

JOHN 20

JESUS, THE VICTOR OVER DEATH

Now the night has gone, and the bright dawn has burst – for Jesus has risen from the dead! With the same physical body that Joseph had placed in his rock-hewn sepulcher, bearing the marks of the spear-thrust and the nails, Jesus appeared to His disciples. And just as unbelief found its culmination in His cross, so also, faith reaches its climax at the sight of the empty tomb and in the vision of the risen Lord! As we review the scenes which are painted by John in this chapter, we should notice that each one presents undeniable evidence to the fact of the resurrection; and we would also do well to observe the faith that each of these scenes inspired in those who were favored with the privilege of beholding it.

The first scene (verses 1-10) shows Peter and John at the tomb of Jesus, early on the morning of the resurrection. They do not know that Jesus has risen; they are not even expecting Him to rise. They have been summoned by the announcement of Mary Magdalene, who – along with some other women – had found the stone rolled away from the grave when they came before daybreak to anoint the Savior's body. "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb," Mary told Peter and John, "and we know not where they have laid him!" And so the two disciples have run to the tomb, and they have found that Mary spoke the truth: the tomb is indeed empty. Peter now turns away, bewildered and distressed. But when John sees the unoccupied sepulcher, and the cloths which had been wrapped about the body of Jesus lying undisturbed, and the piece of fabric which had been around his head carefully "rolled up in a place by itself" – he believes! He concludes that there is only one way to make sense of the facts before him: Jesus has risen from the dead. There is no other explanation of the empty tomb, even though skeptics and atheists have been suggesting others ever since. "His disciples came by night and stole him away" – that was the first falsehood that was broadcast, right after the Savior rose, in order to explain away the obvious fact of the empty tomb; and throughout the ages, even down to the present day, there has been no lack of other lies that have been promulgated by those who refuse to believe in the resurrection of our Redeemer. "Jesus did not really die," such persons assert; "He only swooned upon the cross, and then revived and escaped from the tomb." "The disciples never saw Him," others claim; "they only imagined that He rose." And still others try to encourage us to believe that "His followers were guilty of intentional falsehood." Many solutions for the empty tomb have been proposed: theft, resuscitation, hallucination,

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ *Jesus' tomb is found empty, but the risen Savior appears to Mary Magdalene – verses 1-18*
- ❖ *He appears to the disciples that evening – verses 19-25*
- ❖ *The unbelief and subsequent faith of Thomas – verses 26-29*
- ❖ *John's conclusion to the main part of his Gospel-narrative – verses 30-31*

and deception. But there is only one answer for the thoughtful and believing mind: real resurrection!

What was it, though, that John believed? That Jesus had risen? Yes, surely he did believe this; but that was not all. He believed that since He had risen, He was indeed the Divine Son of God! And it was this conviction that not only produced the source for a life of loving devotion on the part of the Apostle, but it also became the foundation of this Gospel, which has proved to be a blessing to so many. To the mind that has been enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see and believe spiritual things, the only possible conclusion to draw from the fact of the resurrection is that Jesus must be Divine; and consequently, He is absolutely deserving of all our devotion and all our love!

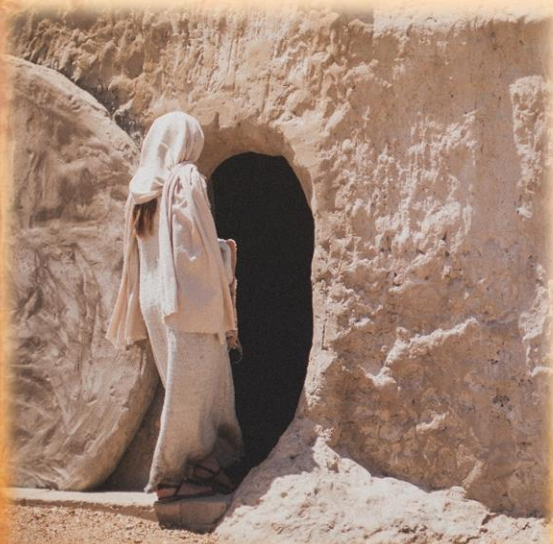
Mary Magdalene was the first person to whom the risen Lord appeared (verses 11-18). She had apparently followed the two disciples back to the grave; and when they left again and went home, she remained there and wept. Suddenly, however, she was surprised by the sight of two angels; and when she turned around from answering their question as to why she wept, she was convinced of her Savior's resurrection by a single spoken word. She saw Jesus, but she did not recognize Him until her own name fell from his lips: "Mary." And then she replied to Him with "Rabboni" – the Hebrew word for *teacher*. It is the mourner who stands weeping at the grave of buried hopes who, perhaps first of all, needs the vision of the risen Christ; and sometimes He speaks, to the very heart, a message which inspires faith that is as real as that which came to John, as he reasons from the fact of the empty tomb. What is the foundation of Mary's faith? It is the assurance that Jesus is a Divine Being, Who stands in an absolutely unique relationship with the Father, as the Son of God. The Savior bids Mary to tell the disciples that He is about to ascend "unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God." What was to be the life which was to result from belief in Him, and as a result of His ascension? It was to be fellowship with Himself – more close and real than His followers had known up to this point. It was to be a precious fellowship that was made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Jesus refers to His disciples by a name which He had never used before: "my brethren!" This also explains the words of Jesus, when He told Mary, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended." It was not yet the time – even for reverent love, and even by a symbolic touch – to claim the fellowship and the true communion which His ascension was to secure. However, now that He has come to dwell with believers as an abiding spiritual presence – now we have the truest fellowship "with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ!"

The first appearance of the risen Christ to His disciples occurred the same day, in the evening (verses 19-23). For fear of the Jews, they had withdrawn for safety to an upper room. The fact of Jesus' resurrection had been reported to them by credible witnesses, but they did not believe it until they had the evi-

dence of a physical demonstration by standing in their midst and showing them His hands and His side. As soon as the disciples had seen this, their faith became rooted in One Who was unquestionably Divine, One Who could give peace to the soul, One Who could impart the Spirit of God, and One Who was indeed the Son of God! And now the life upon which they were to enter, as His followers, was to be – in its essence – a great mission, identical with the mission of the Divine Son Himself. His work had not ended; and it would not end, for it was to be continued until the end of time by those who believe in Him: “As the Father hath sent me,” He says, “even so send I you.” Christ’s disciples are to carry on the work of their Master, and the power to do so comes from Himself: “he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit.” This gift imparted to them a fuller knowledge of the truth, and it was completed in the greater gift on the Day of Pentecost. And even today, by the witness of the Lord’s human messengers, the risen Christ still continues to carry on His saving work of redemption in multitudes of lost souls, by the power of His Divine Spirit.

In the Savior’s second appearance to the disciples, one week later (verses 24-29), His purpose was to convince Thomas of the reality of His resurrection. This disciple has been commonly remembered as “the doubter”; but in reality, this is an unfair label to place on his head – for he was no more skeptical than his fellow-disciples had been before they had seen the risen Christ! When Thomas heard their report, he practically demanded the same proof that had been given to them. It would have been well for him to have accepted their testimony; it is the very essence of doubt to demand a peculiar and specific kind of proof, and to refuse to believe on other sufficient grounds. However, Thomas was what we might call an “honest doubter,” because of his attitude toward the evidence. The next week, he went to the meeting-place of the disciples – the very place where he would hear the testimony repeated all over again, which he regarded as inadequate. When one is willing to face the evidence, and really loves Christ, he or she is certain to receive the light! Conviction came to Thomas

as the Lord appeared and offered to give him the kind of evidence desired. Then Thomas believed – but without demanding the proof which he had previously required. He was convinced by the love, mercy, and knowledge of his Lord – not only of His resurrection, but also of His Divine nature. He cried out in adoring wonder, “My Lord and my God!” This confession is not only the culmination of belief; it is also the climax of the entire Gospel! John immediately adds that his purpose in writing this whole narrative of Jesus’ ministry has been to bring his readers to exactly



the same kind of faith in Christ. If one who was naturally as skeptical as Thomas was convinced that Jesus rose from the dead, then surely we have no excuse for doubt. Since we are assured that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, then we must conclude – as did Thomas – that He is truly Divine. And since Jesus allowed Thomas to worship Him as God, we should likewise yield ourselves to Him in adoration and love, as to a Divine Master, Who – by His resurrection from the dead – has proved Himself to be “very God of very God!”

In verses 30 and 31, John states both his method and purpose in writing this Gospel-account. His intention was not to compose an entire life-history of Jesus. His aim has been to select – out of a vast array of facts – only a sufficient number to convince his readers that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” By the first term – “the Christ” – he designates the office of the Messiah, in Whom were fulfilled all the prophecies concerning the Redeemer and Savior of the world. And by the term, “Son of God,” he denotes the Divine Person of our Lord. The proof presented is that of “signs”; by these, John means not only those found in this chapter, but also the miracles related in his entire narrative. Among these “signs,” the resurrection of Jesus is supreme. When it has been accepted by Thomas, he immediately believes and confesses his faith; and to produce such faith in others is John’s purpose. However, he is not mainly writing for those who are unbelieving; he chiefly addresses those who already have faith in Christ. He has given us a narrative in which we have seen how faith can be increased and developed; and he here shows that a similar experience of satisfying faith will be ours as well, if we carefully study these “signs” which were done by our Divine Lord. Most of all, he encourages his readers by the statement that his aim is practical, and not speculative; moral, and not intellectual. He wishes them to believe, in order that they may have life! He assures them that their creed will affect their character, that their belief will result in experience, and that their faith will influence their conduct. John has written this Gospel in order that we may know Christ! His desire is that we may also trust Him, and that we may commit ourselves to Him; and then we shall have life, in all its fullness of peace and joy and beauty and fruitfulness and hope – even that everlasting life, which flows from a knowledge of the true God, as He is revealed to us in Jesus Christ His Son!

Lord Jesus, we repent of times when we have been like the doubting disciples, for this awful sin so easily besets us. We pray that since You are the great and Almighty Author and Finisher of our faith, You would deal tenderly with the Thomas’s of the present hour, and keep Your redeemed ones from the sin of unbelief! Amen.