

Do You Have to See to Believe?

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

John 20, look with me in verse 1. I'm going to read all the way to verse 18. So if you have a copy of the scriptures, that would be helpful. Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early while it was still dark and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.

So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came following and went into the tomb.

[1 : 26] 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.

Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.

Then the disciples went back to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept, she stooped to look into the tomb.

She saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain. One at the head and one at the foot.

They said to her, Woman, why are you weeping? She said to them, They have taken my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.

[2 : 31] Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, Woman, why are you weeping?

Whom are you seeking? Supposing him to be the gardener. She said to him, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher.

Jesus said to her, Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

But go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord.

And he has said these things to her. This is the word of the Lord. Amen.

[3 : 44] Dale Carnegie once said, A person's name is to that person the sweetest, most important sound in any language. But a person's name is not just sweet and wonderful sound.

A person's name also tells you so much about who they are, who their parents are, about where they live, about when they live.

One article I recently read began, All the apple-cheeked babies captured for eternity in creamsicle onesies, one size too big, are nearly grown.

They are high school valedictorians and college athletes, Eagle Scouts and black belts, yearbook editors and engineering majors. They are in the National Honor Society.

They lead Bible study. They raise money for cancer research. They lifeguard in the summer. They work part-time at Cracker Barrel. One directs short films.

[4 : 45] One blew a trumpet in the high school band at the inaugural parade. One is a linebacker in a defensive end recruited by half the SEC. One is a three handicap.

One runs a 5K in 1820. One hit an unforgettable grand slam in the ninth. Most hail from Tennessee, but you can find them as far away as lacrosse fields in Long Island.

Some know each other. They don't have much in common besides, of course, their first name. It's an unusual name, or at least it used to be.

According to the Social Security Administration, this name never cracked the top 100 in Tennessee. But in 1994, the state's flagship university welcomed a freshman quarterback from New Orleans, named after his uncle, Peyton.

After leading Tennessee to their first win over Alabama in 10 years, the epidemic began. From 1996 to 98, a total of 68 Peytons were born at the University of Tennessee Medical Center alone, compared with 10 the whole decade before.

[5 : 58] By 1997, Peyton was the 51st most popular newborn boy name in the state. Do you see, the name Peyton is not just a name.

Hundreds of years from now, when they're digging through the annals of history, they'll be able to trace these people back to the place in which they lived, the time in which they live, and the Tennessee Volunteers quarterback who started it all.

Since the death of Jesus Christ, two facts have continually confronted history. There was an empty tomb, and over 500 people claimed to have seen the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Is it all a myth or a legend, on par with Hindu fables and the sword of the stone? Is it a product of oral tradition, gradually altered over time?

Is it religious truth, which may be true for you, but not necessarily true for everyone else? Well, again and again, the Bible presents the resurrection as historical fact established by eyewitness testimony, and one of the most important evidences of this testimony are the names.

[7 : 18] The names. Names are carefully recorded in the New Testament to establish the truthfulness of these eyewitness accounts.

Again and again, they're not recorded plainly, John or what have you. They're carefully recorded to tell you who their parents were, to tell you where they lived.

So we have blind Bartimaeus, the man on the roadside, on the way Jesus was going from Jericho to Jerusalem, crying out, what is Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus?

That's what it means. So we have Mary Magdalene, who we just read. What is that Mary from the town of Magdala? That's not her last name.

That's a way of telling you where she's from. When Jesus is walking up to the cross, there's someone called to carry his cross, and Mark tells us it was Simon of Cyrene, of the town.

[8 : 14] The father of Alexander and Rufus. And so these names are listed carefully to distinguish them from someone else and to carefully preserve their eyewitness testimony.

If it was a product of oral tradition, these names wouldn't be included because they wouldn't make any sense. But it's not just the names.

These accounts bear the marks, the indelible marks of eyewitness testimony. This morning, I want us to hear their eyewitness testimony as if for the first time.

To listen to the first ones to the tomb on that first Easter morning. To hear from them what they saw. To hear from them about these two stubborn facts.

Where we're going in a word is they killed him, but God raised him so that you could come to God through faith in Jesus. They killed him, but God raised him so that you could come to God through faith in Jesus.

[9 : 17] There's two points. The first one is the tomb is empty, see and believe. The tomb is empty, see and believe. Now our text begins with Mary going to the tomb.

In each of the four gospels, the first person to discover the empty tomb, the first people to discover the empty tomb are women. Though a woman's testimony was not accepted in a court of law, each of the gospels tell us women were the first eyewitnesses.

There's no reason each of the four gospels would preserve this unless it actually happened. Now John mentions only Mary at first. John mentions that Mary is there.

This is Mary from Magdala. Mary Magdalene. She's been delivered by Jesus. Luke tells us that Jesus cast out ten demons out of her.

Seven demons out of her and she began to fall. She's known for her passionate love of Jesus Christ. Not erotic in any way, but a love of a disciple.

[10 : 23] We know immediately that Mary is not there alone when she says, we, in verse, they've taken our Lord.

We do not know where they have laid him. So Mary is there. With the others, Mary is going to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. Now, Jesus was buried right before the Sabbath and so they had to bury him quickly.

She's going to anoint him and give him even more of a proper burial. So on Friday, Jesus had been buried. He'd been embalmed. John tells us that they anointed his body with 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes, wrapped him in linen cloths and spices, and laid him in a grave.

It was most likely a cave outside Jerusalem, cleft in the rock where they placed his body and covered it up with a stone so that he would be far enough away on the Sabbath that no one would be contaminated by contact with the body and covered with a stone to keep the body safe.

But when Mary and the others arrive on Sunday morning, the stone is rolled away. This stone is already rolled away.

[11:41] Mary immediately assumes that somebody has taken the body. Look at verse 2. They've taken the Lord out of the tomb. We don't know where they've laid him. Someone has stolen.

She's distraught. She rises early while it's still dark, perhaps because she's been weeping through the night, meditating on her Lord that has just been, that just has died and her sorrow is compounded when she sees that the body has been stolen.

Now, grave robbery was something quite common, apparently so much so that the chief priests and scribes were worried that the disciples of Jesus were going to steal his body out of the grave and claim that he had been risen from the dead, erased from the dead.

But the tomb is already empty when they arrive. Mary tells Peter and John and they take off, literally running to the tomb.

Look in verse 3. So John went out with the other disciple. Now, John has a bunch of different ways. He refers to himself in his gospel. The other disciple, the beloved disciple, the important thing for you, it is John, the author of this gospel.

[12:53] So he went out. I mean, after all, he wouldn't want to announce that he won the foot race for all of history. So he went out with the other disciple. They're going along the tomb. Both of them are running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

It's a foot race. I immediately thought of the little rascals running from the wild man from Borneo. Have you ever seen that? He just ran those little legs moving so fast. They're running for all their life.

I mean, after all. Who wants to be second in this race because second means you lost completely. But what are we to make of this race?

I mean, on Easter Sunday morning, preserving the account of Jesus Christ being raised from the dead, and yet John preserves this foot race. I mean, it seems a bit irrelevant to me.

An irrelevant detail to be preserved. Have you ever been sitting with a couple hanging out and find yourself watching them argue about irrelevant details?

[14:04] They might be saying, you'll never believe we went to this awesome restaurant the other night. It was Thursday night. The other spouse piped him. No, it was actually Tuesday.

He comes back. No, I'm pretty sure it was Tuesday. You just want to say, listen, we want to know about the restaurant. Not what day it was. We don't care.

And some of us might be tempted to say, who cares about this race? Well, it doesn't matter unless it happened. Unless it happened.

What this is, actually, is not a race. It's two disciples that just heard that their Lord had been stolen from the grave.

And they run. What's it capturing? They're running with all they got to this grave. The first two eyewitnesses fulfilling Old Testament law having two witnesses there.

[15:06] John arrives first and looks in. Look at verse 5. Stooping to look in. So we know the cave was lower, low to the ground. They're stooping to look in.

He saw the linen cloth lying there but did not go in. Peter, ever the bold, asked for forgiveness, not for permission. Disciple arrives and goes right in.

He came following and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloth lying there and the face cloth lying separate from him. Again, all these unnecessary details in which the account is described are marks of eyewitness testimony.

The only thing Peter sees are the linen cloth used in the embalming. The linen cloth that would have held his hands and his arms close to his body and wrapped his head to keep it in his place

that are lying there.

John went in afterwards. Look at verse 8. And he saw and believed. Though it's not mentioned, it's assumed Peter believed as well as Luke tells us.

[16:15] But what did they see? What were they believing in? They saw the grave clothes lying right where they had been laid.

Right where they had laid Jesus. What is the significance? So they saw the grave clothes right there but they didn't see Jesus. Now if you remember when Lazarus was raised, he came out wearing the grave clothes.

Right? They said, unbind him and let him go. But when they arrived to this tomb, the grave clothes are left behind.

Well, two things they know. First, the thieves did not steal the body of Jesus. They would not have taken so much care to lay it back out and fold it right up. But the other thing they learned is that what happened to Lazarus did not happen to Jesus.

What happened to Lazarus and what happened to Jesus were of totally different character. Lazarus regained consciousness. He was resuscitated.

[17:19] He was restored to life. So he came out of the grave with his clothes on. But that's not what happened to Jesus. Jesus was resurrected.

He wasn't restored to life like Lazarus. He didn't wake up. He was resurrected. He passed through those grave clothes, John Stott says, just like he passes through closed doors leaving them untouched and undisturbed.

Jesus is resurrected. And the disciples realize, as one author said, the grave clothes that are left behind are silent witnesses!

to Jesus' victory, not just over death, but over the grave. And in verse 10, it says, the disciples went back to their homes.

Now, first reading, that looks a little anticlimactic. But if you remember, the last scene from the cross, just before Jesus said, I thirst and it is finished.

[18:34] He said to John, behold, he said to his mother, behold your son. He said to John, behold your mother. And it says, he took Mary to be with him in his home from then on.

So where's John going? He's going to Mary. He's going to Mary to tell her, the Lord, your son, is alive.

It says, though, that they believed, but as yet did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.

So they saw the grave close and believed, but they did not yet understand from the scripture that he must rise from the dead. Again, John's not adding to the story. He's telling us what they know then. They believed because they did not see his body, even though they didn't understand the meaning of the resurrection completely. In a very short time, as Acts record, just over a month later, filled with the spirit, Peter proclaims what he's come to understand, that God, the man, Jesus, was delivered up according to the plan and purpose of God, crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men, but then God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for death to hold him.

[20:02] God promised that the Savior would sit on the throne of David, as Buddy said this morning, on the throne of David forever and ever, so it was not possible for him to die.

And again and again, the message of Acts is you killed him, God raised him, and we are witnesses. What the disciples began to understand more and more is that behind salvation is a judge.

Behind all that God is doing in salvation is a judge. All we like sheep have gone astray. We've not loved God with all our hearts. We've not loved our neighbor as ourselves.

We have sinned against him. Scripture is very clear. We're slaves of sin and sin did my mother conceive me, Psalm 51, 4. Captive to sin.

Everyone who sins is a slave. John 8, unable to free ourselves of sin and the payment of sin is death. What it's helping us to see and what the New Testament helps us to understand that what the disciples understand about the cross of Jesus is not that it was a noble act.

[21:11] Not merely that it was a noble act. Not merely that it was an unselfish act. Not merely that it was an act of compassion. Now if you walked outside the YMCA today and there was a car screaming up one of these roads around here and you walked out and someone ran and pushed you out of the way and got hit by a car, you would be thrilled, right?

You would be thankful. He would be dead or she would be dead, but you would be thankful. You would be thrilled. Well that is not what the cross of Jesus Christ was. It was not an unselfish act. It was not an act of compassion. It was not a noble act. The cross was a sacrifice. Jesus did not rescue you from sudden death or accidental death. Jesus rescued you from certain death. He rescued you from paying the price of your sins and paying the price that your sins deserve, rescuing you from the wrath of God. And so it was not possible for death to hold him because God accepted his sacrifice. sacrifice. That's what they came to understand. It wasn't just a noble altruistic act. [22 : 26] It was a sacrifice for us and so Jesus conquered the power of death and he gives forgiveness and freedom and eternal life now to all who believe.

Point two, the Lord appears to many, go and tell. The Lord appears to many, go and tell. So after Peter and John return home, Mary stays at the tomb and is still weeping. Apparently she missed the foot race and she's weeping because she still thinks someone has stole his body. Look in verse 11. She stood weeping outside the tomb but then as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.

She sees two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had laid. One at his head and one at his foot. What's that all about?

Well the angels ascend and ascend on Jesus Christ. He's the only way to the Father. Two angels there witnessing to the resurrection again to her. They say why are you weeping?

[23 : 38] And she says again her story, her stick, they've taken away my Lord and I don't know where they've laid him. after saying this, Jesus appears. This is again pointing that it was more than a resuscitation, it was a resurrection because in his resurrected body he can pass through grave clothes and locked doors, he can appear without being recognized.

That's what's going on when he's walking down the road of Emmaus and he conceals his identity until he reveals himself and so too he appears but Mary doesn't recognize him. He asks her, woman, why are you weeping?

Now we assume that that might be a little terse in the way he's speaking but it's very common language. She concludes that he must be the gardener. Now where did that come from?

So she says, if you've carried him away, Mr. Gardener man, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away and I will care for him. And he said to her, Mary.

She knew immediately. She says, Rabboni, which means teacher in Aramaic. Why does John suddenly include this Aramaic word?

[25 : 02] So that you would hear the very words she said to Jesus. One of the many advances of modern medicine is the invention of the cochlear implant.

The cochlear implant is a small, I've met one of my friend's wife has this implant. It's a small electronic device that helps provide a sense of sound to someone who is deaf or profoundly hard of hearing.

You might want to get one for your teenager. All kidding aside, it's not a hearing aid. Hearing aids amplify sounds so they may be detected by damaged ears, but cochlear implants bypass damaged portions of the ear and directly stimulate the auditory nerve.

Signals generated by the implant are sent by way of auditory nerve to the brain which recognizes the signals as sound. Some of the most powerful videos are watching a young child hear her mother's voice for the first time.

Or a middle aged woman hearing a friend speak. or a husband hearing a wife speak. One thing is certain, it's a sound I'll never forget. That's what's going on here with Mary as well.

[26 : 16] Mary, the Lord's voice is a sound she could never forget. When she hears Jesus say, Mary, she knows it is him. But there's a deeper spiritual reality here.

The people of God know the voice of Jesus. Earlier in the gospel of John, Jesus says whoever is of God hears the words of God. But the reason why you do not hear them is you're not of God. Now those are the type of words that get you in a fight. But then he said right after that, my sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. And so Mary falls at his feet and grabs a hold of him.

I mean you would too. Can you imagine? It's the Lord. He's alive. She's so happy to see him again. She falls before him. She clings to him.

But look at what he says. He says do not cling to me. For I've not yet ascended to the father.

[27 : 23] What is going on? Mary's happy to see him alive but she doesn't understand what's going on. Jesus has not regained consciousness.

He's been resurrected. He's not returning to continue life with them as it was. He's going to return to the father. As he promised he's soon going to leave this world. He's soon going to send his spirit. He says it's better that I go to the father so I might send the spirit to be with you.! You'll do greater works with the spirit than with me. But look at what he says next.

Do not cling to me for I've not yet ascended to the father but go to my brothers and say to them I am ascending to my father and your father and to my God and your God.

Look at the possessive pronouns. Martin Luther famously said the Christian life hangs on possessive pronouns between whether Jesus is a savior even the savior but if he's not my savior then all his saving benefits don't flow to you.

[28 : 41] My brothers my father your father my God your God one of the most stunning effects of the death and resurrection is that we're all sons of God by faith get this after celebrating the Passover with his disciples Jesus was betrayed Jesus was handed over to the chief priests and scribes by Judas but then he was abandoned by each of his disciples Jesus was denied by them famously denied by Peter three times they asked him you are one of this man's disciples aren't you Peter says no you also are not one of his disciples are you the guard says did I not see you in the garden with him he says no but the first words

Jesus says to them is go to my brothers there has been an increasing if you remember this in John's gospel we're studying the farewell discourse the upper room discourse so we see this there's an increasing affection expressed in how he addresses his disciples in the gospel of John once he gets in the upper rooms he calls them my disciples he loved my own he calls them my friends but this one is the highest he says I call them my brothers now get this his greatest affection for them is expressed to them in their lowest moment right after their betrayal right if they abandoned it would be one thing if Jesus walking down the road after feeding the 5,000 saying my brothers my brothers but it's a whole other thing after they've abandoned him after they denied him after Judas has handed him over and yet he addresses them as brothers he calls them brothers when they're painfully aware of how they failed him and if he was not ashamed to call them brothers he's not ashamed to call you brother brother you may find yourself at your lowest moment this Easter maybe the worst one on record he's not ashamed to call you brother Hebrews 2 tells us we live in a culture that tells us there's nothing you need to be ashamed of but we all know that's a lie it's total lie we carry a deep unshakable sense of shame for the things we've done on Friday in the midst of good Friday in the midst of preparing this sermon I wrote down the 10 worst things I've ever done now this wasn't some form of asceticism to whip myself or something like that I wrote them down I wanted to look at them I wanted to grieve I wanted to ache I cried and then I meditated on the unbelievable reality that he's not ashamed to call me brother he's if you saw my list, you'd never want to talk to me again.

But if I saw yours, I'd never want to talk to you either. He's not ashamed to call you brother. He said, I'm going to my father and your father.

[32 : 46] I'm going to my God and your God. What he is unpacking, he's just whispering right here. He's unpacking behind salvation, not merely God the judge, but wonderfully behind salvation is God the Father.

The whole purpose, the story of salvation, it began in the heart of a father. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is about bringing a massive redemption, about bringing many sons and many daughters to glory.

We who are once slaves of sin, captives of sin, unable to free ourselves of sin, we who are once children of wrath are now called children of God. We're invited to call God Abba, Father.

Just as John 1 tells us, he came into his own. His own people rejected him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who are born not of blood, nor the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God.

So at the heart of salvation is not merely God the judge, desiring to be right with those who had sinned against him, but at the heart of salvation is God the Father, longing to bring his lost children home.

[34 : 00] That's what it is. It's a rescue mission for your son, for his sons. Oftentimes we think God likes us about as much as we like a four-eyed short kid in the pickup basketball.

Sure, we'll take you. Hang out on the three-point line. We'll get you the ball. That's not it at all. Years ago, a picture of a young five-year-old boy being pulled from the wreckage in Syria went viral. They say a picture's worth a thousand words, and I'm sure Ben Finch would agree. Pictures communicate so much. This picture alerted the world to trouble in Syria at that moment like no headline ever could.

Social media exploded, as it is often given to do. Nations responded. Leaders responded. Parents everywhere looked in that boy's eyes and imagined if it was their five-year-old boy being pulled near death from wreckage.

Some children responded. One six-year-old boy wrote the president. He said, Dear President, Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria?

[35 : 15] Can you go get him and bring him to my home? Park in the driveway or on the street. We'll be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons.

We'll give him a family. He'll be my brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him.

Please tell him that his brother will be Alex, who is a very kind boy, just like him. Since he won't be bringing any toys and doesn't have any toys, Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny, and I will share my bike, and I will teach him how to ride it.

I'll teach him addition and subtraction and math, and he can smell Catherine's lip gloss penguin, which is green. She doesn't let anyone touch it.

Thank you very much, Mr. President. I can't wait for you to come. We will give him a family. He will be our brother.

[36 : 22] At the heart of salvation, God is saying, I will give you a family. I'll give you a brother.

The plan of God is not to rescue isolated individuals, but to call a people out of darkness into light, to rescue you and bring you into the family, and so will you stop running and come home to Jesus. This can be the great day of homecoming for you in so many ways, just like Chris told us. If you're believing in God and not living like it, God wants to call you home, to call you to a family.

At the heart of God is not a judge who's just angry at you, wanting to write you down and preach you down one side and down the other.

The heart of salvation is a father calling you to come home, and if you believe in Jesus Christ and trust in him by faith, says welcome to the family.

[37 : 29] Wonderfully, Revelation says he'll give you a new name, give you the name of Jesus Christ, stamp you. The Lord knows whose are his. Call you home.

They killed him, but God raised him so that you can come to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

May God help us. Father in heaven, we hide ourselves in you this afternoon and rest in you completely. Pray that you would press these wonderful realities deeper into our heart.

That we might rest in you more and more by faith. We thank you. We praise you. We give you all the glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

[38 : 36] For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.