

Live: Gospel Hope – Now and Forever

An Empty Tomb

John 20:1-29

Mark Vroegop

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 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. 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.' " Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

(John 20:1-18 ESV)

Resurrection Sunday is the most important Sunday on the church calendar. It's the Sunday where Christians all over the world celebrate the message of hope that is found in the life of Jesus Christ.

Easter Sunday is the day we celebrate the hope of an empty tomb. The message of the Bible and the good news proclaimed throughout the centuries is this, "He has risen from the dead."

Now, I want you to think about that statement "risen from the dead." And I want to highlight a particular word. Not the word "dead" nor the word "risen." But the word "from." It could be easy to pass over, but it's a really important word. It's a hopeful word, isn't it?

“From” is a word that communicates change, transformation, and even hope. For example, when we apply it to our culture and this battle with COVID-19, there will come a day when cities will emerge *from* the stay-at-home order. There will be a day when the infection rate will slow *from* what it was previously. And we will reflect on all the lessons we learned *from* this global crisis.

In the Bible, the word “from” is used for even more personal and eternal hope. For example, the apostle Paul says the following:

- “He has delivered us *from* the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:13).
- “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus *from* the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2).
- “He gave himself for our sins to deliver us *from* the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4).

In the Bible, the word “from” is tethered to the transformation that comes because of Jesus’s victory over the grave. His resurrection *from* the grave creates the possibility of being delivered *from* our sins.

And that is the basis of hope. That, in Christ, we can have a story of transformation: “Jesus saved me from...”

Four Transformation Moments

Today, we are in John’s Gospel, and I want to remind you that John’s purpose in writing this book is to show anyone who reads this book that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31). John has transformation in mind.

All four of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—record the resurrection narrative. But John’s approach is unique. He shows four transformational moments related to belief. He shows us how the followers of Jesus moved *from* one perspective to another. From confusion to belief, from sorrow to belief, from fear to belief, and from doubt to belief.

As I walk you through each of these transformational moments, ask yourself which one you resonate with the most. Make this story personal and practical.

From Confusion to Belief (vv. 1-10)

Our first transformation moment introduces the resurrection scene. Don’t forget that the previous chapter ended with a dark hue. Jesus cried, “It is finished” (v. 30), and he was laid in a tomb. But the story isn’t finished!

Chapter 20 begins with “...on the first day of the week.” All the gospel writers identify the day of resurrection in this way.¹ It’s why the church gathers on Sunday rather than on Saturday, which was the

¹ D. A. Carson, [*The Gospel According to John*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 635.

historical day of Sabbath and worship. In this respect, every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But today is the day we particularly highlight the resurrection.

Verse 1 tells us that Mary Magdalene is the first to visit the tomb. She was also present at the crucifixion. Mary was a devoted follower of Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry. She was from the region of Galilee, and Jesus had cast out seven demons from her (Luke 8:2). Other gospel writers include other women going to the tomb as well. But John highlights the experience of Mary Magdalene because of what follows.

Upon arrival at the tomb, Mary discovers that the stone covering the entrance was moved. Matthew records that Pilate had given orders to seal the tomb and guard it (Matt. 27:64-66). Can you imagine what the angels thought of Pilate's little Roman seal and the human guards? After an earthquake, an angel rolled back the stone (Matt. 28:1-4).

But when Mary sees the empty tomb, she's dismayed. The shock of the stone being rolled back leads her to think that the grave has been robbed. According to verse 2, she runs back to Simon Peter, the other disciples, and John ("the one whom Jesus loved"). What she says is really important, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Remember this. We'll come back to Mary in a moment.

Peter and John (the other disciple) run to the tomb (vv. 3-4). John outruns Peter, and when he reaches the entrance of the tomb, he stops. John looks in and sees the linen cloths lying there. This would have been the material that Jesus was buried in. It is probably on a bed of spices, and neither the expensive spices nor the linen is taken. Who robs a grave or moves a body and leaves the linen behind?

When Peter arrives, he runs into the tomb (vv. 6-7). He also sees the linens, but he notes the cloth that had been on Jesus's face is folded up in a place by itself. We're not entirely sure why John includes this detail. But it may have been to distinguish Jesus's resurrection from Lazarus, who came out of the tomb bound with his grave clothes. Jesus's body is different.

However, the point of the passage is what follows in verses 8-9. John writes that he then went into the tomb. Notice that the text says, "He saw and believed." Up to this point, John had not put it all together regarding Jesus's resurrection. That's what verse 9 says. But something happens when John sees the linen and the empty tomb—he believes.

John runs to the tomb, stops, and is confused. What does this mean? Mary thinks someone has robbed the grave. Peter just busts into the tomb. And then apparently, it hits John. Probably as if he saw everything with new eyes.

This is what the Bible calls the "new birth." It means that God supernaturally intervenes in your life. The pieces fit. Suddenly, you find yourself believing. It's the same thing that Jesus said to a religious ruler who was confused about Jesus's teaching. He said to him, "...unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

One of my prayers this Easter is that there would be thousands of people who come to faith in Jesus, that the fog of confusion would lift. That, maybe you, would hear the good news of Jesus Christ and believe for the first time.

From Sorrow to Belief (vv. 11-18)

The second transformation moment is from sorrow to belief. What follows in verses 11-18 is a personal moment for Mary. After the disciples go back to their homes (v. 10), Mary is still overwhelmed with grief.

After Peter and John leave, Mary looks inside the tomb. And, according to verse 12, she sees two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus used to be. One is at the place of his head and the other at his feet. They ask her why she is weeping. Mary doesn't know what they know.

She replies that she doesn't know where they have taken Jesus's body. And, according to verse 14, she turns around but doesn't realize that Jesus is the one who is standing behind her. Either her tears or the change in Jesus's form make him unfamiliar to her.

Jesus asks her the same question. And Mary gives the same reply. She doesn't know that Jesus is standing right in front of her.

Until Jesus says her name, "Mary" (v. 16). Instantly, everything changes! If you know the Gospel of John, it should remind you of John 10:27 where Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice... and they follow me." And she calls out to him, "Rabboni!" which means teacher.

Jesus pierces through Mary's sorrow and calls her by name. I wonder, Christian, if you can remember the last time, when in your sorrow, you read something in the Bible, sang a song at church, or had a friend pray over you such that you knew it was the kiss of your Savior? For those of you who have walked through deep pain, you know it is one of the unusual blessings of suffering. It makes Jesus more real.

Mary apparently embraces Jesus. Jesus tells Mary that she needs to let him go (v. 17). Instead, she is to be the first bearer of the news that Jesus is alive. John believed by seeing the empty tomb. But here is Mary going back to the disciples with a mission from Jesus.

Can you imagine the scene when Mary arrives saying, "I have seen the Lord!"? What a moment. Her sorrow has turned to belief through a personal encounter with the Lord.

Do you know that Jesus can take the sorrows of your life and lead you to belief?

From Fear to Belief (vv. 19-23)

But there's more. John takes us to the place where the disciples are in "lockdown." It's the evening of resurrection Sunday, and the disciples are huddled together "out of fear of the Jews" (v. 19). Wouldn't you be afraid?

Jesus has just been crucified. All of them ran away. They are hearing reports that Jesus is alive. But I would also imagine they are hearing about the religious leaders' attempt to figure out who they are. Remember, the religious leaders asked about Jesus's disciples in John 18:19.

So they are in this room filled with fear. And suddenly Jesus appears! The locked doors and the threats of the authorities are unable to stop the resurrected Jesus. He stands among them and says, "Peace be with you" (v. 19). Don't miss the significance of this.

Jesus, standing among them, says, "Peace with you." Amid their fear, he offers peace to them. But he does even more. He shows them his hand and his side (v. 20). He shows them his personal connection to their fear and proof that he really is alive.

And then he says it again, "Peace be with you." But this time he adds something more, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (v. 21). Jesus leads them out of their fear by personally reassuring them that he is alive, proclaiming peace over them, and then sending them out on mission.

What's more, he commissions them to receive the Holy Spirit which will be fulfilled about forty days from this moment in what is called Pentecost. And he commissions them to preach the truth of the gospel—the forgiveness of sins. This is connected to the "binding" and "loosing" texts in Mathew 16 and 18 where the church is given authority to validate a person's belief in what creates forgiveness.

The proclamation of forgiveness will be the central message of the church.

Notice what Jesus does here. He not only grants them peace, but that peace becomes the means by which they are sent out to live as the followers of Jesus.

This is the uniqueness of the hope of Christianity. Jesus comes to not just conquer fear but to fill you with peace so that you can live!

Jesus himself is our peace. And that liberates Christians to view life and death differently, to be generous with their money, to be concerned about their neighbors, and to share the good news. Because when your Savior is alive, it changes everything!

From Doubt to Belief (vv. 24-29)

That might have been a good way to end the resurrection narrative, but John wants you to see one more thing. Just in case you think the disciples are always full of faith and never doubt, he tells us the story of Thomas. Many of you may know him as "doubting Thomas."

He isn't in the room for the appearance of Jesus. So, when he hears about Jesus's appearance from the other disciples, he refuses to believe. They tell him that they had seen the Lord (v. 24-25), but he has to see it for himself. His doubt is strong!

Even though all the other disciples tell him, Thomas refuses to believe. Thomas makes a very definitive statement, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the

nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (v. 25). Note what he says, “Never believe.” Wow.

Who knows what is going on in Thomas’s heart? Maybe he’s full of pride. He has to see. He has to touch. Maybe he’s still grieving, and he’s nervous about being disappointed again. Maybe he’s more cowardly, and he is on the margins of the disciples. We’re not sure. But we do know that he doubts.

Eight days later, the disciples are together again. Doors are locked again. And Jesus again says, “Peace be with you.” And he personally addresses Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe” (v. 27).

And then Thomas believes. He confesses, “My Lord and my God!” (v. 28).

John records the words of Jesus that are so important, “Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’” (v. 29).

Thomas is graciously led from doubt to belief. And Jesus commends those who believe without needing the kind of proof that Thomas needs to believe.

Do you see the beauty of “from”? Jesus leads people from confusion, from sorrow, from fear, and from doubt to believe in him.

A Few Questions

Next week, we will bring this entire book to a close before we launch a new sermon series in May on dealing with anxiety and fear. John’s goal in this entire book is to lead you to belief. So let me ask you a few questions:

1) What stands in the way of you becoming a Christian?

This text is filled with hope. Jesus conquers confusion. He’s able to conquer sorrow. He brings hope. He’s able to conquer fear. He brings peace. He’s able to conquer doubt by giving us faith to believe.

The Bible records people with all kinds of baggage that came to Jesus. Today, I want to invite you to not let barriers stand in your way anymore. If you know that you are a sinner and you know that Jesus died for your sins, why not receive Jesus today?

2) What did Jesus save you from, Christian?

Easter is a good Sunday for Christians to reflect and remember what Jesus did for us. It’s a good time for us to reflect on the ways that Jesus rescued you. What is your “from”? Greed, lust, pride, anger, addiction, self-concern, covetousness, slander, fear of man, envy? Can I remind you that this day was the day that changed everything for you?

3) What “old issues” are sneaking back into your life?

The empty tomb is not merely a historical fact; it's a present reality of how we live. Jesus doesn't just save people from the past; he saves them from not letting the past become their present.

The apostle Paul says:

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him (Rom. 6:6-8).

There it is! There's the hope of the empty tomb. Did you hear it? It's the best news in the world—"set free from sin."

It's how the resurrection of Jesus changes everything!

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