

John: sermon #23
The Dawning of the New Day
(John 20:1-18)

Introduction

Biographies usually end with the subject's death. But John's account is not merely a biography of Jesus. Rather, it's gospel—the proclamation of the *good news* of Jesus' life, death, burial and resurrection. Its purpose is to invite the reader to believe, placing their trust in Jesus as God's Son.

A central focus of this gospel is the reality of Jesus' resurrection (see 1 Cor. 15:1-8). The resurrection is the principal evidence that Jesus is indeed God's Son and Messiah (Acts 2:32–36; Rom. 1:4) and that his atoning work on the cross is complete and fully effective (Rom. 4:24–25).

The empty cross and empty tomb are God's *receipts* affirming that our debt has been paid, that Jesus is truly alive, and that as believers we are alive in him.

Jesus' enemies tried from the beginning to deny the historic fact of his resurrection. Jewish leaders claimed that his body had been stolen from the tomb. But if this is true, how did it happen? The tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers and the stone sealed by an official Roman seal. Furthermore, Jesus' 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). These enemies certainly would not have taken Jesus' body. The last thing they wanted was anyone believing that Jesus had risen from the dead. If his enemies took steps to ensure that Jesus' friends *could not* steal the body, and his enemies certainly *would not*, then who took it?

Others claim that Jesus' disciples had *visions* of the risen Lord and interpreted them as evidence for the resurrection. But this theory does not hold up—his disciples did not *expect* to see him, and that is not the kind of psychological preparation from which hallucinations are made. Moreover,

how could 500+ people have the same hallucination at the same time? (see 1 Cor. 15:6).

Others claim that Jesus did not die, but only swooned and was later revived. But this argument does not hold up either—many witnesses testified that Jesus was dead when his body was taken from the cross. Later, he was seen alive by dependable witnesses. The only logical conclusion is that he kept his promise and rose from the dead.

The glorious truth of Jesus' resurrection was not understood immediately, even by his closest followers. It gradually dawned on these grieving people that their Master was not dead, but alive! And what a difference it made when the full realization took hold of them! For most of them it meant going from fear to courage (John 20:19–23). **In the case of Mary Magdalene it meant a three-stage journey of unfolding faith: *faith eclipsed; faith dawning; faith shining.*** Let's travel this journey with Mary. It's one that involves John and Peter as well.

1. Faith Eclipsed (20:1–2)

¹ Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

Mary Magdalene and several other women agreed to go to the tomb early on Sunday morning, so that they might show their love for Christ in **completing the burial preparations**. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had been forced by circumstances to prepare his body hastily, and the women wanted to finish the task. Their great concern was how to get into the tomb. Perhaps the Roman soldiers would take pity on them and give them a hand.

What they did not know was that an earthquake had occurred and the stone had been rolled back by an angel. It seems that Mary Magdalene went ahead of the other women and got to the

tomb first. When she saw the stone rolled away from the door of the tomb, she concluded that somebody had broken into the tomb and stolen the body of her Lord. We may criticize Mary for jumping to conclusions; but when you consider the circumstances, it is difficult to see how she would have reached any other conclusion. It was still dark, she was alone, and, like the other followers of Jesus, she did not believe that he would return from the dead.

She ran to give the news to Peter and John, who were together at a place known to the other believers. Perhaps it was the upper room where they had met with Jesus. Mary's use of the pronoun "we" is interesting, for it included the other women who at that moment were discovering that Jesus was alive (Mark 16:1–8 and Luke 24:1–8). The women left the tomb and carried the angels' message to the other disciples.

It is significant that the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection were women this fact adds to the authenticity and proof of his resurrection. Among the Jews in that day, the testimony of women was not held in high regard. "It is better that the words of the Law be burned," said the rabbis, "than be delivered to a woman." But these women had a greater message than that of the Law, for they knew that their Savior, the fulfillment of the Law, was alive.

Mary's faith was not extinguished here; it was only *eclipsed*. The light was still there, but it was covered. Peter and John were in the same spiritual condition, but soon all three would move out of the shadows and into the light.

What Have We Learned in this section? *From Jewel and Lelia Love on Faith Eclipsed (20:1–2): Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance and saw that the tomb was empty. Her immediate reaction was that the body of Jesus had been stolen. So she ran to Simon Peter and John and told them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" Based on this, Peter and John run to the tomb. John was faster and he got there first. Resurrection was the last thing on their minds. Bending down and looking into the tomb, John can*

see the strips of linen that have enfolded the body of Jesus. There is something about the way they are laying. He doesn't go in. He waits for Peter, who is the leader. The grave clothes have not been stolen along with the body. John enters the tomb and sees the evidence. He starts to believe that Jesus has risen from death. But for the most part, Peter and John, as did Mary, failed to understand that the resurrection had taken place. The truth of the Resurrection was there but Mary did not take time analyze the evidence. Instead of being meticulous like CSI, she jumped to the conclusion that the body of Jesus had been stolen. The light and truth were there, but the light and her faith were eclipsed by what she thought she saw. The main point we learn here is we should never make a rash decision but should get all the facts and all the evidence before we come to a conclusion.

How Does This Apply Personally (Practical Theology in Jesus)?
From Tom and Alberta: What we see when we look through the window of the Bible is Jesus. We see that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. We also see that he is in us and we are in him (John 14:20). In seeing this reality—the reality of God the Father, Son, and Spirit, and humanity's inclusion in that life—we understand ourselves and our relationships with one another. Yet, at times we are just like Mary, Peter and John. Here, Mary's faith was not extinguished here; it was only eclipsed. The light was still there, but it was covered. Here, Peter and John were in the same spiritual condition, but soon all three would move out of the shadows and into the light. We need to understand that Jesus has objectively included all of us in his plan of redemption. But we also need to understand that Jesus subjectively lives in us ONLY when we come to Him and receive HIM and believe HIM and are born anew in HIM. Then, Jesus begins to subjectively live in us and move us out of various shadows into the light of HIS LIFE is us.

2. Faith Dawning (20:3–10)

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was

behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes...

John 20:3 suggests that Peter started off first to run to the tomb, but verse 4 reports that John got there first. Both deserve credit for having the courage to run into enemy territory, not knowing what lay before them. The whole thing could have been a clever trap to catch the disciples.

When John arrived at the tomb, he cautiously remained outside and looked in. Perhaps he wanted Peter to be with him when he went into the burial chamber. What did John see? The grave clothes lying on the stone shelf without any evidence of violence or crime. *But the grave clothes were empty!* They lay there like an empty cocoon, still retaining the shape of Jesus' body.

Peter arrived and impulsively went into the tomb, just as we would expect him to do. He also saw the linen clothes lying there empty and the cloth for the head carefully rolled and lying by itself. Grave robbers do not carefully unwrap the corpse and then leave the grave clothes neatly behind. In fact, with the presence of the spices in the folds of the clothes, it would be almost impossible to unwrap a corpse without damaging the wrappings. The only way those linen clothes could be left in that condition would be if Jesus *passed through them* as he rose from the dead.

John then entered the tomb and looked at the evidence. “He saw, and believed.”

When John wrote this paragraph, he used three different Greek words that all mean *seeing*. In verse 5 the word translated “look in” means to glance. In John 20:6, the word translated “saw” means to look carefully. In verse 8 the word translated “saw” means “to perceive with intelligent comprehension.” **Here is a progression of understanding—their resurrection faith was dawning!**

It seems incredible that the followers of Jesus did not expect him to come out of the tomb alive. After all, he had told them many times that he would be raised from the dead. Early in his ministry Jesus had said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). After His resurrection, the disciples remembered that he had said this (John 2:22); however, his enemies remembered it too (Matt. 27:40, 63–64).

Jesus compared himself to Jonah (Matt. 12:40), and **on two occasions clearly announced his resurrection after three days** (Matt. 16:21; 20:19). **During his last week of ministry he again promised to be raised up and meet them in Galilee** (Matt. 26:32, Luke 24:6–7).

What kind of faith did Peter and John have at that stage in their spiritual experience? They had faith based on evidence. They could see the grave clothes; they knew that the body of Jesus was not there. However, as good as evidence is to convince the mind, it can never change the life. **Those of us who live centuries later cannot examine the evidence, for the material evidence (the tomb, the grave clothes) is no longer there for us to inspect. But we have the record in the Word of God** (John 20:9) and that record is true (John 19:35; 21:24). **In fact, it is faith in the truth of the Word that the Lord really wanted to cultivate in his disciples** (see John 2:22; 12:16; 14:26). **Peter made it clear that the Word of God, not personal experiences, should be the basis for our faith** (1 Peter 1:12–21).

The disciples had only the Old Testament Scriptures, so that is the “Scripture” referred to in John 20:9. The early church used the Old Testament to prove to both Jews and Gentiles that Jesus is the Christ, that he died for sinners, and that he rose again (Acts 9:22; 13:16ff; 17:1–4; etc.). The Gospel includes “that he arose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:4).

What Scriptures did Paul and John have in mind as those testifying to Jesus’ resurrection? Paul saw the resurrection in Psalm 2:7 (Acts 13:33). Peter saw it in Psalm 16:8–11 (Acts 2:23–36 and note 13:35). Peter also referred to Psalm 110:1 (Acts 2:34–35). The statement “He shall prolong

his days” in Isaiah 53:10 is also interpreted as a prediction of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus himself used the prophet Jonah to illustrate his death, burial and resurrection (Matt. 12:38–40). Paul saw in the Feast of Firstfruits a picture of the resurrection (Lev. 23:11; 1 Cor. 15:20–23). Hosea 6:2 is another Scripture that may have illuminated their understanding.

After his resurrection, Jesus did not reveal himself to everyone, but only to selected witnesses who would share the good news with others (Acts 10:39–43). This witness is now found in the New Testament Scriptures; and both the Old and New Testaments agree in this witness. The Law, the Psalms, the Prophets, and the Apostles together bear witness that Jesus Christ is truly alive!

Peter and John saw the evidence and believed. Later, the Holy Spirit confirmed their faith through the Old Testament Scriptures. **That evening, they would meet the Master personally! Faith that was eclipsed has now started to dawn, and the light will get even brighter.**

What Have We Learned in this section? *From Jewel and Lelia Love on Faith Dawning (20:3–10). Jesus had passed through the linen strips. They probably still held their shape, because of the sticky myrrh and aloes wrapped with them. Peter, John, and Mary’s first reaction was, “Who took His body?” This showed the psychological state of Jesus’ followers. None of them expected a resurrection, despite what Jesus had earlier told them. John saw the evidence and believed the resurrection. Or did he? He did not tell Peter or Mary. Instead he went home with Peter. The lesson here is: As it says in Proverbs 15:22 “Plans fail without good advice, but they succeed with the advice of many others.” Or two heads are better than one. If they had all stopped and discussed the evidence, John could have started them have faith in a resurrection and not a theft. We learn that we should counsel with many others and the Scriptures before we come to a conclusion*

How Does This Apply Personally (Practical Theology in Jesus)? *From Tom and Alberta: There are times in our preaching when we need to look at the Bible — its history, grammar,*

construction, etc. — just as there are times we have to clean the windows of our house. But the window itself is not the subject. The subject is that which can be seen through the window. This is why we don't preach the Bible, we preach Jesus (1 Corinthians 2:2). Looking through the window of the Bible and seeing Jesus helps us to understand that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and that humanity is adopted through Jesus into this Triune Life as children of the Father. It is this knowledge of Jesus that we are called to preach and it is this knowledge of Jesus that enables us to know why we are here, how we should live, and how we are created to relate to each other. Just like Peter and John saw the evidence and believed, we need to believe in Jesus as well. Yes, later that evening, Peter and John would meet the Master personally! And just like Peter and John, we too need to meet the Master personally.

3. Faith Shining (20:11–18)

¹¹ ...but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary deeply loved Jesus and came early to the garden to express that love. Peter and John had gone home by the time Mary got

back to the tomb, so they did not convey to her what conclusion they had reached from the evidence they had examined. Mary still thought that Jesus was dead and her weeping at the tomb was the loud lamentation so characteristic of Jewish people when they express sorrow (John 11:31, 33).

When Mary looked into the sepulcher, she saw two men in white. Their position at either end of the shelf where the body had been lying makes us think of the cherubim on the mercy seat (Ex. 25:17–19). It is as though God is saying, “There is now a new mercy seat! My Son has paid the price for sin, and the way is open into the presence of God!” Mary apparently was not disturbed at seeing these men, and there is no evidence that she knew they were angels. The brief conversation neither dried her tears nor quieted her mind. She was determined to find the body of Jesus.

Why did **Mary turn back and not continue her conversation with the two strangers?** Did she hear a sound behind her? Or did the angels stand and recognize the presence of their Lord? In any case she now knew that the Lord’s body was not in the tomb, so why linger there any longer?

Why did she not recognize the one for whom she was so earnestly searching? Jesus may have deliberately concealed himself from her, as he would later do when he walked with the disciples to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–32). It was still early and perhaps dark in that part of the garden. Her eyes were probably blinded by her tears as well.

Jesus asked her the same question that the angels had asked, “Why are you crying?” And he added, “Who is it you are looking for?” (He had asked the mob the same question in the Garden—John 18:4.) **The Savior knew that Mary’s heart was broken and that her mind was confused. He did not rebuke her; tenderly, he revealed himself to her.**

All he had to do was speak her name, and Mary immediately recognized him. Indeed, Jesus’ sheep hear [recognize] his voice and he calls them by name (John 10:3). **Apparently Mary had turned away from Jesus, for when he spoke her name, she had to turn back to**

look at him again. What a blessed surprise it was to see the face of her beloved Master!

All she could say was, “Rabboni—my Master, my Teacher.” “Rabbi” and “Rabboni” were equivalent terms of respect. **Mary not only spoke to him, but she grasped his feet and held on to him. This was a natural gesture: now that she had found him, she did not want to lose him. She and the other believers still had a great deal to learn about his new state of glory; they still wanted to relate to him as they had done during the years of his ministry before the cross.**

Jesus permitted the other women to hold His feet (Matt. 28:9), and he did not forbid them. So why did he say to Mary, “Do not hold on to me”? One reason was that she would see him again because he had not yet ascended to the Father. He remained on earth for forty days after his resurrection and often appeared to the believers to teach them (Acts 1:1–9). Mary had no need to panic; this was not her last and final meeting with the Lord. A second reason is that she had a job to do—to go tell Jesus “brothers” that he was indeed alive and would ascend to the Father (see Psa. 22:22). Jesus had called his followers *servants* (John 13:16) and *friends* (John 15:15), but now he called them *brothers*. This meant that as believers they shared his resurrection power and glory. He reminded Mary and the other believers that God was their Father and that he would be with the Father in heaven after his ascension. In his upper room message, he had taught them that he would return to the Father so that the Spirit might come to them.

It would have been selfish and disobedient for Mary to have clung to Jesus and kept him to herself. **She arose and went to where the other disciples were gathered and gave them the good news that she had seen Jesus alive. “I have seen the Lord!” (Note John 20:14, 18, 20, 25, 29.) Mark reports that these believers were mourning and weeping—and that they would not believe her (Mark 16:9–11).** Mary herself had been weeping, and Jesus had turned her sorrow into joy. If they had believed, their sorrow would also have turned to joy. Unbelief has a terribly deadening effect on a person. No wonder God warns us against “an evil heart of unbelief” (Heb. 3:12).

Mary not only shared the fact of Jesus' resurrection and that she had seen him personally, but she also reported the words that he had spoken to her. Again, we see the importance of the Word of God. Mary could not transfer her experience over to them, but she could share the Word; and it is the Word that generates faith (Rom. 10:17). The living Christ shared his living Word (1 Peter 1:23–25).

What Have We Learned in this section? *From Jewel and Lelia Love on Faith Shining (20:11–18). Mary was left by herself at the tomb wailing. Eastern funeral practices are very emotional. Two angels appeared to her, asking her, “Woman, why are you crying or wailing? She answered that someone had taken her Lord away and she didn’t know where He was. Then she turned and saw Jesus. Commentators often have suggested that Mary Magdalene was the first to see Jesus following His resurrection because she was the person who needed to see Him the most. She was the one who felt the strongest that Jesus’ body had been stolen. When she recognizes Jesus, she cried out “Rabboni!” (teacher) This is one of the emotional highlights of the entire Gospel. The eclipse is gone and she sees the light. She knows the truth. Her faith is now established completely. The point of this section is: Only divine love and divine grace can explain Jesus’ willingness to sacrifice Himself for all of us. He has provided for our faith to be completely and eternally established. The resurrected, glorified Lord calls these disciples back there and us today “brothers.” And, the Scriptures tell us that Christ is alive!” We worship a living Lord. He is risen. He sits at the right hand of God.*

How Does This Apply Personally (Practical Theology in Jesus)? *Let’s remember that the Bible is a window to help us see Jesus. Jesus shows us how to live and how to do ministry. He does not do it by giving us a set of written instructions to be followed. He shows us what life is and how to live, and what ministry is and how to do it, by living with us in relationship and participating with us in life. Please consider this practical relational aspect: Jesus had called his followers servants (John 13:16) and friends (John 15:15), but now he called them brothers. This meant that as believers they shared his resurrection power and glory. He*

reminded Mary and the other believers that God was their Father and that he (Jesus) would be with the Father in heaven after his ascension. In his upper room message, Jesus had taught them that he would return to the Father so that the Spirit might come to them. Once again, the Grace of God is two-fold: it includes Jesus' redemption (objective for all mankind) and The Holy Spirit's empowerment (subjective for believers).

Conclusion

What a blessing it is to learn of the Living Word of God in the written Word (Scripture). But **it is one thing to accept a teaching; it is something else to have a personal encounter with the Risen Lord. Peter and John believed the testimony that Jesus was alive, but it was not until they encountered Jesus personally that true and lasting faith emerged.**

Robert Dale, a pastor and theologian in Britain, was one day preparing his Easter sermon when a realization of the risen Lord struck him with new power. "Christ is alive!" he exclaimed to himself. "Alive—alive—alive!" He paused, and then asked, "Can it really be true? As *living* as I am?" He got up from his desk and began to walk about his study, repeating, "Christ is living! Christ is living!" Dr. Dale had known and believed this doctrine for years, but the reality of it now overwhelmed him. From that time forward, "the living Christ" was the theme of all his **preaching**, and he had his congregation sing an Easter hymn every Sunday morning.

Faith based on historical evidence says, "Christ lives!" Saving faith based on a personal encounter with the Risen Lord says, "Christ lives *in me!*" May we encounter Jesus personally and may that encounter change us forever.

What Is Useful To Us Personally (Practical Theology in Jesus)?
From Tom and Alberta: In summary, we see that it is one thing to accept a teaching; it is something else to have a personal encounter with the Risen Lord. Peter and John believed the testimony that Jesus was alive, but it was not until they encountered Jesus personally that true and lasting faith

emerged. Faith based on historical evidence says, “Christ lives!” Saving faith based on a personal encounter with the Risen Lord says, “Christ lives in me!” May we encounter Jesus personally and may that encounter change us forever.

Sermon Series is provided by Ted Johnston via the Senior Pastor Team of Tom and Alberta Ecker with input from the Beaumont Assistant Pastoral Team of Jewel and Lelia Love to assist ... Bible studies in series covering a book of the Bible.

This issue continues a series in the gospel of John with material from *The Bible Expository Commentary* by Warren Wiersbe, *The New Bible Commentary*, *The Parable of Joy* by Michael Card, and *The Gospel of John* by F.F. Bruce.

Note: Bold script above covered in Worship Services.