

I Have Seen the Lord

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Date: 16 April 2017

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads and pray. Father, we ask that you would help us all to hear and help me to speak in such a way that is truthful, honest, and honoring to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we pray this in his name. Amen. Please sit down. I just want to add my welcome to Dan's, to St. John's today, and to tell you that while the brass quintet was playing at the front here, some of the folk on duty out the back were dancing.

I thought that was a very appropriate response. In fact, we have written at the top of the service on page three, the congregation is invited to prepare for worship by maintaining a prayerful silence during the prelude.

I thought we should dance. But then again, you haven't seen my dancing. Well, it's terrific today to be able to look at eyewitness account of the day of resurrection of Jesus.

There are a number of them in the Bible. And today we're looking at John's. Can I just have my microphone turned down a bit, please? Thank you very much. I don't want to hurt.

[1 : 26] Thank you. That's great. John, as Jeremy explained, John was a great friend of Jesus. He was with him throughout his ministry. He was there at the cross.

He's an eyewitness and believer, but he has a special soft spot for doubters and sceptics. So there's great honesty in his account and in the other accounts about Jesus' first followers that none of them ever imagined that Jesus would rise from the dead.

And even after Jesus had appeared to some of the disciples, there were others who remained deeply sceptical and suspicious. And so John writes with this broad range to sceptics and to saints and to sinners and to the suspicious.

And as he lays out the evidence, he says to us, what would it take for you to believe that Jesus rose from the dead? Because something radical happened that day and all the eyewitnesses have the same human condition that we have.

And that is that we're biologically predisposed not to change our minds about things, not to change our beliefs. Social scientists describe this universal human quality as motivated reasoning.

[2 : 52] It's how we deal with the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, which is a fancy way of saying that we believe what we believe because we want to believe it.

We accept those things that reinforce what we already believe and we avoid those things that we don't like or that we don't believe. Julie Beck, who is a writer for the Atlantic Monthly, last month published an article on the research on this called This Article Won't Change Your Mind.

And it explains something of our tendency to convince ourselves of what we already believe and we ignore and devalue anything that contradicts our cherished beliefs. And she tells the story of a guy who left the States to join a yogi guru in India.

And after five years in that group, this fellow realised that he was being lied to, but he made the decision it didn't matter.

He so wanted it to be true. And it took another five years of his life before he left. And it's a picture of how we're selective listeners. We put likes on Facebook posts.

[4 : 09] We put likes on those things that tell us what we prefer to believe already. So we don't really engage with information neutrally. We don't engage with information as information, but more and more as a marker of our identity.

We are cognitively tribal. And Beck says that what we do is we build... This is a lovely picture. We build a pillow fort around ourselves to filter out everything that's too uncomfortable.

And sometimes, just sometimes, we might go to the window and look out the window of the fort to see something that might challenge what we believe. But what do you do when you look out the window and you see something that tells you you've built your fort in the wrong place?

When the facts challenge your worldview and your identity? And I think coming to church at Easter and hearing the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is an amazing thing for anyone to do.

It shows at least we're open to going to the window and looking out. And I say evidence because this eyewitness account of the first day of Jesus' resurrection tells us that you should not believe anything without good evidence.

[5 : 28] In fact, if John were here, he would say, seeing is believing. So if you turn back in the bulletin to page 4 and 5, or if you're very suspicious, you can open it in the Bible and follow along.

I just want to show you how deeply the seeing word is used in this passage. So the little numbers are the verse numbers. So on page 4, about six lines down, number 1, that's the first verse of chapter 20, you see, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark and saw the stone was taken away.

In verse 5, John saw the linen cloths. Verse 6, Peter saw the linen cloths lying there.

Verse 8, John saw and believed. Verse 12, Mary saw the two angels. Verse 14, Mary saw Jesus standing there.

Now I've gone over to page 5, you can see. Verse 18, Mary says, I have seen the Lord. And in verse 20, the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

[6 : 48] See, I think there are two popular errors about faith and believing that are very persistent today. One is that religious faith is the one area where you believe without proof.

John tells us different. He tells us that not one of the disciples either expected or even wanted Jesus to rise from the dead.

It was what they saw that changed their minds. And for something as astonishing as a resurrection from the dead, I think it's a good thing for us to need evidence.

The other misunderstanding is that somehow these original followers were different than us. They were primitive and we're much more complicated and educated than the first disciples.

But what the record tells us is that they believed Jesus was a great teacher who could do amazing miracles, but rise from the dead.

[7 : 48] It was so far outside their worldview that they had to be convinced. They had to come to see for themselves, to touch and to handle for themselves. You see, the church did not invent the resurrection.

It's the other way around. The resurrection invented the church. And I just, I want to say that by introduction because this is how the passage works. So if you look on page four, this is a word to skeptics.

Those first 10 verses of chapter 20. It puts before us the shock of the empty tomb. And then on page five, there are two resurrection appearances of Jesus.

And I want to look briefly at the empty tomb before we look at the two appearances. And the basic question of those first 10 verses is, how do you explain the empty tomb? So in verse one of chapter 20, it's three days since Jesus was crucified.

It's the third day. John calls it the first day, the first day of the week because he wants to connect this with creation because in John's view, this is nothing short of a new creation.

[8 : 54] And the first paragraph is full of the language of death to remind us that Jesus truly died. And as we were reminded last week, he was flogged and he was crucified and the soldiers testified to the fact that he died.

They broke the legs of the two prisoners who were crucified either side of him because they were slowly dying. When they came to Jesus, they didn't break his legs, but they put a spear in his side and out came blood and water to demonstrate that his heart had stopped beating.

John was there. And then Nicodemus and Joseph, wealthy men, take Jesus' body and they prepare it for burial. And we're told in chapter 19 that they prepare for burial with 75 pounds weight of myrrh and aloes.

And what they do is they put linen, sorry, they would put linen cloths, they'd wrap linen cloths around the body and put layers of these sweet, fragrant mixtures which would dry as hard as concrete so that any other morning would smell sweet.

And then they, so they put the body, they wrap the body entirely in these, in this mixture, this concrete mixture mixture that hardened very quickly and then they put the body into a tomb which was a sort of a cave with a shelf around the outside.

[10 : 22] Now why is this important? Well the idea that Jesus faked his death, woke up in the tomb, hangs on even today. The idea is that after a little rest in the cool of the tomb, he suddenly felt a bit better, broke out of the 75 pound concrete cocoon, pushed back the massive stone that was in front of the tomb, overcame the Roman guards and was well enough to convince his followers that he was fine.

I'm not sure I even need to deal with it. What really happened? Well Mary Magdalene was the first to arrive. She was part of the burial so she knows which tomb to go to.

The stone's rolled away. Her grief turns to horror. So she races back to Peter and John and she says, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb. I don't know where the body is.

So Peter and John run back. John's faster, he's younger and we read verse 5.

Stu, can you look in? This is John. He saw the linen cloths lying there but he didn't go in. Peter blusters in. Verse 6.

[11 : 44] He saw the linen cloths lying there and the face cloth which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Now why is there this triple reference to linen cloths?

Why is that so important? I mean this needs explaining, doesn't it? And I think the reason it's there is we're meant to see this is not a grave robbery. You can't suck a dead body out of the linen cloths and just leave them.

This is different than the day when Jesus raised Lazarus back to life. You remember when Lazarus came out of the tomb, he was all wrapped in his linen cloths. The body was covered with them.

But this is different. What has happened with Jesus? Somehow his body has passed through the linen cloths, spices and all.

And that means his resurrection is not a spiritual or ghostly thing but his body has been changed and raised from the dead. So you see, Jesus' resurrection is not just about the immortality of the soul.

[12 : 52] It's not an ethereal thing. It's not merely life after death. It's an embodied, material, physical resurrection. The same person with the same body that died has been changed and raised and transformed into a resurrection body.

So that by the end of verse 10, the question is, where is the body? Why is the tomb empty? And John just leaves it there as a sort of a hook for us and then he comes to the two appearances and this is where the value is.

Because in each of the two appearances, Jesus does two things, not one. He doesn't just speak about an empty tomb. He now gives positive evidence of his resurrection and then secondly, Jesus explains something of what it means for us that he has risen from the dead.

Because the fact that Jesus has risen from the dead is more to us than just a fact. There are different kinds of facts, aren't there? I mean, I notice my fuel gauge is on the blink in the car.

That's a fact and it's not going to be life-changing unless I attend to it. But what say if you're an adult and you suddenly discover that you were adopted as a child and that you were put up for adoption by, I don't know, Madonna or Kim Jong-un or the Gretzky...

[14 : 18] I mean, it doesn't really matter. You see, your life suddenly changes. And this is more than dry information. What we're going to see in these resurrection appearances is that Jesus' resurrection creates a new situation that's marked by new bonds, new connections with God himself.

So over on page 5, let's look quickly then at Jesus' first appearance to Mary Magdalene. And this is in the paragraph verses 11 to 18.

That's a wonderful story. We know Mary Magdalene was a woman who had deep trouble and Jesus had changed her and honoured her and dignified her and forgiven her and restored her and she was stricken by his death.

The beloved teacher is gone. And all she can do in verse 11 is stand outside the tomb and weep. Death has separated her from this Jesus who gave her so much hope.

Like John, she stoops in just as John had done to look inside and it's not the grave clothes that shock her this time. It's two angels in shining white sitting where the body had been wanting to know why she's weeping.

[15 : 34] They cannot stand, they can't understand why anyone would be weeping that Jesus rose. But here's the wonderful thing for us. Mary is still stuck in her old beliefs.

She says they have taken the body away. She can't imagine such a thing as a resurrection still. And even when she turns around and sees Jesus standing there, she doesn't recognise him and even when Jesus first speaks to her, she still doesn't recognise him partly because of her tears, partly because his body has been transformed, but mostly because she can't bring herself to believe in a resurrection.

And what are the first words from Jesus' resurrected lips, fresh from the grave? Here he is, he's gone through death and defeated death. What's the great and shattering words he says? Verse 15, the first words of Jesus from the grave.

Well, when he says, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking? He's very gentle, very kindly, it's very personal. He wants to draw her out.

It's an invitation for Mary to look outside the window of her pillow fort and to see him as he really is the risen son of God. And in a moment of delicious irony, thinking him he might be the gardener, she says, do you know where the body is?

[17 : 02] And Jesus responds in verse 16 with just one word. He simply calls her by name, Mary. She'd heard him say this so many times and now she hears it from the same voice.

And with that one word, Mary, her world is turned completely upside down. Her grief is turned to joy where there was confusion and grief.

Her heart now floods with belief and joy. But, Jesus is not finished yet. The transformation that Jesus brings by rising from the dead is more than just believing he's risen from the dead.

It's more than reconnecting with old friends or restoring pre-death relationships. There's something deeper Jesus wants to give. He wants to give her a deeper bond with God.

So at the end of verse 16, she says, Rabboni, which means teacher. Verse 17, Jesus said to her, do not cling to me for I have not yet ascended to the Father but go and tell my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father to my God and your God.

[18 : 19] In each of his resurrection appearances, Jesus gives his followers exactly what they need. To Thomas, who doubted it was real, he said, touch my body. To Mary, he wants to cling on to Jesus and that human connection that he's just a human teacher, Rabboni.

Jesus tells her she needs to let go of a human-sized view of him. He has been raised from the dead, he is ascending to God and Jesus' death and his resurrection and his ascension means there is now a completely new bond with God.

Since Jesus has broken through death, all the privileges that belong to Jesus now become ours and the central privilege is that we can call God our loving heavenly Father.

Jesus is saying the transformation of the resurrection means that God is my Father and he is now your Father. He is your Father because he's mine. That eternal life that I've been talking about which is with the Father, it's yours in this new connection with him and that's why he calls his disciples my brothers.

That's the mark of the new bond, new connection through the resurrection. We call Jesus our brother, we call God our Father and it's perfect for Mary. He's more than teacher, he's Lord of life and death and what it means for us when we begin to believe it is that he gives us this experience of communion and connection with God as our Father and that brings us to the second appearance in verses 19 to 23.

[19 : 52] The disciples, nine or ten of them, I'm not sure, are gathered in a locked room and their primary feeling you can see in verse 19, their emotion is fear which is perfectly understandable.

I mean the Jewish leaders had just managed to illegally crucify, execute their leader. Are they coming after us? So the room is locked but the locked door is no issue for the risen Jesus.

Just as he is able to pass through the grave clothes, he's also able to pass through the locked door which is very helpful really. I mean it just means that there's nowhere you can go away from the presence of Christ.

You may feel forgotten but he is with you and even as you pass through death, Christ is present. In verse 19, Jesus came and stood among them and he said to them, peace be with you and then he shows them his hands and he shows them his side.

You know his resurrection body is physical, it is material, he still bears the scars of the nails and the spear, no doubt of the crown of thorns and the flogging as well and his scars are a great comfort to those who are already following Jesus because he is completely qualified to be our Lord.

[21 : 13] His scars and suffering give him impeccable credentials in caring for us and guiding us and he comes bringing peace. He says, peace, the peace of God.

I've carried your wounds, I've carried your sorrows, I said on the cross, it's finished and with this one word, peace, the disciples' world is turned upside down and their fear now becomes joy, grief and dread changes to faith and gladness but Jesus is not finished yet because belief in the resurrection means a profound change within us as well, a different bond not just with Jesus as the son and God as the father but it means a different connection with God, the Holy Spirit as well.

Look down at verse 21 please, near the end. Jesus said to them again, peace be with you as the father has sent me even so I'm sending you and when he had said this he breathed on them and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit if you forgive the sins of any they're forgiven them if you withhold forgiveness from any it is withheld.

It's in the garden of Eden that the first creation when God breathed life into the first man and woman and they came alive but the life that we have it's not eternal you know we've all turned away from God and our bodies and our world are marked by decay and death but here is the new creation the risen Jesus breathes new life into his followers and this is an eternal life and he gives to all who believe in him the spirit of God how does this life come to us how do we know God's spirit in a new way Jesus tells us it's through the forgiveness of our sins that in the death and resurrection Jesus has taken away our sin so everything that stands between us and God is gone and God welcomes us as his father but there is more God sends his spirit into our hearts so that we can enjoy the experience of the freedom of his forgiveness and love and that's what we celebrate today back in that article on motivated reasoning

Julie Beck writes about how very difficult it is to change someone's mind particularly on things that are important I quote she says believing what's true often means accepting things that you don't have first experience of that you may not completely understand sometimes it means disbelieving your own senses earth doesn't feel like it's moving after all you can't see climate change out your window in areas where you lack expertise you have to rely on trust where there's reasonable grounds for supposing that the source knows the matter of which he speaks so the empty tomb calls us to the window of our pillow forts but the empty tomb is not enough to compel us to believe I think none of the early followers of Jesus came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus by the empty tomb however it's still very inconvenient if you want to remain an honest skeptic but what makes us open our window and even climb climb outside the pillow forts are the appearances of the risen Jesus the physical resurrection of his hands and his side they demonstrate the reality of his resurrection body but to believe that means to accept more than those facts because these facts are more relational than they are informational they're more than just evidence and a change of mind the resurrection is about a change of heart a change of attitude a change of life and it's the most important change possible in relation with God it comes to us from the spirit of God who enables us to become children of God and when we look at the evidence and we believe we receive Jesus the spirit of God makes Jesus real to us it's the Holy Spirit of God who shows us the love of God in Christ Jesus that God loves us as he loves his only son and will share with us all the glory that is Christ's that's very good news

[25 : 38] Amen