

John 20:11-18

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 April 2012

Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. Christ is risen. He's risen indeed. Let's continue our reading from the book of John, chapter 20, verse 10.

We're going to pick up right where we left off, in verse 10. 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. And she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

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

[1 : 1 1] Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him in Aramaic, Rabbani, 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 that he had said these things to her. Would you pray with me? Risen Lord Jesus, on this Easter Sunday, we pray that we would come to know more deeply the good news of your resurrection.

Lord, it is like a fact with endless implications. And Lord, we want to see just a few of them this morning, so that we might worship you more fully in your risen splendor.

So come by your Holy Spirit, and soften our hearts, and open our minds, and illumine your word, so that we might behold you, and so be changed.

[2 : 1 8] In your name we pray, Lord. Amen. So this morning we're looking at one of the most gripping and intimate of the resurrection appearances in the New Testament. Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene on the first Easter morning.

It's quite stunning when you think of it. Mary is probably the first person to have met Jesus after his resurrection. And that we don't know much about her life outside the New Testament, it's safe to say her life was never the same.

But what exactly are we to understand about Jesus' resurrection that makes it so radically life-changing? Why ought the event that we celebrate this Sunday be the watershed moment in all of our lives?

Thankfully, this short text has a number of pointers that take us to an answer to that question this morning. But first, we should make no mistake about it.

Don't misunderstand. It is the bodily resurrection of Jesus that the earliest Christians proclaimed and believed. When these men and women said that God raised Jesus from the dead, they weren't speaking figuratively.

[3 : 3 2] They didn't mean God took Jesus spiritually to heaven when they died. It wasn't a symbolic way of saying God loves us after all. No. They meant that Jesus, body and all, had come through death and out the other side into indestructible life.

They meant that the same body that suffered, died, and was buried was raised. It was transformed, no doubt, but it was his body all the same.

That's why John gives us the details he does in the beginning of chapter 20, which Lydia read for us earlier. You'll notice that there's nothing seemingly mythical or allegorical feeling about the account.

John is reminding us, rather, of the unforgettable details that they found after racing to the grave. John, if you didn't catch it, was a little faster than Peter.

Three times he mentions that. A little color there to send down into the tradition. But here were the hard facts. An empty tomb. Grave clothes still lying there.

[4 : 40] Which together we're telling them and are now still telling us that Jesus, body and all, has been raised. The tomb was empty, and then they met him.

Death did not hold him. And he is alive. And that fact forever changed Mary's life and the disciples' lives, and it has continued to do so for 2,000 years.

So what about you, friend? Has it hit home for you? He's risen. Maybe this is your first Easter you've ever spent in a church.

That's okay. We're glad you're here. Everyone's got a first. Maybe this isn't your first Easter. Maybe this is your 50th Easter. Maybe you are an old pro at Easter Sunday. You know the right hat to wear.

The right colors to wear. You know the right brunch to make afterwards. Either way, whether it's your first or your 500th, we all need to hear again the good news of the resurrection and all that it means.

[5 : 48] So I want to suggest that there are four details in this story about Mary meeting the risen Jesus that stick out. And I want to say that each one of them points us to something important about the resurrection.

Something that makes the resurrection utterly relevant to you and I today. Let's take a look at them in turn. The first detail is Mary's weeping.

Look again at verses 11 through 15. Notice how often it's mentioned. Now, of course, it was quite natural for Mary to weep.

outside the tomb of her deceased friend and teacher. And all the more given that she thought someone had probably robbed the tomb and probably defiled the body, adding insult to injury to her beloved friend's horrible crucifixion.

But you see, friends, the truth of the resurrection is this. If Jesus is alive, then God is making all things new. Weeping will be swallowed up in laughter.

[7 : 17] Sorrow will be swallowed up in joy. And death, as Paul says, will be swallowed up in victory. Just as he promised, God has not left the world he created to death and decay, to evil and injustice.

He has acted in Jesus to overcome them all. In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul likens Jesus' bodily resurrection to the first fruits, he says, of a harvest.

Now, if you had a vineyard, say, the first fruits, they would be the first grapes that came in ahead of the others. And even if it was a small batch, it gave you a sure sign and an initial taste of what was to come.

It told you to expect that and much, much more of the same when the full harvest came in. And you see, Jesus' resurrection is like that. It's a taste of what God has in store for his people and for his world.

It's the assurance that God will renew his broken creation. That he will heal and repair and restore all that sin has stolen and destroyed.

[8 : 28] All that the locusts have eaten away, God will bring to life again. You see, friends, we know now how the story ends.

The story of the world, your story, my story. We know how it ends because we've seen how it ends in Jesus Christ. God will and he is making all things new.

Why are you weeping? And yet we have to wonder, don't we? Isn't it a little too good to be true? Isn't the whole thing just a bit of wishful thinking?

After all, I mean, resurrection? Really? You can't expect a person living in the 21st century to believe that a man who was crucified, killed by the Romans, and then put in a tomb, could after three days just come back to life and walk right out again.

Could you? Surely, that's a bridge too far. Friend, if you're thinking that this morning, I want you to know that people in the first century would have actually felt the exact same way.

[9 : 44] Dead people stay dead. It doesn't matter what century you live in. Everybody knew that. Homer, Plato, emperors, poets, philosophers, your common pagan on the street, they all agreed, when you die, you stay dead.

Of course, maybe you go to the spirit world, and maybe you even spook your relatives from time to time like Hamlet's murdered father. But everyone knew that you couldn't come back resurrected in a body.

In fact, most Greeks thought, who would want to come back anyway? Soma Sema, they used to say. The body is a prison. Like Socrates drinking the hemlock, death meant freedom from the cares of this messy, bodily, dirty existence.

Who would want to come back, even if you could? So the Greco-Roman world would have found the claim of Jesus' resurrection as unthinkable as we do today.

And you know, that's not all. First century Jews would have said the same thing. They too knew that the dead stay dead. Yes, some of them believed in a general resurrection of the faithful at the end of the age.

[10:56] But that was going to happen when God acted once for all at the end of history to remove evil and injustice from the world and to be the true God overall, acknowledged by everyone. But nobody believed that one person would be resurrected in the middle of history.

That was absurd. So long as pagan worship continued down at the local shrine, so long as people cheated one another in the marketplace, so long as murder and idolatry and hatred continued, your good, honest Jew knew that the resurrection hadn't happened.

Thank you very much. So neither the Greeks nor the Jews were predisposed or prone to believe in Jesus' resurrection in the first century. In fact, just the opposite. They had their own reasons and lots of them, just like us, to think that it didn't happen.

And it doesn't happen. And you know, Jesus' disciples themselves were no exception. John admits in verse 9 that he wasn't expecting it, kind of in a roundabout way.

Mary certainly wasn't expecting it either. And if you read a little further in John chapter 20, Thomas will famously doubt it all, even when his closest friends swear it to be true.

[12:12] So what would take this naturally skeptical group of men and women and utterly convince them, against their whole intellectual and cultural framework, that Jesus, indeed, had risen bodily from the dead?

It's hard to find a reasonable explanation. Unless, of course, Jesus actually did rise from the dead. And if he did, then Mary need no longer weep. Jesus is not dead. You see, the rulers who unjustly condemned Jesus to die did not prevail.

And God is making good on his promise to put right and to renew the created order. And at the end of the day, you see, it's only the bodily resurrection that will get you that.

What comfort would there be? What justice? Merely to say, well, Jesus died a cruel death, but his spirit went to heaven. And what comfort would it be to you if all that Christianity had to offer was a promise that your spirit would go to heaven?

[13:26] What about all the suffering and pain, the evil and injustice? Does God have nothing more to say than that we all get to go to heaven when we die, even if that's true? Will God not do something?

But you see, Jesus' bodily resurrection means that God will undo those wrongs. He will make them right.

He won't turn a blind eye to the world that he has made. At Jesus' trial, the political and religious leaders condemned Jesus, but in the resurrection, God overruled and cast the right verdict.

Jesus has been vindicated, the resurrection says, and in the same way, the world, too, will know true justice. When God brings in the full harvest of which Christ is the first fruits.

But on this topic, there's even more, you see. The resurrection shows us that God will take the suffering of your life and redeem it. You see, the resurrection means the cross, the horrible, the cruel, the torturous cross was not in vain.

[14:39] Suddenly, Jesus' death and scars had meaning. And likewise, the resurrection is a promise that your scars will have not been in vain. Mary's weeping, your weeping, will not have been for nothing.

God will take it all and swallow it up in victory. Not ignore it, not gloss over it, but redeem it. If Jesus is alive, then God will and is making all things new.

But you see, the implications of Jesus' resurrection aren't just cosmic in scope. It's not just about the renewal of the whole world. It's also intensely personal. The second detail that stands out in this account is the speaking of Mary's name, isn't it?

Look again at verses 15 through 16. 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've carried him away, tell me where you've laid him and I will take him away.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him in Aramaic, Rabbani, which means teacher. The intimacy of this exchange, and it is so intimate, is it not?

[15:53] Shows us that if Jesus is alive, then God himself has come near to us. Now, of course, we should say, the resurrection by itself wouldn't have necessarily meant that Jesus is fully and truly God.

Let's not jump too quickly to conclusions. But, the resurrection would at least mean that all Jesus said about himself was true, right? In Matthew's gospel, the angels at the tomb tell the women he has risen just as he said.

He promised he would rise, and he did. And even though every time he made that promise, the disciples didn't understand it one bit, it was true. And if Jesus was right about that, then all that Jesus said about himself must also be true.

He led others to believe that he was Israel's Messiah. That is the long-awaited king who would bring God's saving plan to completion. He spoke of himself as the unique son of God who embodies God the Father perfectly and personally in the world.

And it is all just as he said, demonstrated to be true by his resurrection from the dead. And this is the one, this Messiah, this Lord, who speaks Mary's name with both tenderness and power.

[17:24] You see, friends, he is the supremely compassionate one. He left heaven to take on our human flesh in the incarnation. And then he even bore our sin and death when he hung on the cross.

And now risen from death, he is able to completely identify with us and have mercy on us. He has tasted our deepest physical pains, our most distressing psychological states, our deepest relational wounds.

He knows them all. And he can speak your name with tenderness and with knowing. And yet, he can also speak your name with power and with authority.

You see, he is not just the compassionate one, but the supremely sovereign one. By his resurrection, he's proved to be God's own son, Messiah, and Lord. He has the right to call all people to himself, to require their love and obedience, to demand it as his right.

And look at Mary's heartfelt and faithful response. She turns and says to him, Rabbani, teacher. It was the familiar name with which she would have called him a hundred times. But in verse 18, she will say to the disciples, I have seen the Lord.

[18:58] What did she mean with those freighted words, I wonder, I have seen the Lord? Did she mean nothing more than I have seen the Master, the Teacher? Or was she perhaps speaking better than she knew?

Was she perhaps the first one to come upon the full weight of what Jesus' resurrection truly means? That he is no mere teacher, but the very Lord God himself present among us.

We can't say for sure, but we know that a week later when Doubting Thomas at last meets the risen Jesus, there's no ambiguity. He puts his finger in the mark of the nails and says, my Lord and my God.

And Jesus offers no correction and no hesitation. He receives his worship. So the resurrection means that Jesus is not just the Christ, but more than that, it means that he is God in the flesh. God come near to us. Now I think it's on this point that the most common attempts to explain, to explain away Jesus' bodily resurrection actually fail.

[20:09] You see, you have to give some account for why. Why, almost immediately after his death, Jesus' followers were heralding him as the Christ, the Messiah, Israel's rightful king.

Put aside for a moment the other stunning claims that they went on to make, let's just consider that one, that a crucified man was Israel's king.

You know, the most common explanation is that after Jesus' death, his closest disciples had some kind of spiritual experience of their lost rabbi and leader.

They felt his love and presence to be still with them. They knew that God must have taken him straight to heaven and now he would live on in their hearts. But you have to remember how strange that must have sounded.

Jesus had been crucified, shamefully murdered and defeated by the ruling Roman authorities. To anyone watching, he was no king. He was certainly no lord.

[21 : 13] And in fact, many messianic movements sprung up in the decades before and after Jesus' death. He wasn't the only one. And some of them were crucified just like Jesus. And you know what? You probably couldn't name a single one.

They were all abandoned and all forgotten. What made Jesus different? Why wasn't he forgotten like all the rest? Would a spiritual experience by one or two of his followers hiding out depressed in a cave have been enough?

Would this have overridden the horrible fact of Jesus' crucifixion? Would the spiritual experiences of Peter or one or two others would then have convinced anyone else that a crucified man from Galilee was God's king and the world's true Lord?

It doesn't add up. To call the crucified Jesus the Messiah, however, actually would add up under one very clear condition.

You see, it would make a lot of sense to call the crucified Jesus God's Messiah if in fact God had raised him from the dead. Not just spiritually, but bodily.

[22 : 32] And you see, friends, if he has been raised, then we know he is the Christ and he is the Son of God, that God has come near and that he can say our name in comfort and in power and intimacy and authority just like he called to Mary.

And isn't that just it? If Jesus is raised, then he has not just the compassion but the authority to call your name.

As the rightful Lord of the whole world, he has that right and everyone must heed his call. Isn't that why the resurrection is so hard to bear after all?

Not finally because our minds find it so difficult but because our wills do. But if Jesus is risen and like Mary, you must turn and you must call him not just teacher but Lord.

And you must submit yourself to him and you must entrust to him your allegiance and your life. But friends, as you contemplate that demand and all that it might mean for your life, remember that this Lord hasn't come to dominate you but to deliver you.

[23 : 53] This is the one Lord who spoke Mary's name not to confine her but to comfort her and to release her from her fear and shame and guilt.

And it's the same for us. Yes, the risen Lord deserves and demands our utter allegiance but he extends to us his utter love and mercy and grace.

A love that will meet you in your weeping and wipe every tear away. And that brings us to the third detail of this encounter with Jesus, Mary's new status with God.

Look again at verse 17. Jesus said to her, don't cling to me 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. You see, throughout John's Gospel, Jesus has often spoke of my Father and he's often spoke of the Father but now he says, your Father.

And that means that if Jesus is alive then we can have a whole new relationship with God. You see, Jesus' life, death and resurrection not only reveal God to us, they don't just tell us something about Jesus' supreme authority and identity, but Jesus' life and death and resurrection, they don't just reveal God to us but they reconcile us to God.

[25 : 19] You see, when someone does their time and pays their jail sentence in full, what do they do? They walk out of the prison free as a lark. When Jesus walked out of the tomb on Easter, it was a sign that his work on the cross had made the full payment for our sentence.

Our sins deserve death. There's no way around that but on the cross Jesus made full payment for sins and on Easter he conquered death and walked away free. And friends, here's the good news. What he's done, he's done for us. Just like David in the Old Testament represented Israel when he took down Goliath and won national freedom for the Israelites.

So King Jesus represents God's people when he takes down sin and death and wins eternal freedom for all who believe. What he did, he did for us so now what's true of him is true for us. For all those who are united to him by faith. And with sin out of the way, all who believe can call God my God. And call the Father my Father.

[26 : 36] Just like Jesus. Because if Jesus has been raised then we have a whole new status before God. Friends, do you wish you had that kind of intimacy with God? Not just to know that there's some God somewhere out there who might have some kind of dealing with your life.

But that the God who created you can be known to you. That you can be taken up into the very life of that God so that you can say my God, my Father.

You see, the God who created you made you to love you and to walk with you. But your sin has broken you off from him. Yet Jesus' death and resurrection have removed sin for all who believe, so that God can have us once again. So that we can step into that life of God. But this status isn't something we simply enjoy for ourselves, is it?

It's something we share with the world. The last detail that stands out in this text is Mary's mission. Look again at verses 17 through 18. Jesus said to her, don't cling to me for I've 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.

[28 : 02] Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I've seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her. Friends, the last implication of the resurrection we see here is this.

If Jesus is alive, then we Christians have a mission. When Jesus says to Mary, don't cling to me for I've not yet ascended to the Father, he's basically saying, Mary, look, I'm going to be around for a while.

You're going to see me a lot over the next 40 days. I've not yet ascended to the Father yet, so don't cling to me like you'll never see me again, but instead, I've got a task for you. I want you to be the first to tell the good news of my resurrection.

Just think of that. Mary Magdalene, the first gospel preacher. Like Mary, we too have a task, and our mission is to go and tell the whole world that Jesus is the true and rightful Lord of all, that in him our sins have been forgiven, and that in him God is making all things new.

You see, this resurrection, this hope, it doesn't leave us passive observers in the world, just the opposite. It energizes us and engages us to go into the world with fresh energy and passion and confidence.

[29 : 22] And that doesn't just mean evangelism. Of course, it certainly does mean that, but it also means demonstrating in all of our vocations that God loves his world and will one day make a new heaven and a new earth that is the renewal of this one.

So yes, to be people of the resurrected Christ means to tell everyone of the love and lordship of the risen Jesus. It means inviting friends to consider his claims, to repent of their sins, to receive his salvation.

But to be people of the resurrected Christ also means demonstrating that love and lordship in every area of our lives. At home, at work, at school, everywhere.

Everything we do can be done as a demonstration, as a sign that Jesus is the risen king and that his kingdom will come to establish the new creation.

For doctors, it means doing your best to bring physical healing, knowing that this is a sign of God's kingdom which will one day heal every sickness and disease.

[30 : 27] For lawyers, it means doing your best to uphold justice and law, knowing that this is a sign of God's kingdom which will one day bring complete justice and right for the whole world.

For teachers, it means doing your best to instruct your students in the truth about God's world, knowing that this too is a sign of God's kingdom which will one day bring truth and wisdom in all its fullness.

The same goes for engineers and maintenance workers, stay-at-home parents and CEOs. Friends, all of your life can be lived as a demonstration, as a sign of Christ's coming reign.

And often it will mean doing so in the midst of a world that seems bent on the very opposite of these things. Nearly all of Jesus' followers, the earliest disciples anyway, were martyred for their proclamation that Jesus was the risen Christ.

But the resurrection assures us that not even death can stop this kingdom. And when you're not afraid of death, friends, what do you have to be afraid of? Nothing can stop the kingdom, not even death.

[31 : 41] And it cannot stop us from spreading his rule into hearts and lives and finally into the whole world until he comes. The resurrection means we have a mission. Let me conclude by saying this.

Maybe you're here and you have a hard time believing in the resurrection. Maybe it seems a bit implausible, even though you've sort of seen some arguments, see how it might be construed.

But even if you have a hard time believing in the resurrection, even so, you should want it to be true. Because the very things that get you up in the morning, your passion to alleviate suffering in the world, your concern for justice, your desire to leave the world a better place for your kids, life. These are the very things that a worldview without the resurrection can't support for very long. What lasting motivation is there to do these things if this world we live in is only an accident and the earth will eventually turn to dust when the sun decides to expand?

the world will matter. But friends, with the resurrection, you can know that this world really does matter and will matter forever because God is going to renew and restore it.

[33 : 02] The resurrection of Jesus Christ isn't implausible. In fact, it's the perfect fit for what we all long and know to be true. And for those of us who do believe in the resurrection, let me ask this.

Are we living now as if the resurrection is a reality? We say Christ is risen but do we mean it? Do we realize that in the Lord our labor is not in vain?

That we have a mission to bring newness and life into our hurt and lost world? In the resurrection we know without a doubt that God loves his world and not even death can stop his covenant plan to bring it home.

Christian, do you see yourself as a recipient of his mission? Your labor is not in vain. Go forth with the confidence that his life has the last word.

So this Easter, friends, remember that Christ is risen. That the new creation has dawned. That God has come near. That your relationship with God in Christ is secure and that our mission is to go forth into the world as people of the resurrected King.

[34 : 21] Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we praise you this morning for defeating death on our behalf and welcoming us into everlasting life.

Lord, we look forward to the day when you will come and we will taste that life in all of its fullness. But Lord, we thank you that even now we can know that resurrection life within.

Lord, you say that if anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation. Lord, I pray that if there are any here this morning who have not come to terms with your lordship, have not sought the forgiveness of sins in your name, have not given their lives to you, Lord, I pray that they would do so this morning and so step into the life that you have won for them.

And Lord, for the rest of us who believe, God, I pray that we would take up in earnestness the confidence and the boldness and the security that come from knowing your resurrection.

And Lord, help us, equip us, give us the wisdom to know how we might be bearers of this resurrection life in the world, in our work, in our home, in our conversation, in all of our lives.

[35 : 40] Holy Spirit, make us a people that live the reality of this resurrection each and every day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.