

"The Empty Tomb"  
John 20:1-31  
Cheri Bean

Today's lesson brings us to Chapter 20 of the Gospel of John. This is one of my favorite texts in all of God's Word. Some might say that it is good to review this chapter around this time of year as the official Easter holiday draws near, because it tells us about the first Easter. But it is so much more than a call to celebrate Easter, isn't it?

The resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of the Christian message. Everything changes if "He is not here! He has risen from the dead, just as He said." (Matthew 28:6) The resurrection culminates the passion narrative in all four Gospels because it is at the center of redemption itself. Without it, one can only pity Jesus as a dead martyr whose lofty ideals were sadly misunderstood. With it, one must stand in awe of the exalted Messiah, the Son of the living God, who gave His life as a ransom for many, who presently reigns at God's right hand, and who will one day return in glory to fix this broken world.

In this lesson, we encountered what R. C. Sproul referred to as nothing less than the "crescendo moment of human history" - the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The details surrounding John's account of this supernatural event are unique and unexpected. No one, not even the early followers of Jesus, immediately recognized what had happened. This is in spite of the overwhelming evidence of the empty tomb, not to mention the words of Jesus Himself. Over and over again He spoke about rising on the third day. Even His enemies knew this and that's why the tomb was so well guarded. They didn't want anyone stealing the body and perpetuating a resurrection story.

But something did happen. The heavy stone was rolled away, the body was absent and the burial cloths were folded. From the very beginning, the enemies of the Lord tried to deny the historic fact of the resurrection. The Jewish leaders claimed that the Lord's body had been stolen from the tomb. This explanation is hard to accept for if the body had been stolen from the tomb by His followers, how did they do it? The tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers and the stone sealed by an official Roman seal. The burial cloths were folded. Thieves don't unwrap dead bodies before taking them. And besides, His disciples did not believe that He was to be raised from the dead; it was His enemies who remembered His words. (Matt. 27:62-66)

Because the timeline of events of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His post-resurrection appearances cannot be perfectly harmonized, the accounts of the events can be confusing. To be honest, I was confused by the fact that there were so many named Mary in the four Gospel accounts.

I had wrestled with some of the side issues which I saw as inconsistencies when I was a teenager and questioning everything. I remember that I was preoccupied with how many angels were actually at the tomb – one or two? I was confused by the number of women who went to the tomb. Now that I have had a few years to think about these issues, I see that the four Gospels are remarkably consistent eyewitness testimonies. The central truths – that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that the resurrected Jesus appeared to many people – are clearly taught in each of the four Gospels. While the resurrection accounts may seem to be inconsistent, I have yet to see definitive proof that the accounts are contradictory.

There are some points that we need to keep in mind as we study chapter 20. First, the stories of Jesus' resurrection must have produced much excitement – even confusion in Jerusalem as many people were trying to figure out what had really happened. And second, the writers of the Gospels did not attempt an exhaustive narrative. In other words, "it was not the intention of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John to tell us every detail of the resurrection or every event in the order that it happened," according to S. Michael Houdmann, Founder, President, and CEO of *Got Questions Ministries*.

The glorious truth of the resurrection was not understood immediately by even Jesus' closest followers. Warren W. Wiersbe tells us that the knowledge of the resurrection gradually dawned on Jesus' followers that their Master was not dead, but alive! What a difference it made when they fully realized the truth of the resurrection.

As John nears the end of his narrative, he presents four encounters with the risen Christ, each highlighting a crisis in belief. As we look deeper into the empty tomb, we will do it through the eyes of some of those closest to Jesus who encountered the risen Savior. We will examine how each of the following encounters resulted in a deeper faith:

- 1) Peter and John (20:1-10)
- 2) Mary Magdalene (20:11-18)
- 3) Disciples (20:19-23)
- 4) Thomas (20:24-29)

In addition, I will cite information from the Synoptic Gospels which, hopefully, will fill in some of the blanks of John's narrative.

In John 20:1, we see that Mary Magdalene was first on the scene. She arrived at the tomb when it was still dark. In his gospel, John mentions Mary Magdalene as the only person present at the tomb in the early morning hours. The synoptic gospels speak of multiple women who went to the tomb for the purpose of giving attention to the body of Jesus with fragrant spices. John, however, mentions only Mary Magdalene. According to R. C. Sproul, "it was customary in Scripture to identify a group simply by

reference to one member of the group, particularly the one who was in the position of leadership."

According to the parallel passage in the Gospel of Matthew, Mary was accompanied by another Mary, the mother of James the Less and Joses. This passage tells us: "There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men." (Matthew 28:1-4)

It makes sense to me that Mary would be that one woman John mentioned considering her close relationship with Jesus. You remember her story – demon-possessed, homeless, begging, eating scraps of food - and then she met Jesus.

John's narrative continues with Mary Magdalene who met Peter and John. She said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." (v. 2)

You may have asked yourself, "Why didn't the possibility that Jesus had risen cross Mary's mind?" She had heard Him tell of what was to come. Put yourself in Mary's sandals for a moment. You can imagine how you might feel after the funeral of a loved one if you were to approach the grave and you saw that the dirt had been moved back from the grave, the coffin is lying open beside the hole, and the body is missing. Of course, you would be shocked and you might assume that the body had been exhumed, possibly stolen, or that the Rapture had occurred and you were left behind.

John and Peter raced to the tomb to investigate. John, the first arrival, peered into the tomb, but did not enter it. According to Jon Courson, in verses 5, 6, and 8, the word "saw" is used and it is translated differently in each of the verses. First, John came to the tomb and "saw" the linen clothes lying. The word translated "saw" is *blepo*, meaning "to look at, to see visibly." In verse 6, Peter "saw" the linen clothes lie, and the word used is *theoreo*, meaning, "to study more carefully," and from which we get our word "theory." But in verse 8, John "saw" (translated is *eido*, from which we get the word "idea" – or "I get it."). John understood that Jesus had risen from the dead. Apparently, Peter needed more proof as the Bible does not tell us that he understood at that time.

The general sense of John's description is that the resin and linens had formed a cocoon, only hollow where the body had been. Someone stealing the body would have taken everything or at least unwrapped the linens and thrown them aside. The cloth used to tie Jesus' jaw shut had been rolled up and set aside. If this were a hoax, it seems to be elaborately staged.

John explains the reason for the disciples' slowness to comprehend the full meaning of what they saw. While prophecy alluded to His rising from the dead (Ps. 16:10-11; Hos. 6:2), they did not understand the necessity of the Messiah's resurrection. They still did not understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead; therefore, they did not understand the meaning of the resurrection its necessity.

We have the advantage of God's Word that tells us that without the resurrection, Jesus' death would go without divine interpretation and endorsement. The resurrection amounts to the Father's clear signal that Jesus is the powerful Son of God who has conquered death and reigns as Lord of all. (Romans 1:4; 4:25)

By the first century, Jewish scholars struggled to understand how the Messiah could suffer and die for the sake of His nation, yet overcome their enemies, lead them to prosperity, and establish a worldwide empire.

Dr. Charles Swindoll provides this explanation as to why the idea of the resurrection was so foreign to the early Christians:

"One theory suggested the messianic prophecies foretold the rise of two individuals, one who would sacrifice his life and another who would reign in his place. The seemingly conflicting prophecies remained a conundrum until . . . John recognized that the bodily, miraculous resurrection of the Messiah resolved everything."

At this point in the narrative, Peter and John returned to where they were staying according to John 20:10. The other women had already been sent on their mission by the angels that they should go quickly and tell Jesus' disciples that He had risen from the dead and that He was going ahead of them and would meet them in Galilee. (Matt 28:5-8; Mark 16:6-8; Luke 24:5-9)

Mary Magdalene had been a woman who had been delivered from the relentless torment of demonic possession. Jesus miraculously rescued her from her horrendous spiritual captivity and she remained faithfully devoted to Him. Her love for Jesus must have been as strong as anyone's - except for Jesus' mother, of course. It must have broken her heart to see His lifeless, mangled body so poorly prepared and laid in a cold tomb. She was determined to wash and anoint His body properly.

Matthew, Mark, and John all record that Mary Magdalene was present at the crucifixion. Combining all three accounts, it's clear that she stood with Mary (the mother of Jesus), Salome (mother of the apostles James and John), and another Mary (mother of James the Less and Joses).

Mary Magdalene and the other women remained near the cross until the bitter end. Can you imagine their agony? I remember my mom's last days on earth. She was

in hospice and given as much comfort as possible, but the waiting was excruciatingly difficult and I could do nothing for her – no food, no drink – just wait.

Watching Jesus endure agony must have been so painful. There was nothing for the women to do but watch and pray and grieve as Jesus suffered. Mary Magdalene remained longer than any other disciple at the cross. She and Mary mother of Joses secretly followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb and “were looking on to see where He was laid.” (Mark 15:47).

In John 20:11-12, Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb weeping. She bent over to look into the cave and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. The angels asked her why she was crying? Mary responded, “They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put him.”

Ironically, Jesus was standing right behind her in plain sight. Mary thought this man to be the caretaker as she did not recognize Jesus. He repeated the angels’ question – “Why are you weeping?” Mary did not recognize Jesus when she answered His question. Then the greatest thing happened. Jesus called her name and she immediately cried out, “Rabboni!”

As I read this passage, the Scripture that comes to mind is in John 10 when Jesus refers to Himself as the Good Shepherd and His sheep listen to His voice (verses 3 and 4). In verse 14, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” John 10:14

I do not know what prevented Mary from recognizing Jesus, but she immediately recognized His voice, turned to Him, and really looked at Him. She accepted the fact of His resurrection. If not the first person, she was one of the first people to whom Jesus appeared.

Matthew gives us a little more information about this meeting. He mentions that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were witness to Jesus’ appearance. They came to Him and they clasped His feet and worshiped Him. In John 20:17, Jesus gently rendered the command, “Stop clinging to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

Can you imagine the relief that she felt. She embraced Him and held on as though letting go would cause her to lose Him again. Jesus reassured her that she would see Him again as He had not yet ascended to His Father. Jesus asked her to give the same message to His other followers.

Dr. Swindoll explained that Jesus' response confirmed two truths: 1) It confirmed that His physical presence on earth was temporary; and 2) that Mary's physical clinging would have to give way to another kind of bond, a relationship of faith. Jesus gave Mary three commands – stop clinging . . . go . . . tell. . ." (John 20:17). Mary's immediate response to His command: obedience. She did exactly as she was told.

Before the first day of Jesus' resurrection was over, His followers began to assemble together in a place that was probably familiar to them in Jerusalem. (John 20:19) The doors were locked for fear of persecution from the Jewish leaders. Despite the locked doors, Jesus suddenly appeared among them. Luke tells us that His appearance was so baffling that the disciples thought Him to be a ghost; and yet, He possessed flesh and bones that could be sensed by touch. (Luke 24:37-39)

Unlike Lazarus who was raised from the dead, but eventually died again – Jesus' resurrection was so profoundly different. Dr. Swindoll explains that "His resurrection body, while still completely human, possessed supernatural qualities. He was raised to a new kind of life, never to die again."

We know with surety that John already believed. Apparently, the other disciples were slow to accept that they saw - the authentic presence of their risen Master. Unlike Mary who immediately accepted that Jesus had risen, the disciples needed more proof.

John 20:21-23 is a momentous passage. Once joy had replaced their fear, Jesus recommissioned them to fulfill God's great plan of redemption. (John 17:18) "Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jon Courson brings up two interesting points as he shares information in his commentary about John 20:22. He shares that at this point the disciples are born again and I quote: "Although they were already following Jesus, they were not yet regenerated because He had not yet died for their sins." Of course, at the time of this meeting, Jesus has died for their sins, He has risen from the dead and now Jesus breathes on them. This is reminiscent of Genesis 2:7, when God breathed life into Adam's nostrils and he became a living soul."

At this meeting and in this same passage, Jesus made an interesting statement that could be perceived as controversial when He stated, "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." While only God has the right to forgive sin, Charles Swindoll reminds us that the apostles were granted authority – the same authority granted to all believers and to all redeemed men and women who carry the Holy Spirit within them. He stated, "The Lord commissioned and empowered believers to proclaim His message of forgiveness. The phrase rendered 'have been forgiven them' in the NASB describes an action already taken by God. . . If

'any' respond with belief to the disciples' proclamation of the gospel, the disciples have the authority to pronounce them forgiven."

Jon Courson puts it in these words: "It means that His ambassadors don't provide forgiveness, we do proclaim it. In other words, it is our responsibility to say, 'According to the Word of God, if you open your heart to Jesus Christ and believe in His work on the cross, your sin is gone.'"

Thomas was absent from this meeting of Jesus' followers in their "secret room." It is possible that he went home to Galilee. Upon his return to Jerusalem, Thomas heard the stories of Jesus' resurrection. Because he refused to believe them, he earned the nickname of "Doubting Thomas." It was Thomas who said, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him." (John 11:16), and "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" (John 14:5). Thomas wanted concrete proof. I believe it was not to satisfy his doubt, but to overcome his hopelessness. It sounds as if the melancholy Thomas felt that the resurrection was too good to be true.

Eight days after the Lord's first visit to the disciples' hideout, Jesus appeared as He had before and offered the neediest person in the room the assurance he needed. The Lord's gentle rebuke of Thomas communicated, "It's okay to place complete confidence in Me; I won't let you down. I am here, I am real, and I won't abandon you." Thomas didn't need to touch the Lord's wounds. We see his confession as a pinnacle moment in John's narrative when Thomas declared: "My Lord and my God!" Jesus affirmed his confession of faith and then responded with a blessing on all those who had accepted the truth of His resurrection because of faith in God's promises rather than physical evidence. In verse 29, Jesus told Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Before closing, I want to draw your attention to the encounters that Jesus, the Son of God had with His followers in chapter 20. The glorious truth of the resurrection was not understood immediately by even His closest followers. What a difference it made when they realized that He was alive!

The difference for Mary Magdalene meant her tears of grief turned to tears of joy. For ten disciples, it meant going from fear to courage. For Thomas, it meant moving from doubt to assurance. I am sure that Jesus will make the difference for each of us in whatever season of life we are in and whatever our need is.

The last two verses of this chapter are the most climatic verses of the entire Gospel. John writes to all of us: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." (John 20:30-31)

For these disciples, it took the living, breathing Jesus in their midst to make the difference. For many people today, it takes the presence of living, breathing Christians. Mary Magdalene was sent with the glorious news of the resurrection. The disciples were recommissioned to spread the Gospel, Thomas doubted no more and he faithfully served His Savior.

As I see it, our first priority is making sure that we have life in His name. Once we are secure in our belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, we are to tell others. We, too, are sent as messengers of the incredible news that Jesus who died is alive again. He has overcome death and triumphed on behalf of His people. Will you hear the Savior's voice and take this glorious good news to a world that is lost and dead in sin?

Please stand and I will close in prayer and stay standing as we sing "Because He Lives."

### **Because He Lives**

"Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,  
Because He lives, all fear is gone.  
Because I know He holds the future,  
And life is worth the living,  
Just because He lives!"