

“The Fact and Experience of the Resurrection”

John 20:1-31 (NRSV)

William Willamon, one of the most celebrated contemporary preachers, former chaplain at Duke University and now Bishop of Atlanta, Georgia, in the United Methodist Church, says:

One of the best compliments I ever received was after an Easter sermon in which I'd said, “Easter is not about the return of the robin in spring or crocuses or a butterfly coming out of the cocoon or any of that pagan drivel. **It's about a Body that somehow got loose.** The gospel accounts strain to describe what happened, but don't make any mistake about it, they're trying to describe **something unearthly**: death working backward. So I can't talk about ‘the eternal rebirth of hope’ or ‘Jesus living on in our hearts.’ We're talking about **a dead Jew, crucified, who came back to harass us.** And it scares the heck out of us!”

After the events of the preceding Friday, as far as the disciples were concerned, **Jesus was dead.** After his terrible ordeal of crucifixion, had not Jesus himself finally said on the cross, “**It is finished,**” and then “bowed his head and [given] up his spirit” (Jn. 19:30)? The unthinkable had happened. **Jesus Christ was dead.** As far as the disciples could see, **it was all over!** They'd come up against a blank wall. They'd not believed it would end like this, and they'd not yet grasped the truth of Jesus' earlier prophecies of resurrection. There was nothing left except a recurring sense of utter helplessness and the shame of their denials and desertions.

The disciples didn't know they were about to discover and experience a greater joy than they'd ever known. In the words of the ancient Orthodox chant, they discovered, “**Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!**” John 20 is the story of the discovery of that joy. In this passage Jesus Christ brings the truth of the resurrection, with its accompanying joys, to his followers, including us. Their discovery of **the fact of the resurrection and their experience of it** can be our discovery and experience too.

1. **The discovery of the empty tomb** (John 20:1-10).

The first thing they discovered was **the empty tomb.** In the previous chapter, John told us that Joseph of Arimathea, a “secret disciple” of Jesus,

had gained permission to bury Jesus' body. With the aid of Nicodemus, the Pharisee who once came to see Jesus and ask him some questions by night, he wrapped Jesus' body in linen wrappings and about 100 pounds of spices and laid him in a new garden tomb near to the place of execution (19:38-41). The Lord Jesus' body lay in that quiet cemetery until the resurrection, which took place sometime before dawn on Sunday morning.

Shortly after he was resurrected, **certain women came from the city to the tomb to anoint Christ's body with spices** (Mk. 16:1; Matt. 28:1; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1). At least four women were there, probably more. Mark tells us that in addition to Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, Salome was present. Matthew mentions Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," the mother of Jesus. Luke later includes Joanna (24:10). John mentions only Mary Magdalene.

These devoted women evidently reached the tomb **at daybreak**, "while it was still dark" (20:1a), obviously a time when it was **difficult to see**. But **what they could see shook them**: the stone had been removed from the entrance! (20:1b). Had someone broken into the tomb? Had they gone to the wrong tomb, or had Joseph of Arimathea decided upon another tomb? And where were the soldiers who had been placed on guard?

Finally, **the women decided to inform the disciples**, and Mary Magdalene left with the message. John 20 picks up the thread of the message: she managed to find **Simon Peter** and "the other disciple," **John**, "the one whom Jesus loved." They'd been among the closest associates of the Master. No doubt, hysterically, and in confusion, **Mary Magdalene** cried, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him" (20:2).

So these two come "running together" to the tomb, with Mary lagging behind, to see what had happened. **John gets there first** (20:4), and bends down to look into the tomb, and sees the linen wrappings lying there, flat on the stone shelf, all by themselves, without the expected lifeless form of the body inside (20:5). The word used here for his "looking in" suggests **simple seeing**. **Peter**, impetuous as usual, **goes right into the tomb**, and sees the same thing, including "the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself" (20:6-7). The word used here for his seeing suggests **a long and careful look**. Then **John also went in**, and we are told, "**he saw and believed**" (20:8). Now

another word used for seeing, suggesting a **believing look**. Nevertheless, “as yet,” we are also told, **neither of them “[understood] the scripture that [Christ] must rise from the dead.”**

What, then did John believe? That Jesus was gone? No, even though he and Peter did not fully understand the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the Messiah’s predicted resurrection, **he believed in the fact of the resurrection.** John was the first in the world to believe that somehow Jesus Christ was alive again.

Why did John believe? Something he didn’t see in the tomb and something he saw in the tomb made him believe. The tomb was empty. **Clearly, Jesus’ body was gone.** Certainly, the disciples hadn’t removed it. It was also inconceivable that the enemies of Jesus would have removed it. **Clearly, something dramatic had happened.** And the way the grave cloths were left obviously lying there bore telltale signs, as if the body had simply passed through them and left them behind. It was not that Jesus had somehow revived and pulled off the linen wrappings, leaving them in some disarray, and had staggered out of the tomb – as if that were possible, as some scoffers would later suggest. No, **the way the linen wrappings were left** suggests “Here ... it seems that the body in some way disappeared from or passed through the cloths and left them lying as they were” (C. K. Barrett, 1975, p. 468). **Certainly, Jesus Christ’s body was not merely resuscitated.** It was resurrected. Mysterious though it was, and beyond understanding though it certainly would have been, Anglican pastor, preacher and commentator, **John Stott**, says the body must have “vapourized” as it became something wonderful and new (Basic Christianity, p. 52).

John might have said to Peter, “Peter, don’t you see it? No one has done anything with the body. Its gone right through the grave clothes! Jesus is risen! He’s alive! The only reason the stone is gone is so we can see Jesus is gone. Praise God! Let’s go! Last one home washes the feet!” (20:10).

I cannot make any more **sense** of it than you, but I am convinced of the fact of the resurrection **by the way the Scripture tells us this story.** It’s straightforward. It’s unvarnished -- the hesitation, the natural lack of understanding, is real. In fact, it’s more believable than any of the alternative explanations you might hear. It has, as the English translator of a generation ago, **J. B. Phillips**, once said, “The [crystalline] ring of truth.”

Moreover, I am convinced of the resurrection because **there are times I have a deep inner conviction** that it is truly true! For example, every time I hear Kathleen Battle sing, “I know that my Redeemer liveth” from Handel’s Messiah, I get goose bumps and feel it’s true, really true. Like the apostle Paul, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (Php. 3:10). Jesus Christ is alive! He is alive!

The great goal our text sets before us is to believe as the apostles John and Peter believed. If we can attain that height, our lives will be changed! A living Christ is an all-powerful Christ! A living Christ is a present Christ! A living Christ is a Christ who gives us life now! A living Christ is a Christ who gives us victory in life’s discouragements and disappointments. A living Christ is a Christ who gives us life forever!

2. **The appearances of Jesus on resurrection day** (John 20:11-23).

The apostles believed though they had not yet seen Jesus alive again. They believed because of what they saw and didn’t see in the tomb. But in addition to having been the first to call the apostles to the tomb and, therefore, being called **“the apostle to the apostles”** by the Eastern Orthodox Church, **Mary Magdalene was the first to have the privilege of seeing Jesus alive**. Probably, when John and Peter had sprinted to the tomb, poor Mary Magdalene (who had already run back into the city to inform them) was left in the dust. When they left the tomb, believing, they either overlooked her or departed another way.

Mary was left in the garden alone, weeping (20:11a). No doubt she was thinking of how Jesus had changed her life. She’d sinned greatly, been forgiven greatly and loved greatly. Standing outside the gaping, dark opening of the tomb, uniformed and in great anguish, she took a moment to bend down and look into the blackness. Startlingly, **“she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying**, one at the head and the other at the feet” (20:11b-12). In contrast to the darkness of the tomb these angels must have radiated a blinding white light. I’m sure she must have gasped, “What’s this?” Then, rallying her thoughts, she repeated her exclamation to the apostles, only now personalizing it, “They have taken away **my** Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (20:13).

Chrysostom suggests that at this point one of the angels must have motioned for Mary to turn around. For John continues, “When she had said

this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus” (20:14).

This is **one of the most tender moments** in all of Holy Scripture. Jesus kindly inquires why she is crying and whom it is she looking for.

“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” (20:15). Jesus calls her by name and, suddenly, she knows. She sees. Jesus is alive! O wonderful moment!

And when she cries, in return, **“Teacher!”** she must have thrown her arms around him. At first unrecognizable, he is now, instantly, recognizable! At first utterly alone again, she is now again befriended! Formerly unreachable, he is now as close to her as he can be. But Jesus cautions her not to cling to him. He wants her to realize that **a new relationship** was in the process of being established.

The spiritual comfort that awaited Mary and her friends was far more substantial than Jesus’ previous material presence could ever have given. Believing in our Lord’s resurrection, and the ultimate resurrection of all believers, **C. S. Lewis** said something similar after the sudden death of Charles Williams, his “friend of friends, the comforter of all our little set, the most angelic man. The odd thing is that his death has made my faith stronger than it was a week ago. And I find that all that talk about ‘feeling that he is closer to us than before’ isn’t just talk. It’s just what it feels like – I can’t put it into words. One seems at moments to be living in a new world. Lots, lots of pain, but not a particle of depression or resentment ...” (Letters, 20 May 1945).

It’s very significant that here, as in the other three gospels, Christ appears to the woman, **Mary Magdalene** – not to an apostle, not to the great in society or in the church, but to a particular, in some ways, **an ordinary woman**. Christ appeared first to one who in the culture of the time was oppressed, a woman who had known great sin. What a comfort it should be to us that Christ always comes first to “the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3). That truth will never change. How Mary must have been elated at that moment! Off she went on another cross-country run to the disciples (20:18).

It must have been very satisfying to say to them, “Hey, Peter, John and the rest of you, I’ve got something amazing, something stupendous to tell you – **“I have seen the Lord! I’ve seen Jesus! He’s alive!”** But Mark and Luke tell us the disciples had difficulty believing Mary’s tale (Mk. 16:11; Lk. 24:11).

What a day it had been! Multiple trips to the tomb, multiple retellings. Dark threats and rumours that someone stole the body too (Matt. 28:11-15).

By now it is Sunday evening. Despite all the excitement, the apostolic band was afraid, and so, in some private room, behind closed doors, they sat together to try and take it in and somehow sort it all out. Suddenly, **Jesus appeared to the disciples.** He showed up in their midst though no one had opened the door. Hearts raced. Adrenaline flowed. Goose bumps appeared on goose bumps. Jesus gave them his supreme, calming greeting, “Shalom” – “Peace be with you” (20:19). And “he showed them his hands and his side” -- confirming his wounds, still visible in his resurrected body, showing them that it was really he who appeared to them. No wonder the disciples “rejoiced” (20:20).

Can anyone describe that night? I think not. We reach the heights of mystery when we read further in John 20:22-23: that Jesus added, “‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

What a day. What a night. Without a doubt, it was the most dramatic day and evening in the history of the world. But one disciple had missed the whole thing. Thomas wasn’t there that first day or evening.

3. **The problem of disbelief and the remedy for it** (John 20:24-31).

I can understand that **Thomas** wanted to be **alone with his grief** (20:24). We all deal with our emotions differently. Certainly, **Thomas wasn’t a coward.** He’d shown his fortitude when he’d said earlier he was prepared to go with Jesus into Jerusalem and “die with him” (11:16).

Many people would say Thomas spoke for the whole world when he said, **“Give me proof and I’ll believe”** (20:25). Truth be told, it’s hard for some people to believe or to even to enter upon what the great English poet,

Samuel Coleridge, called “that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment” (*Biographia Literaria*, ch.12). Some people need facts, hard facts, and more facts, than others. Other people, even when they have the facts, find other reasons to disbelieve.

In any case, **Thomas** is an example of one who had some **time to reflect**. But when he was fellowshiping with the apostolic band again – note he didn’t abandon his friends and they didn’t abandon him – and when he was presented with another resurrection appearance of Jesus, Thomas came to believe for himself. He experienced the evidence for himself, palpably and substantively. His faith rested on solid rock. Further, Thomas may have **been slow to believe**, but he was **not slow to grasp the implications of Jesus Christ’s resurrection**. Jesus was not only his Lord but also his God (20:26-28).

What about us? The evidence is still just as substantive and clear. The risen Christ asks, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29). This is our Lord’s final beatitude. We have the testimony of Scriptures to confirm our faith. And we have the testimony of resurrected lives. Apart from the Word of God, this truth has never been communicated more forcefully than in the poem written by the late American novelist and poet, **John Updike**, entitled, “Seven Stanzas for Easter”:

Make no mistake: if he rose at all
it was as his body;
if the cells dissolution did not reverse, the
molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as his Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as his flesh; ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that -- pierced – died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might

new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor;
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted
the fading credulity of earlier ages;
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not paper-mache,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest awakened in one unthinkable hour, we
are embarrassed by the miracle
and crushed by remonstrance.

We have great joy now and someday will share in the likeness of our Lord's resurrection. In the words of **Joni Eareckson Tada**, who broke her neck some years ago in a diving accident and became a paraplegic, "I know the meaning of that now. It's the time after my death I'll be on my feet dancing."

Amen

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