

The Grave is Not Empty! John 20:1-10

Well, we have gone through the heart wrenching last couple of chapters of the betrayal, trials, and crucifixion of our Lord. In this chapter we have the celebration of the resurrection of our Lord. And we saw as we opened chapter 20 last time we were together that the women approached the tomb where Jesus lay, around day break of the first day of the week, which would have been Sunday. The emphasis here is on Mary Magdalene and her response of finding the stone rolled away. We see she thinks the worst and goes to find Peter and John, no doubt still up thinking and mourning the death of Jesus. And we find that they first had a hard time believing the report of Mary but then decided to go to see for themselves.

And verses 3-10 really highlight their response and what they saw, and no doubt how God challenged their faith and trust in Christ as being Lord and Saviour. And this passage is important for a couple of reasons. One, it truly validates Jesus rose from the grave. It really is a stunning passage of Scripture and a glorious passage of Scripture that strengthens the faith of those who are believers. Our Lord rose from the grave. And even if there were no eyewitness accounts what we read here should be enough to convince us that Jesus is risen just as he said. We have not followed cunningly devised fables or fantasies, but the resurrection of Jesus is so validated by history and these accounts. If you want your faith strengthened then just look at these accounts. And it starts here with the empty tomb — or what we could call a not so empty tomb, and we will explain what we mean by that.

The other thing that we see is that God is in the business of strengthening our faith. We often say that he will send us through things that we would never choose to go through in order to bring change into our lives that would have never come unless he brought us through those events. But here is the thing — he not only ordains the trials but works in conjunction with his word — with the truths of Christ and the promises he has given us. We might hear of his grace for weak believers like us and wonder where it is, but when we are brought to the end of ourselves all of a sudden the truths we have heard over and over about his presence or his peace that passes understanding or the promises of his coming glory, come to life. And God works through the trials and suffering of his people to shape us more and more into the image of Jesus but he never does it apart from his Word. The words that Jesus spoke before his resurrection will suddenly and dynamically become living and life-altering in both of these disciples lives. They have certainly gone through things they would have never chosen to go through but through that grief there would be so much light given.

And I think we all realize what I have just said. We can think back to grief, sorrow, failure, pain, and trials in our life and how God has brought us through them. But there are some passages as we think of those trials that pop into our minds. In fact they are etched forevermore in our consciences so gloriously that in the midst of our tears there is a smile. Our God revealed our hearts and changed us, and all we can do is glorify him.

Now the importance in realizing that is that this process of his word speaking into our trials, failures, and suffering is just not something that he has done in the past, but God's Word is just as living and active in the present. It is meant to change us and

give us the hope of Christ in the here and now. And I want us to see that great hope and have this passage really speak into our lives no matter what we are going through. May God help us see the glory of Christ — the living Word — and change us through none other than the validity of that not so quite empty tomb. I want us to see the text and then we will draw some conclusions that I hope will be helpful to us.

1. We need to see the text. Vv. 3-10

One of the things that I find exciting is details, because details are important. The details indicate so much about our Lord, and often we miss the blessing of the passage just because we do not look at the details. Remember the whole point of this gospel is that we would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and have life through his name. And for us as believers, it strengthens our faith and emboldens us to trust and follow him. It excites us to see all that Christ has done, and gives us such an expectation of what is to come for us as his loved ones.

So let's look at the details. Look at verses 3-4, **“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.”** Now here is the question: why the emphasis on running? Why not walk? There is no rush. Jesus is dead, at least in their minds. It could be that they might think the grave robbers are still there or they might find some clue where they have taken the body of Christ. But the text all the way through seems to have a feel of anticipation or even the rising of hope or excitement. Could it be that he has risen? Could it be that what he said was truly, and has actually come to pass? We never thought about the possibility but maybe — hope against hope — something miraculous and unthinking has taken place. We also see that John, the unnamed apostle outruns Peter. And again, why this detail? It could be that he is simply younger or whatever. But it also could be that Peter is still weighed down by his guilt of denying the Lord. It is amazing to think that the information we have in this chapter about the resurrection of Jesus indicates that sin has forevermore been forgiven. Death could not hold Christ. And there is no sin that could ever hold us back from Christ. He really did pay it all!

Now look at what happens as they get to the tomb in verses 5-7, **“And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 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.”** What John saw as he peered into the tomb must have been shocking and confusing. The tomb was not exactly empty because the linen cloths were still lying there. Why he did not go all the way in we are not told. Whether it was out of reverence where Jesus lay or that he was young and waiting for the older Peter to arrive. But Peter goes straight in. And it is incredible that the linen cloths were lying there. The meaning here is that they were placed in order. They were undisturbed. There was no incense lying on the ground, or the grave cloths scatter about as robbers tried to get the incense. He also saw the face cloth that covered his face not with the other garments but fold up. The meaning again would be that they were in an orderly arrangement apart from the others.

And think of it because this is not what they expected to find. The face cloth would have covered his face and kept his head upright and the mouth closed, but here it is like it was undisturbed. Now think of it, if someone was to steal the body of the Jesus they would have ripped the grave cloths off. They would have to strewn them everywhere. There would be a mess or whatever. But if robbers came, it would have been unlikely that they left what was of most value and that happened to be the incense and spices. And to try and unpack it would certainly be laborious. They would have taken the body with them. But the narrative gives these details of the orderliness of the grave cloths to give the message that Jesus passed right through them. And what that resurrection was like the moment Jesus arose I really do not know. What would it of been like in that moment where the cloths just passed through but Jesus arose from the stone slab. Jesus seems to be able to translate through that which is material. We see this when he appears to the disciples in verse 19, **“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”** The doors are locked but suddenly Jesus is there! Think of it. The reason why the angel rolled away the stone was not to let Jesus out, but to let the witnesses in. He is not captive to the tomb, and he is not captive to the grave cloths. He passes right through them.

So the tomb where Jesus lay is not quite empty but there is so much evidence that he is not here. Something other worldly, something glorious happened. This is something that they had never witnessed before, and you can only imagine the thoughts racing through these two disciples minds. So look at verses John 20:8-9, **“Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”** So John goes in and sees all that Peter sees and witnesses. And notice the terms used here, “he saw and believed.” Now what did he believe? Some think that he only believed that the body of Jesus is gone. He believed the report of Mary. But there seems to be so much more. The word “saw” is different Greek word than the others in this passage. It means to see with thought or discernment. And the meaning here is that this was enough to convince him that Jesus was alive. He had risen just as he said. Listen to what the angel said to the women at the tomb in Matthew 28:5-6, **“But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.’”** Just as Jesus said it came to pass. And certainly the resurrection was taught in the Old Testament Scriptures. Listen to Psalm 16:9-10, **“Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.”** The body of Jesus was not abandoned in the grave and his flesh never saw corruption.

Now look at the last verse here in this paragraph, **“Then the disciples went back to their homes.”** Now why did they go back home? And the reason is that the grave has lost all its significance and meaning. We often visit graves. We honour those who have died, and we remember that this is where their physical presence lay. Think

of it, because if Jesus is still in the grave then they would have stayed there all the day. In fact, larger groups would have come to mourn the death of this beloved Teacher. But the grave has lost its significance, because it has lost its occupant, Jesus is no longer there. He truly is risen. And you do not seek the living among the dead. The evidence is so overwhelming to them. There is no need to stay. Our hope is not in the tomb, but the message in the tomb itself — those empty grave cloths, Jesus is alive.

And isn't it amazing as you look at these details. We can so easily concentrate on various doctrines of the faith, or practice our faith just by a set of principles, but forget that we are following one who is alive forevermore. The evidence is in, and the evidence says that Jesus is alive forevermore! All who came to the tomb, witnessed what they witnessed came to the same conclusion — Jesus is alive. And their faith would be further strengthened by actually seeing the resurrected Lord.

2. So what can we take away from this passage?

Well, there are several things. One is that the evidence of Jesus' resurrection is so overwhelming. We have the report of the tomb where Jesus is not only missing, but the position of the grave cloths. Do we really think that grave robbers would have laid them out and left the bounty of the spices? Or a popular theory is that Jesus was still alive and revived in the cool of the tomb. Then how did he ever get out of the grave clothes, or roll away the tomb, or overcome the guards stationed at the tomb? Then you have to explain all the appearances of Jesus — these eyewitness accounts are so credible. No one is expecting his resurrection. And then the change of the disciples. They go from scattering and hiding to bold proclaimers of Jesus alive from the grave. And they know that death now cannot hold them.

This is what you have to conclude — people do not believe in Jesus not because there is not enough evidence but simply because they do not want to believe! It is the same as God being Creator. The evidence is just overwhelming, and the evidence is seen visually every single day, and yet sinful man suppresses that which can be known of God. So, when we see things start to click for John at the tomb, we have to realize that this is the work of the Spirit of God in the heart of this man to see the significance of truth presented and truly believe on Christ. Apologetics are arguments for the faith or for the existence of God, and they are great for believers. They buttress our faith, and we should be ready to give an answer to anyone of the hope we have in us, but apologetics can only go so far, and the reason why is the sinful heart. Sinners, which we all are, do not want to believe. Yet God works in the hearts of both John and Peter to show them what they could not see and would not see.

And he does the same for us. Think of why we believe the resurrection. We believe because God caused us to believe. God said it and it is enough. That should startle you. That is none other than the work of God. And the more we put ourselves under this Word the more he shows us about himself and the great hope we have in him. My Jesus is alive. The reason I believe is because of him. Apologetics is just validation of what I already believe.

Second, Jesus rose in power. Jesus rose in glorification. Resurrection accounts in Scripture are rare. But Jesus' resurrection is in a category all on its own. He rose not in the weakness of human flesh. His body did not rise in order to die again, but he rose forevermore in a new humanity with a new human existence. It was the same body but

oh so different. Listen to how our God explains this through the writings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, **“So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”** It is a totally transformed humanity.

Think of when Lazarus was raised. John 11:43-44, **“When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’”** Now why the command to unbind him? And the reason why is he had the same natural weak and natural body that he had before the resurrection. He was raised to die again. Jesus was raised to never die again. He is able to live in the realm of heaven with the Father at his right hand. He is able right here and right now to make intercession for us and does! He is reigning and ruling over all things to the church and is building the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus is not among the dead, nor will he ever be. He died once for all. He is living and active forevermore!

The third thing to see here is his resurrection is the basis of our own transformed lives. We realize the glory of our salvation is that we will be with Christ. The hope we have extends far beyond the life in the here and now to that life we will have with him. And we will not have a body of weakness that we have now. We realize how susceptible we are to temptation and to just physical fatigue. I don’t know if you noticed but each one of us have to sleep at night. The toil of this very day has weighed on us. Who is able to deliver us from this body and from this sin and from this existence? It is Christ. Imagine free from sin, in a perfect environment where there is no corruption — no disease, no hospitals, no discord in relationship, and in a perfect humanity where I can enjoy Christ and it never gets old, and I will rejoice in him as much as redeemed humanity can. And to realize I deserve the exact opposite. I deserve to be under his wrath and punishment but through the merits of Christ, I am guaranteed that life, and his resurrection is the assurance of these things.

There are times in the hostilities and trials and anguish of life we remember, and those truths change us. They give us a hope in a world where there is so little hope. And the more we think on these things the more our hopes and expectations change. And our hopes and expectations are not played down but actually elevated. So often we actually hope for too little. We hope for a little freedom from marital discord, or just a day where I would not have physical pain, or a little more money or material things or a day where I could forget all that is wrong with my life. Our hopes are too small, too incomplete and limited. The hope of Christianity is for everything wrong to be made right, and here is the glory — it will.

And I do not know what is going on in the hearts of these two men as they see all of these things, but God’s revelation is meant to give us a steadfast sure hope. Our future hope is based on things already accomplished. That is why it is so certain. Jesus has died for sinners, he is victorious over the grave and therefore my future is brighter than I can ever imagine or perceive. But think about the effect that hope has on us. Because it does not cause a grin and bear it Christian but the more we see the glorious

of Christ's promises to us — those future promises change us. Our hope creates delight. They affect how we handle life, look at difficulties, and live in the here and now. It is one of the reasons why God has ordained problems in our lives — to awaken us to what we truly need to hope in — to give us a greater hope, more expansive hope, because our hopes are too small and limited.

Listen to this process in Romans 5:3-5, **“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”** Why would we ever rejoice in suffering? Because suffering produces something that cannot be produced without us going through that suffering. It produces endurance. We keep going and keep trusting, and that endurance produces character. God is actually changing us. But what is the end of that process? It is hope! It is not hope in a problem free life or this or that to change or whatever. It is the hope of Christ! It is a hope that is bigger than any hopes in this world. And it is based on a not so empty tomb. It speaks of what Christ has accomplished and my future life with him.

So let me ask you through all your problems and difficulties what are you hoping in? I read a story about a young girl who was gravely ill. The doctor informed her parents that the future does not look good. She heard and spoke up and said my future is so bright. My future is I will be with Jesus. Let the truths that blare out through this passage change you. The one who occupied that tomb is no longer there!