

The Fact and Meaning of the Resurrection, John 20

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | Easter 2018

“The disbelief of Thomas was of more benefit to our faith than the faith of the disciples who did believe.” — Gregory the Great, as quoted by Thomas Aquinas

Proposition: Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and you will live if you believe in Him.

- I. The Fact of the Resurrection
 - A. First Clue: The Empty Tomb, vv. 1-10
 - B. Three Encounters with the Risen Christ, vv. 11-29
 - 1. Mary Magdalene, vv. 11-18
 - 2. The Disciples, vv. 19-23
 - 3. Thomas, vv. 24-29
- II. The Meaning of the Resurrection: Believe, and Live, vv. 30-31

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come together this morning to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. There are really two components that I want to highlight this morning, because I believe that these are the two things the text of Scripture most clearly highlights. The first of these is the fact of the resurrection. It really happened. Jesus really did rise from the dead in time and history, on an otherwise ordinary Sunday morning in Jerusalem some 2000 years ago. The reality of this happening is confirmed by the evidence of the empty tomb, and then by successive encounters with the people who knew Jesus best. Its meaning is summed up by John with an appeal to us to believe — that is, to take the report about Jesus on faith and to trust Him with our lives, fortunes, sacred honor, and eternal destinies. What does it mean that Jesus rose from the dead? It means that you should believe in Him.

I. The Fact of the Resurrection

We look first at the fact of the resurrection, which John is at such pains to establish for us. He left us on Friday night at the end of the previous chapter. Jesus has died and been buried in a tomb in a garden very near the place of crucifixion. Good Friday is over as John 19 ends. Holy Saturday is passed over in silence by the evangelist, and he only resumes his narrative on the morning of what we now call Easter Sunday, very early, while it was still dark.

A. First Clue: The Empty Tomb, vv. 1-10

The evangelist spotlights Mary Magdalene, a sinful woman who had been converted under Christ’s ministry and who obviously loved Him deeply. She has come early to the tomb. John doesn’t bother to mention her purpose; it is clear from his narrative that she is so deeply in love

with Christ that she cannot refrain from visiting His tomb. Yet as she gets close, an important detail jumps out at her: the tomb is open!

Now, perhaps most funerals we go to these days don't include the closing of the grave as part of the ceremonies. At my grandmother's funeral a few years ago, though, we were all still hanging around as they started up the backhoe and pushed all the dirt back into the hole. It is easy to imagine how surprised any of us would be to attend a funeral one day, only to come by the gravesite 36 hours later and see the grave open.

So Mary rushes back to Peter and John and tells them, and they immediately go investigate. They didn't expect to find an empty tomb, it would seem. And so they come and discover in stages that the grave is there, quite orderly, but that the body is gone. The presence of the burial cloths is evidence that no one stole the body: people who take a body aren't going to go to the trouble of unwrapping it! Indeed, the cloths are evidence that Jesus no longer needed them.

And so, from the evidence of this empty tomb, John personally saw, and believed. Here is the first mention of the key word that John is going to emphasize through the rest of this chapter. How did he come to believe in Jesus? Through sight. He saw the empty tomb, and though he failed to connect it with his knowledge of the Old Testament, nonetheless the tomb itself was enough to generate faith in Jesus Christ.

Does this empty tomb do that for you this morning? Do you see in your mind's eye the empty tomb, and do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead by His own power? John had to see the evidence first hand before he believed. He did not believe simply based on the report of Mary Magdalene. But when he saw, he believed.

Let me ask you further: Do you understand the Scripture's teaching that Jesus had to rise? Ultimately, that teaching is found in God's threat in Genesis 2, which promised death to those who sin against God. Since Christ never sinned, He was not subject to death. Since God is the God of the living, and since God is the God of Jesus Christ (Ps. 89), Christ would have to rise. Since Christ was going to pour out His soul to death and yet to prolong His days (Is. 53), surely He would have to rise again from the dead!

Do you understand this teaching? Do you know the Scriptures well enough to know that even to Israel it was revealed that Christ would be resurrected on the third day? You should. You should believe, not by seeing the tomb, but by understanding what the Bible says!

B. Three Encounters with the Risen Christ, vv. 11-29

But John himself did not just see the empty tomb. Perhaps he personally witnessed all three of the following encounters which he narrates. The first of them portrays a joyful moment of reunion as powerfully as possible.

1. Mary Magdalene, vv. 11-18

Mary, in love with Christ, stands by the tomb weeping. Does your soul resonate with this at all? Do you love Jesus like this? Would you stand and weep over Him? Obviously, such a thing is a hypothetical, for He lives. But Mary loved Him, if not as much as He deserved, then probably as

much as she could! She wept, and then entered this brief conversation with the two angels as if it were the most natural thing in the world. We certainly see here the mercy and kindness of God, who allowed her to converse with supernatural beings. Yet that was not the important thing in her mind. She cared only for Jesus.

He, of course, showed Himself to her, for He is loving and merciful. Yet, like some of the other disciples, she did not at first recognize Him. But when she did, her joy was overwhelming. She clung to Him, and He had to explain to her that His ascension was not yet complete. What did He mean? That simply knowing Him as a man was insufficient. To know Him, and to benefit from the knowledge, means not knowing Him according to the flesh any more. To know the risen Christ truly it is not enough to see Him face to face and to embrace Him with your bodily arms. That was a wonderful privilege, but Christ insists to Mary that He has to be known as ascended, as sitting at the right hand of the Father. He could not be held on Earth, for His time here was almost over. He could be hugged, but He was no longer a man of dust. He had, through His resurrection, become a man of heaven.

So Christ tells Mary that her responsibility is to declare to His brothers that He is ascending to His Father and their Father. And so she does, to this day! Her testimony, her encounter with Jesus, is showing us on this Easter morning so many years later and so many miles distant that Jesus really did rise from the dead and that He really is alive. Even as we read this story, Mary is fulfilling the commission Christ laid upon her.

2. The Disciples, vv. 19-23

That evening, Jesus appeared in a room with the disciples — probably not just the 10 (the Twelve not counting Thomas, who was away, and Judas, who was dead) but a number of other disciples. Notice that Jesus appeared to them when they were all together. He showed Himself to Mary when she was alone, and He still meets with us alone — but He meets with us together too. We can spend time with Jesus in private worship and in corporate worship!

He came in, not stopped by the locked doors, and granted to the disciples His peace. Surely they had every reason to expect that He would come in rebuke, that He would ask them why they all forsook Him, that He would not ask why they didn't understand His teaching — but He didn't. He came, and He granted them peace.

Do you realize that that is what the risen Christ does? When you meet with Him, in the assembly of His people, He doesn't confront you in wrath and judgment. He offers you peace. It is peace on His terms, of course, but it is nonetheless peace. Just as He had left His peace with the disciples before the crucifixion, so He now extends it to them afterwards. He died to purchase peace between us and God, and He is the one who preaches peace to us.

The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Are you glad when you see Him? Do you delight in His resurrection like they did? Brothers and sisters, this day is the best day in the calendar. This is the day that Christ conquered death. That is why we are called to rejoice on this day!

But not only does He grant them His peace; He also grants them His Spirit. This was a prelude to the mighty outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. But the fact is that Christ sends His Spirit to us repeatedly, generously, inexhaustibly. The presence of the Spirit in the Church makes it possible for us as a church to warn people that their sins will damn them, and conversely to tell them that God has forgiven their sins if they are penitent. This verse does not mean, as some have taught, that mere human beings have the ability to withhold and grant the forgiveness of sins. God alone can forgive sin. We, His Spirit-filled people, are merely able to report what God has already done. Indeed, this is especially clear in the case of retaining sins, for that is a perfect-tense verb which means “they have already been retained.”

Do you rejoice in the message of forgiveness for the penitent but judgment for the impenitent that is proclaimed in this resurrection community? Because Jesus lives, there is salvation and forgiveness for all who turn to Him.

3. Thomas, vv. 24-29

But Thomas was not present when these events took place. He refused to believe without seeing and touching. A week later, Christ came and granted his wish. This is surely an example of the proverb, “Be careful what you wish for”! Christ kindly and gently confronted Thomas, but He still confronted Him. He offered Thomas indisputable evidence that He had risen from the dead in the very same body in which He suffered. He specifically commands belief. And what did Thomas do? He believed! He gave expression to that belief in the statement, “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas recognized Jesus as Lord, a title He had long borne. But he also recognized Him as God Himself. This is possibly the very strongest affirmation of Jesus’ deity in the entire New Testament. And Christ’s words to Thomas are now before you this morning: Do not be faithless, but believing.

Do you believe in Christ? Do you demand to see and touch Him? Or can you accept the blessing He offers to those who believe even without sight?

John believed without seeing Jesus. Thomas believed after seeing Jesus.

II. The Meaning of the Resurrection: Believe, and Live, vv. 30-31

And, John tells us, this entire Gospel, including this next-to-last chapter of it, was written to teach us to believe as well. If you believe that Christ is God, come in the flesh, that He died for the sins of the world and rose again on the third day, you are blessed. What is the specific blessing that you have? Life. Resurrection life, granted to you in the name and by the power of Jesus Christ.

Do you want a share in His life? Then believe. Trust that He is exactly who He said He was, exactly what Mary Magdalene and Peter and John and Thomas saw Him to be. He is the Son of God. He is the King of Israel. And He is the Savior. Believe, and live. Amen.