

The Garden: Mary's witness to the Resurrection

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[0 : 00] Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. 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.

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.

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, and stooping to look in, he saw that the linen cloths were lying there, but 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.

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.

[1 : 12] Then the disciples went back to their homes. And if you'd like to take up your Bibles, we're going to read together in John's Gospel, chapter 20, continuing from the verses that I read at the beginning of the service.

You'll find them, if you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, on page 906, page 906, I think. And John, chapter 20, at verse 11.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

And as she wept, she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

They said to her, woman, why are you weeping? She said to them, they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him. Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing.

[2 : 23] But she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher.

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. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord, and that he had said these things to her.

Just keep your Bibles open. On Good Friday, we looked at the witness of Mary Magdalene at Golgotha. Her witness to the cross of Jesus.

And this Easter Sunday morning, I want to look again at her witness, this time in the garden. Her witness and her testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. Before we get into that, I want to just be clear for all of us that John's gospel is very, very concerned with evidence from eyewitnesses like this woman, Mary.

[3 : 59] And also, along with the evidence, explanation of what that evidence actually means and signifies. If you turn over the page, the very last couple of verses there of John's gospel, John chapter 21, verses 24 and 25, you'll see that John's purpose is stated, and it's very clear.

These verses tell us that, first, John is a credible witness. We know that his testimony is true. And, of course, there were plenty still alive when John wrote to refute that witness if it weren't true.

Second thing they tell us is that he was a careful selector of material. Look at verse 25. The whole world, says John, couldn't contain all the books necessary to write everything about Jesus if it was to be recorded.

But John writes selectively, carefully, selecting his material for this one short book. And that brings us to the third thing, that John does that with a very clear purpose.

Turn back over again to chapter 20, and you'll see it, verse 30 and 31. He tells us his purpose. It's far too much for one book, he says, but these things are written for a clear purpose.

[5 : 20] John's no charlatan. All the signs he records here are evidence, honest testimony from honest people. Things that he says here are done in the presence of the disciples, of whom there were many, but evidence with a purpose, so that we would grasp the significance of it all.

The evidence is recorded, he says in verse 31, that you may believe. What does that mean? Well, it means recognizing the reality that Jesus of Nazareth was not just a man, not just a teacher, not just a healer, but as John says here, that he was the Christ, the Messiah, that he is the Son of God himself.

And this belief is the personal discovery, through Jesus Christ, of a relationship with the living God himself, the God who gives life, the God who is life.

And so, it says John here, it is to find life, life in his name. And for John, as you'll understand, if you read through his gospel, the life that he is always talking about, is the life that will come at the final resurrection, everlasting life.

But life, according to John, that can be entered into now, through trust in Jesus Christ. I am come, said Jesus, that you may have life.

[6 : 53] I am the bread of life. The words that I speak to you are spirit and life. These are the things that Jesus said.

And that's what John's book is all about. It's all about everlasting life. The life of the world to come. But life that can be found now, here, through belief, through personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. But it's important to realize that faith, belief, as far as John is concerned, is absolutely not a leap into the dark, a leap into the unknown.

For John, it's quite the reverse. It's a step into light and truth. It's the light of clear evidence. It's the light of testimony to things that happen before many witnesses that were passed on faithfully and truthfully.

John's book records many signs, many mighty works of Jesus that were publicly witnessed by dozens, hundreds, thousands even of people. But here in John 20, in recording the resurrection of Jesus, he records for us the sign of all the signs.

[8 : 08] The rising bodily of a human being from the dead. And it also is testified to by many witnesses. There is clear evidence. But again, along with the evidence, John gives a clear explanation.

He gives us the significance of it all. That if we accept it, it must drive us to honest belief. The faith that can and does lead to life everlasting in the name of Jesus.

So it's rather like in a courtroom where one by one all the witnesses are testifying and then in the end the judge or the prosecutor sums it all up and brings it all together into a case that is absolutely unmistakable.

And that's what we have here in John chapter 20. It's full of evidence. Four separate lots of witnesses see with their own eyes the physical evidence of the resurrection of Jesus.

First of all, as we read at the beginning, there's John and Peter in verses 1 to 9. They see the empty tomb. They see the grave clothes. And John at least gets it in verse 8.

[9 : 17] He sees and believes. Then there's Mary who herself sees the Lord and testifies to it in verse 18. And then later on, verse 20, there's the 11 disciples who also see the Lord.

And then last of all, of course, there's famous Thomas. Thomas is not just a doubter. Thomas is a hardened cynic, an absolute skeptic, an unbeliever. I will never believe, he says, unless I see it with my own eyes and touch with my own fingers.

But of course, as verse 27 records, Thomas did at last see and touch. And in fact, Thomas is the one who becomes the great believer, the great testifier in the whole of John's gospel.

Look at verse 28. my Lord and my God, he says. You see, it's all about evidence. And Jesus rebukes Thomas for rejecting perfectly good evidence that had been given to him in the honest testimony of these eyewitnesses.

And Jesus commends those who will come afterwards who won't be able to see with their own eyes the body of the risen Jesus because he will have ascended to glory. But blessed, says Jesus, verse 29, are those who have not seen and yet believed because they have believed testimony, evidence,

things seen and heard and honestly passed on by honest people.

[10:48] Passed on to people like ourselves today. That's why John wrote his gospel. That's why the writers of the New Testament wrote down what they would so that people like us who can't see the risen Lord Jesus because he's now in heaven so that we also can believe and find life in his name.

And so this whole chapter is full of vital evidence for Jesus' resurrection. We've only got time this morning to focus on one part, Mary's witness in the garden. And I want us to see how John shows through her eyes not just the evidence, not just the story of Easter, but the explanation, the explanation that makes her such a powerful message there in verse 18 that makes her message a gospel, good news for the whole world.

So in a moment after we've sung again we're going to come back and look and see how Mary's misery and Mary's misunderstanding wonderfully gives way to Mary's message of great joy. Well, turn back with me to John chapter 20 and let's look particularly now at verses 11 to 18. And in verse 11 we're met undoubtedly with Mary's misery.

It's one of the utterly authentic and rather lovely touches of the gospel witness that we see these little cameos of different characters around the cross of Jesus and also on Easter morning.

[12:29] And so here we have Mary Magdalene come early in the dark perhaps with others though they're not mentioned. And the very first time that Mary appears in John's gospel we noted on Friday is in fact in John 19 at the cross.

And here she is again at the tomb. Mary, a key witness to both Golgotha and Jesus' cross and in the garden to Jesus' resurrection. By the way, contrary to popular myth there's absolutely nothing in the gospels about Mary being a formerly immoral woman or a prostitute or anything like that.

There's certainly none of the nonsense that gets into Dan Brown's novels *The Da Vinci Code* and things like that. That's all complete fantasy. What we do know though from Luke's gospel is that Mary had been a very sick and troubled woman.

She had been possessed by demons and Jesus had healed her and freed her from that terrible affliction. In all probability also she was a woman of some wealth one of those who Luke's gospel chapter 8 tells us paid for and helped to support the ministry of Jesus and his disciples.

So very quickly obviously she had become a devoted follower of Jesus. And so you can imagine can't you her desolation her grief her sorrow on that first Easter Sunday morning.

[13:55] She had watched her master her healer her teacher she had watched him crucified his clothes fought over and divided among the soldiers.

She had heard him cry in dereliction from the cross and no doubt she had watched him. Perhaps she had even helped herself wrapping his body in grave clothes and laying him in the tomb.

Imagine the sorrow and imagine the fear Jesus alone had had the power to release her from the terrible destruction of her demon-possessed past.

But Jesus now was gone. He was dead. Who would protect her now? Would it be a return to life as it once was under that terrible tyranny?

Uncertainty, fear gripping her heart. And now to add to that agony even his body is gone.

[15:05] So she can't even be near the grave, near his body, near the last bodily remains of her Lord and her Liberator.

We know that agony, don't we? We see it when somebody perhaps is lost at sea or killed in an accident and there's not even a body for the grieving ones to grieve over.

That's one of the tragedies, isn't it, of that awful plane crash just the other day in the Alps. The body is just vaporized, gone. Not even a body to bury.

That's a terrible thing in the place of grief. And so verse 11, Mary stood weeping, tears of abject grief and misery.

And, you know, what we're seeing here is the awful misery of the unbeliever in the place of death. Mary has no hope here of resurrection.

[16:13] Verse 2 says that she assumed that the body had been stolen away by others. Verse 9 tells us that she didn't yet grasp the truth of the message of the scriptures that Jesus had to rise again.

So, clearly, she had no expectation at all that morning other than to come and honor the dead body of a dead Jesus. And she assumes that death is the end for him and for her.

And that's why she was weeping so very bitterly. Just like many people today. Most people today, perhaps. Think of the abject misery that we so often see in the crematorium or in the graveyard. Where there's no real hope at all in the face of death because there's no understanding of the message of the resurrection. There's no understanding of the hope that is found in Jesus Christ. So, there's weeping and wailing. There's just the inconsolable grief of those who grieve in ignorance. They don't have any hope. They don't have no hope or comfort in the pain of loss. [17 : 26] No solace when the open grave yawns hideously as that coffin is lowered down into the earth. No relief when there's the empty space in the bed beside you and it's so cold and so empty and so desolating.

That's how poor Mary felt. Here she is alone in her misery and her grief. And yet not alone because so many, many people all over the world today experience just exactly that.

The hopeless grief. So many have grieved like this through the years and so many will be grieving like this this very day. Full of misery, full of inconsolable sadness.

Because they too share Mary's misunderstanding. It's that misunderstanding that makes her grief so unbearable. It's that misunderstanding that we see being challenged and changed in verses 12 to 17 of our story, isn't it?

As poor Mary's groping in the darkness of that morning begins to see her grappling with facts that begin to dawn on her. First of all through the words of the angel and then the words of Jesus himself.

[18 : 50] It's the picture of a misunderstanding of a faltering seeker whose unbelief is rebuked by incontrovertible evidence of Jesus' resurrection.

But as yet hasn't really understood the full significance of what it actually means. And so into the darkness of her misery, her grief, her hopelessness comes evidence that Mary just can't actually deny.

even though she can't yet properly grasp its meaning, she doesn't understand it. It is an undeniable fact in front of her face. So first, verse 12, she sees the angels and they gently rebuke her.

Do you see? Why are you weeping? What could be more bizarre, more incongruous and out of place from the point of view of the angels than somebody weeping in the empty tomb of the Lord Jesus Christ who has just been raised from the dead?

It's an extraordinary thing to their eyes. And then verse 14, do you see she actually sees Jesus but she doesn't recognize him yet because he's the last person she's expecting to see alive.

[20 : 06] And verse 15, he also rebukes her. Why are you weeping? Don't be an unbeliever, Mary. That's what he's saying. Whom do you seek? Is that really all you thought of me?

Didn't you listen to all the times I told you about what must happen after my death? And then again, even after Jesus wonderfully reveals himself to her in that one word, Mary, wouldn't you have loved to see the look on her face at that moment?

Mary? Even then, when she had fallen on her knees and grasped his feet in a moment of joy, even then, Jesus has to rebuke her again.

Verse 17, do you see? No, don't cling on to me like that, Mary. You still haven't properly understood, have you? Things are not going back to just the way they were before.

This is not a going back, this is a going forward. Something totally new has happened. Yes, it is me. I am alive.

[21 : 16] I have risen. But you need to understand now what that means. And he tells her, I haven't yet ascended to my father, but I am risen from the tomb, and therefore I am on my way.

I am going. I am going to my father and to your father. And that is what you must go and tell these others. That is the message that you must bring them.

Not just that I have risen, you know that now, you have seen me, but what my rising from the dead means for you. You see, the evidence of Mary's eyes needs to be interpreted according to what Jesus has already told her and all his disciples, according to what the scriptures had always been saying.

And that alone is what makes this evidence into a gospel. That is what makes it into good news for human beings. That is what means Mary has witnessed the words of eternal life.

So you see, Mary's misery, her unbelieving hopeless grief, turns to groping for understanding as evidence faces her and rebukes her unbelief and her misunderstanding. And she begins to grapple with what she's seen.

[22 : 39] And as she does so, she's guided by what her ears hear in Jesus' own words. So that she does come to understand.

She gets it. And she realizes that this is far, far more wonderful than that just Jesus is back, that he's alive again.

She grasps that this is the beginning of something far, far greater. this is the beginning of everlasting life coming into our world of sin and death.

And that's why she does let go of Jesus. That's why she stops clinging to him in verse 18. And she goes to proclaim her message. The good news, the words of eternal life.

Well, we'll come back in a moment to look at Mary's message and understand exactly what it means. Once we've sung once again another Easter hymn, see he dies, but he lives and he comes.

[23 : 47] Well, let's take up the Bibles one last time and look again at this section together and especially at verse 18, which is Mary's message. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her.

Notice that Mary's message is more than just, I have seen the Lord. Her message is the evidence, but it's also the explanation of that evidence.

It's the significance of Jesus' resurrection. She is to tell them the things that Jesus himself had now made clear to her.

So what is the significance of these things that Jesus said? Well, it's there in verse 17. I'm ascending to my father and your father, my God and your God.

Now, you see, if you have read through John's gospel, you will understand that that little phrase is full to bursting with significance for Jesus' disciples. disciples. Because if you remember back to what Jesus had told the disciples in the upper room before his betrayal, Jesus had told them absolutely clearly what it meant that he was going now back to his father.

[25 : 17] Remember what he said? John 13 verse 36. Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, but you will follow me afterwards. that let not your heart be troubled.

Believe, trust in God, believe also in me. In my father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

And he said, I am the way and the truth and the life. No man comes to the father except through me. You see, if Jesus has now risen from the dead and now is ascending to his father, then it means wonderful, wonderful things.

Let me just mention at least three. First, it means that adoption in God's family is now possible and is now happening for all of his followers.

He's going to prepare a place in the father's house for his followers, for his disciples who are now his family. It means Jesus is bringing all his brothers and sisters home to God, his father and their father.

[26 : 40] The resurrection means adoption into God's family for all who trust in Jesus Christ. It's the promise of the very first chapter of John's gospel fulfilled to all who believed in his name.

He gave the right to be children of God, born not of the flesh or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but born of God. Go and tell that to my disciples, Mary, to my brothers.

That's what Jesus is saying. My resurrection means not going back to what we once had before. It means going on to much, much more. No longer will you just be my disciples, my followers, and I your teacher.

You will be my brothers and sisters for all eternity, heirs of the same father's house. That's why Easter is full of hallelujahs.

It's the declaration of the waiting father that his long lost sons are coming home. It's the command that the new robe and the ring and the fatted calf be brought out and the celebration of great joy begins.

[27 : 57] Because I am going to my father and your father. That's Mary's gospel message. And because it means the adoption, the coming home of God's sons forever, Jesus' resurrection secondly means life eternal begins now.

It means the coming of the Holy Spirit to inhabit our hearts by faith now. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Galatians.

Because you are sons, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying Abba, Father. See, it means the beginning of the absolute intimacy of relationship with God the father through the spirit of Jesus himself.

The spirit who comes because Jesus is now risen and is ascending to his father's right hand. Remember again what Jesus told his disciples in advance in the upper room? John chapter 16. Now I am going to him who sent me. And because I have said these things, sorrow has filled your heart.

[29 : 13] but I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away. But if I don't go away, the helper will not come to you. But if I go away, I will send him to you.

It's the Holy Spirit he's speaking about. And now says Jesus through Mary to the disciples, I'm going as I promised. And therefore I will send him to you.

That's the message to go and tell my brothers, Mary. And though it will be different, your relationship with me won't be the same as it was before, you won't see me soon any longer.

You won't be able to touch me and cling on to me in the flesh. It's to your advantage that I go.

Because now it will be greater, it will be better, it will be more wonderful.

Remember what Jesus had said again in the upper room? if anyone loves me, my father will love him and will come to him and we will make our home with him.

[30 : 19] We'll make our home with him forever through the indwelling within you of the Holy Spirit of God himself. You see, because the Holy Spirit will come through Jesus' resurrection and through his ascension, the life of heaven, the life of God himself, the life of the world to come, will break into this world now, from now on.

That's what Jesus is saying. He'll come into human lives and bring them to life with the everlasting life of the Spirit of God that can never be extinguished.

Because I live, Jesus had said, you also will live. So Jesus' resurrection means eternal life begun now for everyone who will receive the Spirit of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

And not only that, Jesus had told his disciples, because you live, others also will live through your testimony. Jesus promised the apostles in the upper room that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth, into all understanding of what Jesus' work was really all about, so that their minds would be opened and they would now have the authoritative, life-giving words of God himself in their gospel message for the world.

John 15, verse 27. When the helper, the counselor comes, the Spirit of truth, he will bear witness about me, and you also will bear witness, because you, you apostles, have been with me from the very beginning.

[32 : 07] Jesus going to the Father means that everlasting life comes now for all who will believe in the message that they proclaim throughout the whole world.

And for all who find that life, and therefore pass on that gospel life to others, they will see others also coming to live with the everlasting life of Jesus.

Remember, Jesus said, whoever believes in me, out of his heart will flow rivers of living in life-giving water.

That's what Jesus' resurrection means. A river of everlasting life is opened to the world through Jesus and through his Spirit bearing witness in the hearts of those who believe.

That's Mary's message. And finally, you see, Jesus' resurrection, therefore, means sure and certain hope for the future for all who believe.

[33 : 15] Not just the joy of adoption and welcome into Christ's family now. Not just the joy of everlasting life experienced now, beginning now through the Holy Spirit's witness.

But also, the sure and certain hope of our full and wonderful resurrection life, just like Jesus. With Jesus.

Jesus. On the last day, on the great day of judgment. Jesus said in the upper room, if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself so that where I am, you may be also.

Forever, he means. Tell that to my brothers, Mary. That's your message. That's what it means that I'm risen. That's what it means that I'm going now to the Father.

And that was Mary's message. And that's why Mary went from weeping to witnessing. Because the sheer hopelessness of death was broken for her forever by the hope of glory and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

[34 : 33] God. Friends, no other message, no other reality can ever turn the horror of the open grave into the hallelujah of an open heaven, an eternal home in the Father's house.

But that's Mary's message. The message of the one who witnessed firsthand the evidence, incontrovertible, of the resurrection of Jesus, which changed her life and changed the life of all the apostles and has changed the lives of countless millions the world over ever since then and still today.

Go to my brothers and say to them, I'm ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Christ is truly risen.

And that's what it means. And so it's right that today we sing hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Amen.