

John 20:1-18 (Easter)

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- [0 : 0 0] 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 him, and went into the tomb.
- 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.
- [1 : 0 5] 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.
- 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.
- [2 : 2 5] Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord, and that he had said these things to her. Why are you here this Easter Sunday?
- Perhaps you're here out of respect for a friend or family member who invited you to join them. Perhaps you're curious about what Christians do when they meet in these odd-looking buildings.
- And a major holiday seemed like a good time to visit. Perhaps you were brought up in the church, and even though over time you have drifted away, there's still something that draws you back. Every so often.
- Perhaps you come to church every Sunday, and this week is no different from any other. But let me go one step further with this question. Not just what brings you here this particular Sunday morning, but deep down, what are you searching for?

In verse 15, Jesus asks Mary, whom are you seeking? At the beginning of the Gospel of John, in chapter 1, Jesus asked his first would-be followers almost the same question.

[3 : 34] What are you seeking? Beyond mere survival, what drives you to get out of bed in the morning, do what you do all day, come back to where you live at night, and do it all over again?

Who or what are you searching for? Well, let me begin by suggesting three common answers to this question. Perhaps you're searching for truth, for a coherent system of beliefs that makes sense of the world and shows us how to live well.

This is the quest of scientists, who through painstaking experiments seek to understand the underlying structure and order of the universe. The quest of students, who stay up until 4 a.m. trying to sort out the meaning of life in a college common room.

The quest of philosophers, ancient and modern, who have sought out a path to wisdom and virtue. Luke Ferry, the French secular humanist philosopher, wrote this, At the heart of every great philosophical system is a quest for salvation without God.

Philosophy, like religion, also claims to save us, if not from death itself, then from the anxiety it causes, and to do so by the exercise of our own resources and our innate faculty of reason.

[4 : 55] So perhaps you're searching for truth through reason. On the other hand, maybe you've tried that, but it all seems too abstract, too complex, too inconclusive.

So instead, you're searching for a spiritual experience. The world is confusing, full of pain and suffering and injustice. You're not trying to figure it all out, but you're looking for a spiritual experience that will replace anxiety with confidence, grief with comfort, restlessness with peace.

Isn't that why we seek out things like music, or sex, or even food and drink? That they can provide that solace, that comfort in a harsh world.

Perhaps that's what brings you to church this morning. A hope of being lifted above the weariness of everyday life into the realm of the transcendent. Or perhaps even more than a spiritual experience, perhaps you're longing for community.

Because even with all the knowledge in the world, and all the pleasant feelings one could hope for, we might still be alone and unfulfilled. As human beings, we long to be known and loved.

[6 : 14] Isn't that why we pursue friendship, or romantic love, or building a family? Even though at the same time, we fear the vulnerability that close relationships require of us.

As human beings, we seek truth to satisfy our minds. We seek comfort to heal our hearts. And we seek community, where we're known and loved. What we see in our passage today is that the resurrection of Jesus speaks to us on all three of those levels.

It speaks to our mind. It speaks to our hearts. It speaks to our relationships. So I want to take those three themes in turn this morning.

The first thing that we see is that the resurrection of Jesus speaks to our mind. It's grounded in objective evidence. Now, sometimes we think that people in the ancient world were prone to believe just about anything.

They believed in miracles. They believed in angels and ghosts, or many of them did. So perhaps they wouldn't find it too hard to believe that, some rumor, that somebody rose from the dead.

[7 : 26] But that's actually not true at all. They might have believed in miracles, ghosts, and angels, but they knew just as well as we do, that when a person dies, their body decays, and they don't return to life in this world.

In a body. Now, some Jewish people believed that one day God would raise all the dead to life, and usher in his everlasting kingdom, but that would happen all at once, at the end of time.

So when Jesus was crucified, and his body was laid in a tomb, no one expected him to rise again. Not the ruling authorities who had executed him, not his opponents who had accused him, not his disciples who had followed him.

When Mary Magdalene came to the tomb in the darkness of early morning and saw the stone taken away, she didn't immediately conclude, he's alive. She ran away in terror.

She said, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him. When she found Peter and the other disciple, probably John, John doesn't refer to himself by name in his gospel, they didn't immediately believe he was alive either.

[8 : 41] They went to see for themselves. Some people have said perhaps they were mistaken. In the dim light of early morning, they went to the wrong tomb.

But if they went to the wrong tomb, if Jesus' tomb wasn't really empty, the Christian movement could never have survived in Jerusalem. Perhaps it could have sprouted up hundreds of miles away in the Greco-Roman world as a mystery cult.

But it could never have survived in Jerusalem where these events were supposed to actually have happened. Jesus had been accused of blasphemy by the religious leaders, accused of treason by the political authorities, condemned to death under Roman law.

There were all kinds of people who wanted him and his movement to stay dead. If Jesus' body remained in the tomb, while his followers were claiming that he was alive and risen, anyone could have pointed to the body, discredited the Christian movement, and plenty of people had a motive to do just that.

But no one ever did. Instead, the Christian movement survived and grew and maintained a consistent presence in Jerusalem, as well as spreading out to the world, despite frequent persecution and opposition, particularly in Jerusalem.

[10 : 02] The Christians maintained their claim that this Jesus, who was crucified and buried, had been raised to life by God himself. And none of their opponents ever challenged that claim, that the tomb of Jesus was empty.

Now we might ask, well, is it possible that someone stole or removed Jesus' body, like Mary wondered? Well, Peter and John seem to have had this very question.

That's why they ran to the tomb and looked inside. They had a little race to the tomb. Interesting details. John, the younger and more agile one, got there first.

Peter, a bit older by all accounts, and perhaps not in quite as good shape, arrived second, huffing and puffing. John, the restrained and reflective one, looked inside and noted the linen cloths lying there.

Peter, no holds barred, barged right in, saw not just the linen cloths, but also the face cloth. Which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded up in a place by itself.

[11 : 07] Now what's the point of all this detail? Well, when Jesus died, when he was buried, his body was wrapped in linen cloths. Chapter 19, verse 40 says this.

But that was the common Jewish burial custom. He was embalmed with spices, his body was embalmed with spices, and a separate cloth was wrapped around his head, leaving only the neck exposed.

Now if someone had carried away the body, they would have carried away the linen cloths, and the face cloth along with the body. If you were a grave robber, or if you were simply transporting the body to another location for whatever reason, you wouldn't unwrap the dead body of a man who had been beaten to a pulp and crucified.

But this is what they saw. The linen cloths that had bound Jesus' body, lying there undisturbed. The face cloth that had been wrapped around his face, folded up neatly by itself.

In the words of John Stott, the linen cloths were like a discarded chrysalis, a cocoon from which a butterfly has emerged. And so verse 8 says, the other disciple saw, and he believed.

[12 : 22] He saw the objective evidence, the linen cloths and the face cloths, and he concluded, contrary to all expectation, that this Jesus had come to life again.

You see, the resurrection of Jesus is not simply a fairy tale, like the Easter bunny, as much as I enjoy eating those marshmallow puffs. It's not simply a metaphor for the coming of spring, as relieved as we all are that it finally seems to have come.

The early Christians were convinced that Jesus' resurrection had actually happened, and they testified to what they had seen. But of course we might think, well, 2,000 years have passed since then.

Perhaps you wonder, what if it's not so simple? I mean, the story we're reading here wasn't written down until 50, 60 years after the events it describes. That's plenty of time for legends to develop, and by then no one would be able to prove them wrong.

But that's the thing. This story wasn't made up 50 or 60 years after the fact. From the very beginning, the earliest Christians testified to their belief in a resurrected Lord Jesus, that the same Jesus who was crucified and buried was raised from the dead.

[13 : 37] Earlier we read from 1 Corinthians 15, which is one of the earliest letters in the New Testament written by the Apostle Paul, written around A.D. 53, 20 years after Jesus was crucified.

And in the passage we read, he quotes from an early Christian summary of the faith. He says, I delivered to you, as of first importance, what I also received.

In other words, he had received this summary from others. He said that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared.

And then he lists a bunch of people that Jesus appeared to, who were witnesses of his resurrection. And this wasn't something that Paul had invented himself. He says, I already delivered this to you.

He's referring back to when he had visited the Corinthians in person, probably around A.D. 50, a few years before that, before he wrote the letter. Previously he said, I received this, most likely from the Christians in Jerusalem, most scholars think.

[14 : 45] He had visited Jerusalem, where some of the leaders of the church were, and he had received this summary tradition from them. And by then, it had already become an accepted summary of belief within the Christian community.

Now, in any community, it takes time for traditions to develop. And accepted summaries of belief to be actually accepted summaries of belief, and not just somebody's new ideas.

So many scholars believe that the statement Paul was quoting originated from within five years or even less of when Jesus himself was crucified. You see, the earliest Christians, not just the later ones, the earliest ones, believed in Jesus' physical resurrection because they were convinced that it had actually happened.

That it wasn't merely wishful thinking, it was grounded in real evidence. Let me challenge you. If you are not a Christian, have you grappled with the objective claims of the Christian faith?

In particular, have you considered the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, the most central claim of all? You know, most people haven't.

[15 : 59] C.S. Lewis once said, many people compare a version of Christianity suitable for a six-year-old to a thoughtful, nuanced, articulate case for agnosticism, or atheism, or another worldview.

Please don't assume that what you remember, the tidbits you remember from being sent to Sunday school as a child, or what the major news outlets portray Christians as being primarily concerned about, is the whole story.

Christianity is not primarily an abstract philosophy. It's not primarily a political agenda. It's not a list of ways to become a better person that you can pick and choose from on and off if they seem helpful.

The central claim of Christianity is that God has decisively intervened in human history, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and that these events that occurred 2,000 years ago, Jesus' life, Jesus' death, and particularly his resurrection from the dead, make all the difference, both for you personally, and for the destiny of the entire cosmos.

Now here at Trinity, we want to take these questions seriously. Today in particular, we've made several books available for free at the back. There are 10-page booklets, there are 800-page treatises, take your, and everything in between.

[17 : 28] Start where you want. There's a book called The Reason for God. If you haven't read it, take a copy and read it with a friend. If you don't have a Bible that you can read, feel free to take one of the few Bibles with you as our gift to you.

So that's the first thing we see in this passage, that the message of Jesus' resurrection is grounded in objective evidence. But second, we also see that it was confirmed by personal experience.

Verse 11, we see Mary weeping beside the tomb. Now we're not told exactly when Mary came back to the tomb, whether she had talked with Peter and John about what they had seen or how she reacted to them, but we see her overwhelmed by grief.

Four times, just in verse 11 through 15, the text refers to her weeping. Twice, she basically repeats what she said to Peter and John back in verse 2.

They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him. Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've laid him. She was completely overwhelmed.

[18 : 38] And considering all that Mary had been through, it wasn't surprising that she was in such a fragile emotional state. Mary had been a devoted follower of Jesus for some time.

According to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 8, she belonged to a group of women who followed Jesus throughout his public ministry and provided for him out of their own means.

these women were some of his most loyal followers. Even when he hung on the cross, while he was being executed, they stayed near him. When he was buried, they witnessed the burial.

And for Mary in particular, Jesus wasn't just a respected leader whom she had followed and supported. Jesus had powerfully transformed her own life. Luke, chapter 8, verse 2, says, Jesus healed many of evil spirits and infirmities.

And for Mary in particular, he says, seven demons had gone out from her. Now, we aren't told the details. Perhaps she had been plagued by a complex illness.

[19 : 41] Perhaps her life had been characterized by addictive and self-destructive patterns. Perhaps she was literally possessed by multiple evil spirits. Perhaps all of the above. But through encountering Jesus, she had been released from bondage.

She had found wholeness and joy and peace in her life. And now it seemed that perhaps all was lost. Not only had her teacher died a shameful death, but his grave had been violated, his body carelessly removed.

Mary was a mess. Have you ever been there? Overwhelmed by grief and shock, feeling that you've lost your last friend.

Feeling humiliated, violated, alone. In light of Mary's emotional state, Jesus approached her with tender compassion.

He began by asking two simple and yet searching questions in verse 15. woman, woman, why are you weeping?

[20 : 55] Who are you seeking? Isn't that what a good counselor or a good friend does if you're an emotional wreck?

Takes the initiative to come near to you. Listens to your weeping. Perhaps listens to you saying the same thing over and over. and ask simple yet thought-provoking questions.

And yet Jesus didn't stop there. The turning point of this story is verse 16. Jesus said to her, Mary. And she turned and said to him, Rabboni, my very own dear teacher.

Jesus is the good shepherd shepherd who calls us by name. Who leads his sheep and goes before them and the sheep know his voice. Some people come to believe in the risen Lord Jesus like Peter and John.

Through a process of thinking and reflection. Reading, discussing, questioning, observing. Other people come to believe in the risen Lord Jesus like Mary.

[22 : 07] Through a personal experience of Jesus' steadfast love and mercy. Meeting them in their darkest hour. On the one hand, Mary's experience of Jesus is not a standard to measure our experiences against.

According to the Bible, Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God, the Father in heaven. That means you and I will not touch Jesus physically. We are not promised to hear Jesus' voice speaking to us in the same way Mary did.

If it was necessary for every believer to have such a dramatic personal experience in order to authentically believe, Jesus' command to Mary in verse 17 would make no sense.

Telling her to go and tell the others. If the experience was only for her, he would simply have said, Mary, now I have appeared to you.

Now you are in the know. But that will do no good for anyone else. So you may keep this all to yourself and I will appear to the others one by one if and when I choose.

[23 : 15] But no. Mary's experience of Jesus was not just for her own benefit. Her experience wasn't an end in itself. Her experience of Jesus was ultimately for the benefit of others who would hear her testimony and believe in the Lord whom she had experienced.

Verse 18, Mary doesn't just tell the guys this is what I've experienced but she also says that he had said these things to her. She conveys the message of who Jesus is and what he has said.

Now our experiences of Jesus today may not exactly parallel Mary's but Jesus is still the same compassionate friend and counselor who draws near to us as we grieve the loss of loved ones who listens to our fears and anxieties as we look into an uncertain future who asks us probing questions simple questions but profound questions in the midst of our confusion.

He's still the same good and gracious shepherd who calls his sheep by name who knows the very details of our personal histories and present circumstances and finds a way to our heart in the midst of them.

He knows you. He loves you. If you haven't experienced him yourself consider the many other people who have. There are many people right here in this room with their own stories of how they've experienced Jesus healing, Jesus presence, Jesus deliverance, sometimes in very dramatic ways, sometimes in very ordinary but still life transforming ways.

[25 : 09] If you're curious ask someone who's sitting next to you after the service. But whether we come to faith through an intellectual process or through a personal experience the path to Christian maturity involves engaging both the mind and the heart.

If you've had a dramatic experience of God share that with other people who might benefit from it from hearing your story. But don't simply try to live in the wake of that experience forever because the feeling may fade.

And the reason why it fades is because Christianity is not ultimately about our experience of God. it's about the God whom we've come to experience.

And so let your experience propel you to know this God more deeply and fully as he's revealed in the scriptures. On the other hand if you've come to belief in Jesus largely through an intellectual process let me encourage you to bring your heart to Jesus as well.

Bring your fears to him. Let them be reshaped in the light of his promises. Let the glory of God's kingdom kindle your imagination and refine your desires.

[26 : 26] Be open to all the ways both rational and intuitive that God's spirit may choose to work in you and through you to bless others. Christianity is not only a matter of objective evidence it's not only a matter of personal experience it's both.

It's meant to engage both our mind and our heart. But there's one more thing. The resurrection of Jesus is not only grounded in historical evidence appealing to our mind and confirmed by personal experience appealing to our heart but it also results in a new community.

We see this at the end in verse 17. Jesus said to Mary Mary 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.

Now at first Jesus words to Mary might seem a little harsh. Don't hold on to me. But I don't think we should imagine Mary recognizing Jesus trying to give him a hug and Jesus saying don't touch me.

He says don't cling to me. Which implies that Mary was already doing just that. She had embraced Jesus and didn't want to let him go. What Jesus is doing here is redirecting Mary's focus from her own personal comfort and experience to the good of the larger community.

[28 : 04] Don't cling to me. But instead go to my brothers. And he says give them this message. I am ascending. In other words I am in the process of being enthroned as king over everything.

Having accomplished his great work on earth. Jesus is now ascending to the right hand of God the father to reign over all. But he doesn't just say I am ascending to reign as king over the whole universe.

He says I am ascending to my father and your father. My God and your God. In other words Jesus in his resurrection has become not only the rightful king over God's new creation he has also become our brother.

Through whom we can draw near to God. You see by taking on our human nature Jesus the son of God fully identified with us. By living a life of unwavering trust and obedience to God and steadfast love of neighbor Jesus fulfilled God's calling for humanity.

In his death on the cross Jesus took our place. Dying the death that we deserve to die. Paying the price for our rebellion so we could be forgiven.

[29 : 26] And through his resurrection and ascension Jesus has blazed a trail into glory. He has opened a new and living way from earth to heaven from our flawed and fallen state into the holy and everlasting presence of God.

Through Jesus we can draw near to God as our father who loves us. This is the message that Mary was commissioned to bear to the apostles that Jesus father is now our father.

That the God who sent Jesus is now our God. That together we can draw near to God like Jesus himself did. As people who are deeply known and deeply loved and fully accepted.

Let me close with two questions. First do you have this kind of relationship with God that verse 17 describes? For many people God is basically a distant law giver.

A judge. God is and your goal is to do your duty. Check the boxes on his list and then go your way and hope he doesn't bother you too much.

[30 : 38] Sort of like when you see the police car with the sirens. And you hope that you haven't been going too much over the speed limits. For other people God is much more like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.

Merely a projection of our own wishes. Simply an affirmation of ourselves as we currently are. And yet that will never deeply change us.

You see the God that Jesus describes is the holy God. The sovereign and transcendent creator of the universe. The law giver and judge. And yet at the same time he is the God who has sacrificed everything.

in order to adopt you into his family. So that you could belong to him. And King Jesus the son of God himself is now your brother who loves you.

And who will be forever loyal to you. And who will never leave you. If you know that God, Jesus' God, you will have deep awe and great assurance.

[31 : 53] Deep awe in light of God's majesty and great assurance in light of God's love. You know, holidays can sometimes be painful. Because our family relationships often fall short of what they should or could be.

But through Jesus Christ, we can know that we have a place in God's family. Forever. the apostle John wrote to all who received him.

To those who believed in his name, Jesus' name. He gave the right to become children of God. Born of God. Born into a new kind of life that even death cannot finally take away.

Have you received this Jesus? And come to know this God? Second, have you joined his community?

The invitation that this passage extends to us is not only to consider the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection, not only to experience Jesus personally, ourselves, but to join the community of brothers and sisters in Christ who draw near to God together.

[33 : 09] Knowing that we are loved, knowing that we belong to God, knowing that in Jesus Christ even our worst failures have been atoned for. We have the potential to become a new kind of community, where we can be known without the fear of being rejected, where we can extend ourselves to one another in love and to our world instead of simply guarding and fearfully protecting ourselves.

Following the risen Lord Jesus is not a solitary endeavor. It's not about privately clinging to Jesus, it's about joining with his followers and proclaiming his good news to the world.

Come and join this new community that the risen Lord Jesus has created. What are you searching for this Easter Sunday?

Are you seeking truth grounded in objective reality? Are you seeking a God who knows you personally and relates to you love?

Are you seeking a community where you know you can belong? This is what the risen Lord Jesus provides. Let us pray. Almighty God, we thank you.

[34 : 49] We thank you for creating us in your image. church and putting in us the desire for truth, the desire to know you personally, the desire to be part of a community.

We thank you for the resurrection of Jesus. Lord, we pray that your spirit would lead us to a deeper knowledge of you, deeper love of you.

We pray that you would draw near to us as you drew near to Mary. We pray that you would guide our minds in our searching.

And we pray that you would dwell with us as we gather as a community. Lord, that we may know your presence, that we may be confident in your truth, that we may be assured of your love.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, as the music team comes to the front, please stand as we sing our closing hymn.

[36 : 14] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.