we believe in in terms of God is not something that is to be the object of our creating.

And so if you turn from that kind of background, which is specific to our culture at the moment, and look at this story, you suddenly find that you are involved in a very personal kind of world.

A woman who rises early in the morning and leads the way to the tomb of Jesus in the rock-cut tomb just outside the city wall, as they understand it, in a garden.

[14 : 04] And she goes there very early in the morning in order to prepare the body of Christ for burial.

The same woman, Mary Magdalene, who is, of all the characters in the New Testament, probably the most readily identified as a sinful woman who has been marvelously transformed by her encounter with Jesus.

And so that's the way God chooses to do it. He doesn't. And I don't mean to be cynical by this, but he doesn't hire Angus Reid to do it for him.

He doesn't create that kind of dependency. He depends on a woman who deeply loved Jesus, going to the tomb as early as 3 o'clock in the morning, perhaps, and simply observing, apparently at first glance, that the stone had been moved away.

The stone which two other Gospels said was carefully put in place, was sealed, and was guarded. She comes at 3 o'clock in the morning, and it's moved away.

[15 : 29] And that's all the evidence she has that drives her at the run to go and find Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved.

Simon Peter presumably because he was the head of the disciples' community by the appointment of Christ, and John because he was the most intimately and emotionally involved with Jesus of all the disciples by reason of the close friendship that existed between them.

And he puts his signature to this story by identifying this disciple as the one whom Jesus loved. And Mary Magdalene goes and says, they have taken our Lord out of the tomb.

We don't know where they have put him. Now all that is conjecture on her part because all she saw from this record was that the stone was moved. And everything else was, everything that she said about the taking him away and they don't know where they have put him was pure conjecture on her part.

It may be interesting for you to remember that there is no, none of the four Gospels actually identify the moment of the resurrection.

[16 : 53] It was the witness of the disciples after it had taken place. And so she goes and tells them and Peter and the other disciples start for the tomb.

And both were running, but John outruns Peter and reaches the tomb first, peeps in, and sees the strips of linen lying there, but does not himself go in.

By reason of some fear or some awe or some anxiety, he waits back. And Simon, who was behind him, arrives and goes into the tomb.

And he saw the strips of linen clothes lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separated from the linen.

Now, those, in a sense, details about the linen cloth lying and where it was and that the stone had been removed away, those are common to the testimony of all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

[18 : 09] And it's interesting that they seem to suggest that this was not a grave robbery, that there was something very ordered about this.

And this event was witnessed to by these people who neither understood it, they didn't know what had happened, and they didn't believe that Jesus was risen from the dead at this point.

They're just giving you what they saw. Then it goes on to say that when Peter came that he saw the linen clothes lying there, and the other disciple who reached the tomb first went in and it says he saw and believed.

they still did not understand from the scriptures that Jesus had to rise from the dead. So you see that one of the characteristics of the story is that it was that it was all the disciples doubted it, none of them understood it, none of them had the background, even though they had all that religious training behind them which belonged to every devout Jew, all that was behind them, but they still couldn't comprehend what had taken place.

And they simply give testimony to the fact that this is what we saw. We saw the stone moved away, we saw the linen clothes lying there, we didn't understand, except it breaks through in a kind of climax to the story in verse 7 when the reluctant disciple John who had not gone in previously went in and it says he saw and believed.

[20 : 06] And problematically for some it doesn't say what he believed, but that he believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

And then you see it again affirms the ignorance and agnosticism of the disciples by saying they did not understand from the scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

Well, that's the story that's portrayed there that this is what happened.

Now, I don't know how we can come to terms with this and I still feel embattled by it, by the story because because it's what was it that happened to John that he went in there and it says he saw and he believed.

And I don't know how to do this. I can say from my own experience that I mean it was it was the record of the New Testament concerning the person of Jesus and of his death on the cross and of his resurrection that being aware of that without being particularly aware of anything else was the point at which I felt that I believed and I have since then been through university I've been through seminary and I've lived these many years and I've been through lots of circumstances and I cannot shake from my mind and heart the belief that this is exactly what happened that Jesus rose from the dead and I don't know how to present it to people because if it was simply a theological proposition then presumably a brilliant theologian could convince you of the truth of it and if it was a philosophical inquiry some brilliant philosopher would be able to demonstrate it and if it was something that you could get under a microscope some scientist could show it to you but you're confronted here with whether or not you believe this story and you don't

[22 : 48] Angus Reed can't help ultimately Angus Reed can confirm the necessity of the atheists if you want to say we've got to fight harder we're losing a hold in this country but you see there's something that you can't do here because at the heart of Christian faith is this encounter with the person of the risen Christ which was Mary's experience immediately after this story concludes in John chapter 20 if you go on something else happens and you're you're stuck with the awareness that our relationship to God is primarily in the area of a human relationship it's that kind of thing now if you look at a human being if I talk to you the question I'm going to ask you is how's your wife how's your husband how's your mother how are your children how are your grandchildren because we look at our lives basically as a web of relationships and we know that those relationships are there because we are in a sense structured into the downtown community by a job which we hold a union that supports us a pay packet that comes in and we all know that you can that all that can be cut off and you have that wonderful saying that the last man on earth will spend his last hour looking for his wife and child because fundamentally that relationship is what our life is based on and that what God offers us in Jesus

Christ is a relationship to to the Lord Jesus the risen Lord the one who died and was raised and and it just it says that and and it it apparently means it because when you go on and you deal with the doubts of the other disciples all the disciples doubted all the disciples at first thought it was a false report all the disciples lacked the background and understanding to know that this had to happen and yet they were confronted by the reality of Jesus Christ and and Thomas expresses the the doubts in this same chapter when he says unless I see the print of the nails and the wound in his side I won't believe and

Jesus turns to him and says stretch forth your finger and touch this wound and and Thomas says my Lord and my God he is forced as it were not he is not brought to the place in a sense where his his demands are satisfied so much as he is brought to the place where he acknowledges the person of Jesus Christ and you see that's what that's what is at the heart of our faith I I was listening to a fellow whom I respect a lot and he said this radical thing but it may help you to understand because it helped me to understand Christians don't live under the law don't commit adultery that was in the Old Testament Christians live under the obligation and they live under a relationship to

God himself a relationship which means that if you want to maintain that relationship you probably won't commit adultery but it's different and it in a sense suggests what's at the heart of this story is the relationship the ongoing personal relationship we have to Jesus Christ you see what what happened at the end of the at the end of this story is that when when Thomas says this to him you know I see and I believe Jesus said blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe and of course that's all of us because we haven't seen what do we have all we have is the record as it's written there and you know it's not like it's not it's not possible that you could be a witness to the resurrection remember John Chapman saying that some schoolboy asked him have you ever seen him and

John said no I was late about 2,000 years but it helps to it helps to understand that kind of that that thing that's at the heart of it and that the heart of the Christian faith is a personal relationship to Jesus Christ these this the great sign is the sign of the resurrection and that this is given to us in order that we might believe and we turn we don't have anything else but then we don't need anything else except this account of this witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and coming to terms with the reality of not that you can believe but who it is you believe in let me pray Lord help us to to know your risen presence as we study your word as John bent down and looked into the tomb and was afraid to go in so help us to bend our heads over the scriptures to read them and then by faith to enter in to the understanding and the believing which the disciples slowly were brought to which the scriptures confirmed which their fellowship maintained

[29 : 35] Father we're not those who will who will see but you have given us the privilege of believing stir by your Holy Spirit our hearts that we may come to believe not in a proposition but in a person we ask in his name amen amen amen and ciones an bit also