

Responses to the Resurrection
John 20:1-31
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Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Introduction

Job 5:6 says that “*man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.*” I don’t know all of your particular troubles, but I know that we’ve all faced hardships, trials, and difficulties in life. Maybe your parents got divorced when you were growing up and your world spun out of control. Maybe you got kicked out of school or arrested. Maybe your boyfriend, girlfriend, fiancé, or spouse left you. Maybe you did something so shameful that you hope that no one ever finds out. Maybe you’ve struggled with addiction. Maybe you got fired and had no backup plans or prospects. When those things happened, you were devastated. When everything seemed dark and grim, did you wonder how you would find the strength to continue? Did it feel impossible to find joy and hope again?

We’re going to meet three people this morning who were feeling that kind of devastation. Whose lives had metaphorically crashed into a wall. They thought that they had found the answers to life. They had been following a Man who seemed to be all-powerful – curing people of diseases just by touching them and calming great storms with just a word - they found out that He wasn’t as powerful and invincible as they thought when He was arrested and killed. They thought that He had been the chosen One sent by God, but it seemed that God had abandoned Him in His hour of need and allowed Him to be executed. Each of the three people we’ll meet was dealing with the fallout, the tortured emotions after His death. They were all struggling, lost in their grief, guilt, and doubts. But the events of the third day after He was buried would change everything.

Richard Phillips tells a story that happened in England in the early 1800s when the country was at war with France and Napoleon. A British admiral tried to send light signals to communicate the result of the battle that the Duke of Wellington had been involved in, but a heavy fog rolled in as he was sending it. So the only two words that got sent were “Wellington defeated.” The news reached London and there was great sorrow that things had taken a turn for the worse. Until the fog lifted and the message was able to be repeated in its entirety: “Wellington defeated the enemy!”¹ That changed everything. Today’s passage is the second half of the message that was sent on Friday afternoon: “Christ defeated” with the fuller message “Christ defeated the enemy.” Christ defeated the enemy for the three people we’re going to meet – Mary, Peter, and Thomas – and He defeated death, hell, and Satan for you and me. Let’s work our way through John chapter 20 to see how encountering the risen Jesus changed everything for these three and for us. (First let’s pray)

The first person that we are looking at this morning is

I. Mary Magdalene: Grief Turns to Joy (vv. 1-2, 11-18)

¹ *Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”* (skip down to verse 11)

¹¹ *But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.*

¹² *And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away*

¹ Supplement to *Encyclopedia Britannica* (London: Archibald, Constable & Co, 1824), 6:650.

my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” 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.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

We know from the other Gospels that several women visited the tomb of Jesus, but John focuses on Mary Magdalene. If you were not aware, Magdalene is not her last name. Magdala was her hometown, a city on the western coast of the Sea of Galilee. The Gospel writers called her that to distinguish her from the other three Marys who interacted with Jesus. There are two other, deeper misunderstandings of this Mary. The first one is that she was a prostitute. This idea got attached to her because of the story of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet; Luke calls her a “sinful woman,” but none of the Gospels identify her as Mary Magdalene. The other idea that has been explored in literature and films is that she and Jesus had a romantic relationship or were married; that idea has zero evidence anywhere. The most we know about her is from Luke 8:2-3: “*Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.*” Jesus had cast demons out of her and then she had been a faithful follower, travelling with the disciples and helping provide food. She had been at the cross with Jesus’ mother and seen Him die, and now she was the first one at His tomb. Like everyone who followed Jesus, her life had been shattered with His death.

Just before the Sabbath began (sundown on Friday), Jesus had been buried in the tomb; there had been no opportunity to prepare the body with spices. So Mary came after the Sabbath was over on Sunday morning hoping to get permission from the soldiers to anoint the body. Instead, she found that the stone had been moved from the entrance and immediately assumed that the body had been moved. She ran and told the disciples. When she came back later, things got interesting - she got to talk to two angels and then to Jesus Himself! I love the tender but humorous scene of Jesus appearing behind her and Mary’s mistaking Him for a gardener. Until He said her name, and then she knew instantly who He was. There’s a similar incident with the two disciples who were walking to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus joined them on their walk home, explaining the Scriptures as they went; they didn’t recognize Him until He broke bread with them. Jesus was clearly able to disguise Himself even from those who knew Him well, but then to reveal Himself beyond all doubt.

Contrary to all of the theories of those who would seek to debunk these historical accounts of Jesus being physically raised from the dead – that the disciples stole Jesus’ body, that Jesus hadn’t really died, He’d only fainted and then was revived by the cool air of the tomb – notice the one thing that Mary never considered when she saw the empty tomb. She thought they moved His body, she grasped for some natural explanation. But she never thought, “Oh yeah, Jesus said He would rise. I’m so glad that He actually did!” No, she thought anything but that until He appeared before her. And then she knew, and her grief was turned to joy. And He sent her as a witness to tell the others.

Our second biblical witness to the resurrection is

II. Peter: Guilt Turns to Service (vv. 3-10, 19-23)

³ So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him,

and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, ⁷ and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes. (skip down to verse 19)

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." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

You remember that Peter was the blunt, impulsive disciple, always blurting things out. Sometimes he said the perfect thing and other times he was clueless. Jesus called him an instrument of God and then an instrument of Satan within six verses. Halfway through Matthew 16, Peter said to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" and Jesus replied, "Blessed are you... my Father has revealed this to you." Then a couple verses later Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about dying, and Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan!" Only Peter could be so right and so wrong in back-to-back discussions. Then when Jesus talked about His death in Matthew 26, Peter, in his great zeal, claimed that he would never desert Jesus even if everyone else did. But Jesus prophesied that Peter would deny Him three times, and that's exactly what happened. Peter had more courage than most of the disciples, going to the courtyard of the high priest's house when Jesus was on trial. But when people recognized him as one of Jesus' followers, he denied it strongly three times. Luke's gospel records that Jesus looked right at him after the third denial and Peter "went out and wept bitterly" (22:62). Ever since Jesus' death, Peter's guilt over that failure must have been eating him alive.

So when Mary came to the disciples with the report that Jesus' body had been moved, he and John raced to the tomb. John arrived first, but Peter went into the tomb first because, remember, Peter was the reckless one. All he saw were empty graveclothes and he didn't know what to make of that. It says that John "believed," but that neither of them really "understood." Your guess is as good as mine why Jesus didn't appear to Peter and John at the tomb when He was just about to appear to Mary. But Jesus would appear that evening to the entire group of disciples. The next chapter tells us that Jesus and Peter got to have a private moment where Jesus restored and commissioned him to his ministry ("Do you love Me? Feed my sheep."). But here, Peter is just one of the larger group of disciples who were hiding in a locked room when Jesus appeared in their midst, showing them His pierced hands and side that His resurrection body still carried scars of. Jesus' charge to them was threefold: 1) He wished them *shalom*, peace, and breathed the Holy Spirit on them, 2) He reiterated that He was sending them out for ministry in the same way that God the Father had sent Him, and 3) He gave them the ability to declare sins forgiven. If I was preaching through John, we would take time to really delve into those three things, but we don't have time for that.

The point is that Peter was among the group of disciples who were appointed and sent out for ministry. Far from giving up because he had failed Jesus, Peter was emboldened to go tell the world about his Lord. The book of Acts records the times when he preached to the crowds, when neither arrests nor threats from the religious leaders were able to silence him. He never denied his Lord again. In Acts 10, Peter was preaching and said,

"³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him

to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead."

Jesus turned Peter's guilt into holy service; Peter would eventually be martyred for his bold faith.

Our third witness to the resurrection is

III. Thomas: Skepticism Turns to Worship (vv. 24-28)

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." ²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

We don't know as much about Thomas as we do Mary and Peter, except that he was one of the twelve. He had shown boldness in John 11 when he said that the disciples should go to Jerusalem to die with Jesus. That courage deserted him, though, when Jesus was arrested in the garden, and he ran away with the others. And now, he would not believe the report that the other disciples had seen Jesus; he saw it as a rumor that Jesus was alive until he could actually see for Himself. And because of that, he's been called "doubting Thomas" ever since. Which, on the one hand seems fair, because he was basically calling his best friends liars for saying they'd seen Jesus. But it's also a little unfair; none of the disciples initially believed that Jesus had risen from the dead until they were given proof. And we have to give him some credit: when he was given that proof, he immediately believed and declared that Jesus was Lord and God. From the text, it seems that Thomas didn't even take up Jesus on His invitation to touch His hands and side. Just Jesus being there and inviting Thomas to believe was enough for His response of faith.

It's so fascinating to think about Jesus' resurrection body as it's described in these accounts: 1) that He could appear and disappear, 2) that His body was solid but that He could also get past locked doors, 3) that He ate and drank with His disciples, 4) that His body still had the wounds from the crucifixion but they did not cause Him pain. One of the beautiful things that we understand from the rest of Scripture is that Jesus was the first one who was given a resurrected body. And all who are united to Him by faith will receive new bodies after death as well! 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 49:

"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... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven... For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality."

I've mentioned Joni Eareckson Tada before and many of you know the name. She was paralyzed as a teenager in a diving accident and was initially depressed and angry at God. But she came to see God working in the midst of her suffering and is now in her 70s and has had a lifetime of ministry from her wheelchair. In her book, *Heaven*, she talks about growing up Episcopalian, and how she wishes that she could still kneel in worship as she did as a child. She wrote this:

"It's impossible for me to bow in worship. Once at a convention... I watched as everyone in the room... got down on their knees. With everyone kneeling, I certainly stood out. And I couldn't stop the tears. I wasn't crying out of pity or because I felt awkward or different. Tears were streaming because I was struck with the beauty of seeing so many people on bended knees

before the Lord... I was reminded that in heaven I will be free to jump up, dance, kick, and do aerobics... (but) the first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on grateful, glorified knees. I will kneel at the feet of Jesus.”²

Beloved, we have the sure and certain promise that our best days will be in glory, where there will be no crying or pain and we will have immortal bodies that have shed the limits of this world. The one condition is that we believe. You see, the last people that we see in this passage is ourselves:

Conclusion: What Will Our Response Be? (vv. 29-31)

²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

We are not able to meet Jesus in person and see with our own eyes, and be convinced beyond all of our doubts like Mary, Peter, and Thomas were that Jesus rose from the dead. But we have the sure and historical testimony of the eyewitnesses, and we have all the evidence that we need to believe. Jesus says we are blessed if we believe without having seen Him alive. The blessings of believing are the forgiveness of our sins, the power to live a meaningful and spirit-filled life, the free gift of eternal life, adoption into His eternal family, deliverance from the judgment to come, and a resurrection body after death. If we trust what is written in the Bible, we may have Life in the name of Jesus. The evidence is overwhelming: over 500 people saw Jesus’ risen body and there are multiple, credible historical accounts that meet every scholarly criterion. If you think the Gospels are fiction, you have been deceived. The German historian and theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg said: “The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”³

John concludes this chapter saying, “*these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*” The resurrection is the turning point in history, and it is the defining claim of Christianity. You can’t be neutral, you either believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead or you deny it. Scholars who consider themselves nuanced and sophisticated have tried to stake out a middle ground where it sounds like they are sympathetic to the Bible’s claims, but that they can’t fully go against “science” and logic. So they say things like “What’s important is that Jesus rose in the hearts of His friends and followers, and that gave them the faith to move forward.” Well, sorry, that’s not what the Bible claims. It claims that Jesus died and was buried, but that God the Father physically raised Him back to life. Don’t minimize that and try to make it academically respectable: either accept it or reject it.

If Jesus *did not* rise from the dead, then 1 Corinthians 15:19 says, “*we are of all people most to be pitied.*” Christianity is a fairytale and I’ve based my life on a lie. But if Jesus *did* rise from the dead, then Thomas is right – He is Lord and God. He determines the meaning of life and decides where you go when you die. One of the two options must be right. You cannot remain neutral or detached, you must choose. And as the old song says, “If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice”: ubbelief.⁴ We invite you this morning to put your faith in the risen Savior.

² Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven: Your Real Home* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 50-51.

³ J.D. Greear, *Essential Christianity: The Heart of the Gospel in Ten Words* (The Good Book, 2023), p. 109.

⁴ Rush “Freewill”

Paul David Tripp says that

“the most horrible thing that ever happened was the most wonderful thing that ever happened... The only man who ever lived a life that was perfect in every way possible, who gave his life for the sake of many, and who willingly suffered from birth to death in loyalty to his calling was cruelly and publicly murdered in the most vicious of ways... (but) the cross was not the end of the story! In God’s righteous and wise plan, this dark and disastrous moment was ordained to be the moment that would fix all the dark and disastrous things that sin had done to the world... The same God who planned that the worst thing would be the best thing is your Father... He takes the disasters in your life and makes them tools of redemption. He takes your failure and employs it as a tool of grace... So be careful how you make sense of your life. What looks like a disaster may in fact be grace... Your Father is committed to taking what seems so bad and turning it into something that is very, very good.”⁵

Jesus sent Mary to tell His followers that He would be returning to “*my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*” How powerful, that for those who believe in Jesus, they will have God as their Father forever! It’s a reminder that all that Jesus had gone through in His suffering, death, and burial was so that His people would be forever saved, accepted, and adopted into God’s eternal family. Mary, Peter, and Thomas show us that no matter how much guilt you carry, how much doubt you wrestle with, or how much grief you’ve encountered in your life – Jesus has returned from death to give you forgiveness, hope, and healing. Amen, let’s pray.

Benediction

1 Corinthians 15:54-57 - “*When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

⁵ Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), March 31 devotional.