

John 20.1-18 Sermon / COB / 05.17.15

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: clown]** I want to thank those of you who responded to my promotional email. I was very encouraged. My one fear is that I promoted the sermon much better than I possibly can deliver it!

- † I think preaching is an art form of balancing and blending many objectives. It is my job to provoke you, to bring you the truth of God's Word in a way that allows you to feel conviction that you need what God is offering, you need to take a step of growth, repent of sin, trust more fully.
 - At the same time, I want to mediate God's Word to you in such a way that you are inspired, encouraged, and edified [or built up in your faith]. I reckon a good sermon has a little of both convicting moments and inspiring moments, both accountability and positive encouragement.

- † Sometimes it depends on the nature of the scripture passage. But even when the sermon is serious in topic, like the death or burial of Jesus, I think a good speaker can soften the intensity without sacrificing the impact; and maybe even increase the impact if the balancing and blending goes well.
 - Not everyone agrees on how to do that. Pastor John Piper's father, Bill, was a preacher who thought there was no place in the pulpit for humor, that any humor in a sermon not only detracted from the message, but was irreverent. I don't agree with Bill, but I do think there is a line there which we should not cross in a formal sermon; what might be ok at a special event or in a children's program might not be ok in our worship service. I would not want to disrespect God or his Word, nor to weaken the credibility of the speaker or the message.
 - At the other extreme, Wade and I found it amusing to discover that clergy in England are getting trained by professional comedians, so they can be more engaging when they preach. Now I think that is a sign of our doom, because it indicates how short your attention span has become and how disinterested even the faithful have become in studying God's revelation.
 - But I think getting this training is ok. That's why LeeAnn and I appreciate the church paying for us to go to London this week. Not really, but I do think getting this training is a good thing, for while it's true that every preacher depends on the Holy Spirit to make the sermon effective – and the Holy Spirit can do this and has done this no matter how dull and dry is the preaching – it still is true that pastors are responsible to do everything we can to help you understand and appreciate the message God wants us to bring.

- † So I do use humor, and I use illustrations, examples, statistics, interviews, news items, videos, props like my whip and my sword, the Phillies logo from the 1940s, whatever God brings to my mind, so that each of you, with your wide array of spiritual maturity and biblical understanding can enjoy learning something from our time together in God's Word.
 - A pastor named Jeff was one of the most engaging speakers I ever met. I remember when he was teaching about biblical conflict resolution, which sounds like a very dry and serious topic; I remember he taught it by contrasting the styles of his wife and himself. He said she was like a porcupine: if you upset her, she exploded a bunch of quills in your face. But he was like a snapping turtle: he would react by withdrawing into safety, but then when you thought the fight was over, snap! he would bite you. Both of their reactions were sinful, he offered them as contrasts to the biblical way, but the way he taught made us laugh and remember the point.

- I have not been trained by professional comedians, but I was a popular economics teacher even though I was the hardest grader, because I used humor and other creative elements to make economics understandable.
- † I want to do the same with the Bible. Sometimes God gives us a passage or a topic that just does not lend itself well to humor or creativity. And even when I can use humor or other engaging elements, often the main point is more convicting than inspiring.
- I also admit that my personality is more inclined to scold than cheer; so I have to keep that in mind as I prepare; but I also think that most of you need a kick in the pants at least as much as you need a hug! So I will try to give you both most weeks.
- † Today, we have a joyous and exciting topic: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead! But as this is one of the most theologically significant events in history, we want to talk seriously about the text. So says the fellow who just spent seven minutes trying to creatively introduce it.
- The resurrection should inspire us! Yet even in the resurrection we will find a challenge. We will see that three people looked into the empty tomb. Two looked then went away confused; one looked and believed! That invites us to consider how we react to Jesus, his resurrection, and his work all around us.
 - Let's pray; then we'll see what happens after Jesus died on the cross and was buried in a tomb.

[Slide 2: 20.1-2] John 20.1-2 ESV: 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."

- † You know, her name was not Mary Magdalene; her name was Mary, she was from the town of Magdala, and thus she was a Magdalene, just as Jesus was a Nazarene, being from Nazareth. But she has become known in our English Bibles as Mary Magdalene, instead of Mary the Magdalene.
- Our movie uses just one actress to represent Mary from Magdala and Mary from Bethany. Some have argued that they were the same person, but when we consider how these women are presented in the four gospels, we conclude they were different people.
- † The Sabbath holy day for the Jews ended at dusk on Saturday evening. You will remember that Jesus was buried late Friday afternoon, before the Sabbath began. The Sabbath ran from dusk Friday through dusk on Saturday, so Mary came to the tomb early Sunday morning. We learn from the other gospels that she and some other women planned to put more spices on the body.
- John probably emphasized the darkness of early morning, as he often emphasized darkness in this gospel, to symbolize the spiritual state of Mary's understanding at this point. She loved Jesus and had supported his ministry, but she did not yet understand who he really was.
- † According to the other gospels, angels told Mary Jesus had been resurrected. Apparently she didn't believe it. Maybe she didn't recognize the angels for what they were, since they appeared as men.
- Grave robbing was a problem throughout the empire, so Mary might have worried that someone had stolen the body or maybe she assumed that the Jewish religious leaders or the

Roman soldiers had taken the body somewhere for political reasons. In any case, her conclusion was not that Jesus had risen from the dead, but that someone had taken his body away.

[Slide 3: 20.3-5] John 20.3-5: 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.

- † As we have throughout this study, we assume the unnamed disciple is our author, John, himself.
 - A tomb carved out of the rock of the hillside was like a cave. Most had entrances that were only about three feet tall, so John had to bend over to peek in. Apparently the sun had come up, since he could see inside.
 - A tomb like this would have a shelf or bench around the other three walls or would have a niche carved into a wall, so the body could be laid out while it decomposed.
 - If you were here last week, you might remember that Nicodemus and Joseph had prepared the body of Jesus by coating him with a perfumed gel, wrapping him in linen cloths, and placing him in the tomb. John saw the linen cloths there, but no body.

[Slide 4: 20.6-10] John 20.6-10: 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 [or "looked"] 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.

- † Peter went right into the tomb, so he could see not only the linen cloths from the body, but also the one that had been wrapped around Jesus' head, which now was folded up separate from the others.
 - As we said last week, the Romans had sealed the tomb and placed a contingent of soldiers to guard it. We learn from other gospel writers that on Sunday morning, an angel rolled back the stone sealing the entrance to the tomb, and that the soldiers saw this and were freaked out.
- † Peter and John still did not understand that the resurrection was part of God's eternal plan. But when John went inside the tomb, he looked at the scene and believed.
 - John knew Jesus had really died, because John was there as a witness at the cross. He knew there had been guards on the tomb; he would know that no grave robber, even if he somehow got past the guards, would unwrap the body, leave the valuable linens, and even take time to fold them up neatly. In that instant, when he looked, he believed in the resurrection of Jesus.
 - Interestingly, he apparently kept this conclusion to himself. As we will see, he did not console the weeping Mary who was nearby, nor can we see that he encouraged Peter, who [according to Luke] went off unsure of what had happened.

[Slide 5: 20.11-13] John 20.11-13: 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."

- † When the men were in the tomb, they did not perceive any angels, but now the angels appeared again to Mary. But she again did not understand who they were, nor that Jesus really had risen from the dead. She still thought someone had taken the body.
 - Because she did not believe, she had despair. In the world today, there is much the same problem. Last week, we talked about how we all find ourselves in a pit, a hole, due to our corrupted nature, acts of sin, and guilt, but that God offers us a ladder, a way out through Jesus.
 - The problem is that many people cannot see the ladder, so if they perceive their situation in the hole correctly, then life seems hopeless. They turn to alcohol and other drugs, they turn to violence and selfishness, they turn to idols and false philosophies, because they feel a despair that comes from being separated from God in a suffering world.
 - Faith alleviates despair. I read this book, Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*; I don't recommend it, because Kierkegaard is hard to understand. But he said despair was the worst sin, because it indicated a lack of faith, because if we can believe in the resurrection of Christ, then we can believe that the ladder is real, we can believe Jesus did pay the penalty for our sins in his crucifixion, that he will keep his promise to resurrect us to new life someday, and thus that our suffering here is only temporary and a prelude to something good, and that we can reconcile with God right now and walk through our struggles with him and empowered by him.
 - So while it is normal to suffer in this life, we should continue to hope and rejoice in knowing that Jesus will one day fully deliver us out of our suffering. Mary wasn't there yet; neither was Peter.

[Slide 6: 20.14-15] John 20.14-15: Having said this [to the angels], 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."

- † You have to give Mary some credit: despite not grasping that Jesus has been raised from the dead, despite her despair and weak faith, she continued to show devotion to Jesus: she was a woman of means, and she was willing to take the body and care for it herself.
- † The movie showed Jesus hidden behind a bush for this part of the discussion, but that is not the sense you get from scripture. Sometimes even Christian directors struggle to believe or interpret the miraculous. The resurrected Jesus appeared to various disciples at different times, and they did not recognize him until he chose to reveal his identity to them. In a moment, we will see Jesus do that with Mary.
 - First he asked Mary two questions. Jesus knew what was on her heart and in her mind. He knew that she still walked in spiritual darkness, that despite her steady devotion to Jesus during his years of ministry, she still did not understand who he was or what he was capable of doing. We should not be too hard on her, since Peter apparently had the same struggle.
 - We should not be too hard on her, since we have or had the same struggle. Last week, I used the ladder to represent God's offer of salvation, and I said just getting on the ladder was faith enough to be saved. Yet despite her show of devotion and trust, Mary at this point is not saved.
 - Now think about this. Jesus cast out seven demons from Mary of Magdala. This happened fairly early in his ministry. She then followed him around and financially supported his ministry. So she obviously was devoted to Jesus, she obviously believed in him as a teacher, a prophet, a healer, and a spiritual leader. Yet we cannot say she had saving faith at this point, because

there she was, standing at the empty tomb, hearing the angels say Jesus had risen, and she did not believe, because she did not understand who Jesus really was or why he had to die.

- It's the same for us today. We can come worship passionately every week, we can dutifully try to obey the commands of scripture every day, we can publically praise the name of Jesus, give lots of money to Christian causes, and experience great blessings in our lives – all the things your pastor encourages you to do – but if we do not understand and believe the gospel of Jesus – if we do not understand and believe what scripture says about who he really is and what he actually accomplished in his crucifixion and resurrection – then we also are not saved. I would bet that every church in our nation has people who consider themselves Christians but do not really know Christ... including ours...
- In the next verse, Mary gets to take another step of faith, and I am confident she is in Heaven today, but we need to be careful that we truly come to saving faith and do not settle for anything less, not even for a good life of devotion, service, and blessing like Mary had up to this point. That is not sufficient faith, it is not getting on the ladder, because it is not faith in the gospel truth of Jesus the Christ.
- This week, I encourage you to think through the gospel again. If you have any questions or doubts, call me! or email me. And do a self-assessment: if you are not growing recognizably stronger in faith, growing more obedient, seeing real change in your character and lifestyle, then I would take that as at least a yellow flag, a warning that something is wrong, even if you are saved. Again, if that is true, please talk with me, so I can help you. There is no shame in asking for help, the shame would be to not get on the ladder or to get on the ladder but remain in the hole!

[Slide 7: 20.16-18] John 20.16-18: 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.

- † It is unclear what exactly Jesus meant in 20.17. I can think of two possibilities.
 - One alternative is that Jesus meant, "You should not be clinging to me in excitement, of course I have not yet ascended to Heaven; don't be so surprised, I am still here just as I said I would be!"
 - Another possibility is that Jesus meant, "Stop fussing and clinging, there is still much we have to do before I ascend to Heaven, so go to the apostles and report to them."
 - I can believe both of those were in his mind; but I favor the first one: she should have known he would rise from the dead as he promised, so she should not be surprised to see him.
- † As soon as Jesus spoke her name, Mary recognized him. What joy she must have felt! Think about not only being as happy as you could be, but zooming in an instant from the pit of despair to the height of ecstasy!
 - I think about when LeeAnn's grandmother accepted Christ as her savior on her deathbed; I think of when I went fearfully into spinal surgery and emerged not only able to wiggle my fingers and toes but to walk pain free for the first time in ten years.

- Imagine if your beloved spouse, child, or best friend had died, but then came back to life! Even without the theological implications, this would bring you incredible happiness.
- † Of course, there are theological implications of Jesus rising from the grave, coming back to life, and we should consider them. What does the resurrection mean? In scripture, the crucifixion and resurrection go together, they are one complex theological event. On his last night of life, Jesus talked about how he was going to be glorified.
- Jesus was glorified by exemplifying the utmost in godly qualities for a human being, the utmost in humility, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love.
 - Jesus was glorified by finishing his perfectly sinless life by obeying God the Father, not only all the way through the last second of life, but through fulfilling God's sense of justice by taking our penalty for sin.
 - Jesus was glorified by proving his identity as the Christ, the Messiah-savior whom God had promised to the Jewish prophets of the Old Testament; if Jesus did not rise from the grave, we could not know that he had victory over sin and death, that God the Father had accepted his sacrifice on our behalf; but the resurrection proved this was true.
 - Jesus was glorified by proving his identity as the Son of God, who could conquer sin, death, and evil, and thus will return to rule the Earth in God's name as the Ultimate Davidic King and representative Son of Man.
 - Jesus was glorified by proving that he can keep his promise as the greater Moses prophet to deliver us, not only to take us to Heaven when we die, but to resurrect us someday to new life on a renewed earth, to give us a wonderful inheritance as adopted children of God, so we can see that our hope placed in him is well placed, not futile.
- † **[Slide 8: 1 Corinthians]** Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 15.14 NET: And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is futile and your faith is empty.**
- That's because the resurrection is what proves that Jesus is who he said he was and that Jesus accomplished on the cross what he said he would. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we can believe in him as our savior, and thus we can have new and eternal spiritual life right now, just by accepting his gift in faith.
 - So as each of us puts our faith in Jesus, we also experience his victory, we experience resurrected spiritual life right now. We turn from spiritual darkness and confusion to spiritual light and insight, from the power of Satan to the power of God, from being people of the flesh to being people of Christ.

Conclusion

- † **[Slide 9: me]** Sometimes pastors are funniest when they don't mean to be. That pastor I mentioned earlier, Jeff, one time told us he had ten points in his sermon. I don't remember what it was about: ten ways to be a better husband or something.
- Anyway, he got started and was doing a fine job. After about half an hour, the lady who served as our program director held up a sign that only Jeff could see, which told him he had only ten more minutes, because our service was highly scripted and had to stay on schedule. Well Jeff

stopped dead in shock, just staring at her for a moment, then he muttered, “But that was just the first point!” He was preaching a ten point sermon and took thirty minutes for Point One.

- Obviously, the thing to do was say that we would continue next week. But no, Jeff was going to deliver that sermon, so he delivered it speaking very fast, like the FedEx guy used to speak in the commercials – let me show you what I mean **[insert 0.11-0.20 of YouTube commercial video]** – now Jeff was amazing as he spoke the last nine points super-fast; I didn’t understand any of it! Certainly it was one of the more amusing moments in preaching I have seen.

† **[Slide 10: blank]** Today, I have only one point. I haven’t been very funny, but I do want to end on an inspiring note. The one point is: Jesus really rose from the grave.

- Today, all serious historians, even skeptics, agree that Jesus really lived.
- The first century Jewish historian Josephus wrote about John the Baptist and his imprisonment; he wrote about Jesus’ brother, James, as the leader of the church; and he wrote about Jesus himself, saying Jesus was a teacher and miracle worker who had a large following of both Jews and Gentiles, who continued to revere Jesus even after his death.
- Second century Roman historian Tacitus confirmed that Christ was crucified during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of Pontius Pilate, just as the Bible says, but that the Christian faith not only was not squashed, it burst forth out of Judea all the way to Rome. And he wrote that believers in Christ were so sure of their faith, that they were willing to be tortured and killed for it.
- This has led modern historians like Cahill to say that the transformation of Jesus’ early followers is compelling evidence for his resurrection. They were few and in hiding, but then became thousands who were willing to speak out for Christ in public even if that meant torture or death, and their witness eventually changed the culture and faith of the empire. If those first followers had not seen the resurrected Christ, there was no reason for them to come out of hiding.
- We also have a lot of historical and archaeological evidence that the historical framework of the Bible is accurate and true. The biblical gospels were written by eye witnesses, and written when other eye witnesses were still alive to complain if they had been false. We also have many writings of the early church which detail what these eye witnesses, these disciples of Jesus, themselves taught to their disciples.
- The evidence is compelling that Jesus really was crucified on the cross and then resurrected from the grave on the third day, and he continues to work in and through people today, empowering them to climb out of the pit into true spiritual life.
- The question is will you look and then believe...