

John 20

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 August 2024

Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] Please turn back to John chapter 20, page 906, as we continue this series in John's Gospel. Lord willing, next two weeks we'll finish things out in chapter 21.

! I wonder how you feel at the moment about all of the cultural shifts that are going on around us. Cultural shifts that seem to have gathered speed. It feels like the thrust has been put down as the secular project is growing and gaining ground as institutions, whether it's an education or industry, airbrush Christianity out of their curricula and their culture.

How do you feel about that? How do you feel as Islam continues to grow in both size and influence? Political leaders advance their policies that undermine the institutions that any healthy society requires the institutions of marriage and family and local community.

And by the way, they tell us that it's going to cost us more in order for them to do that. How do we feel about all of this? The more important question actually is, how does God feel about this? It's His world.

How does God feel about these ways in which He is rejected? The psalmist tells us the answer in Psalm 2. The nations rage, the peoples plot in vain, the kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His anointed. He who sits in heaven laughs. The Lord holds them in derision. He laughs at all of this. He doesn't laugh at evil.

[1 : 44] He doesn't laugh at evil. He is appalled by wickedness. But He does laugh at every attempt, every opportunity that is taken to seek to overthrow Him. And He laughs because of what John tells us in chapter 20 this morning.

The kings of the earth, King Herod and the rulers, the Jewish ruling elite and the Roman governor Pilate, took counsel together against the Lord Jesus and they killed Him. Crucified, dead and buried. No more Jesus, they thought.

No more of this man with his claims to be the Son of God. No more of this man who is gathering a following that are a threat to political stability in the day. Crucified, dead, buried. Chapter 19, we saw that.

But we also saw that what that very wickedness managed to do was usher in the salvation of the world. God laughed because the best His enemies can do in the greatest act of evil and suffering that the world has ever seen, the cross of Christ, is arranged for your forgiveness.

And we know this because when Mary comes to the tomb on the first day of the week, the first Lord's Day, the tomb is empty. Jesus has been raised. Death could not hold Him. And this is the point that John is making in chapter 20 of his Gospel. And he does it by focusing us on two realities. Two points this morning. The first is this. He focuses us on Christ's absence. His absence. Verses 1 to 10. John really wants to get this across with the details that he includes. And he starts with the eyewitnesses.

[3 : 36] Verse 1, there's Mary Magdalene who thinks, verse 2, that the grave has been robbed. They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid Him. Some heartless person has come along and robbed the grave.

And it's totally reasonable that she would think that. Jesus was dead. She saw that. He was in the tomb. She saw that. She's back at that tomb and He's not there. Dead people don't get out of tombs. He must have been stolen.

She then runs to tell Peter and the other disciple, the beloved disciple who we know to be John, the author of the book. She goes to tell them what she's seen or not seen as it is. And they then run to the tomb for themselves.

She runs to them. They then run to the tomb. There's a lot of running going on. Verse 3, 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 He was going to tell them first. Why John needed the whole of Christian history to know that he was faster than Peter we don't know. We don't know. I guess history belongs to the winners.

It's my book. I'll write what I want. His point, however, is that Jesus is not there. But He points us, do you notice, to what is there.

[4 : 53] Have a look at verse 5. 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 cloth, but folded up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, okay, John, let it go. He also went in, and he saw and believed. We are shown the linen cloths in which Jesus had been wrapped, those are in the tomb.

It's not an empty tomb. It's a tomb with linen cloths in it. And the headpiece is separate from the rest because the head would have been wrapped with a different cloth, a face cloth. So when the body comes through the cloths and there's nothing there, they separate.

The head cloth rolls off, as it were, and is flat in another place. The scene is entirely consistent with the body having been raised through whatever it was wrapped in. Mary saw it.

Peter saw it. John himself saw it. Jesus is not there. Now, they're not properly clear yet exactly where he is.

[6 : 06] When it says that John went into the tomb and saw and believed, the sense of that verb is better taken as, he began to believe because, it says, for as yet they did not understand the Scripture.

To say, he went in, he saw and believed, because as yet he did not understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead. That doesn't follow. He began to believe because he had not yet fully understood the Scripture about his resurrection.

His understanding was unfolding as he needed to grasp maybe the testimony of Psalm 16, verse 10, you will not abandon my soul to shale or let your Holy One see corruption. Or perhaps Hosea 6, 2, after two days he will revive us on the third day, he will raise us up that we may live before him. 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 4, says that Jesus was raised according to the Scripture. This is what Peter and John had not yet fully grasped.

Now, we know, don't we, that the fact of the empty tomb is often challenged by people who don't want to believe the Christian story. Dead people don't rise from the dead.

[7 : 16] Therefore, Jesus can't have risen from the dead. Therefore, there must be an alternative explanation. And all kinds of things have been proposed for the last 2,000 years. Popular, the body was stolen by the authorities, or stolen and hidden by the disciples.

Now, there is zero evidence to suggest that either of these are possible. In fact, the evidence that we have suggests the opposite. If the authorities had the body, if they had stolen the body, and that was what Mary thought, actually, if they had stolen the body, all they would have needed to have done would produce the corpse, and the Christian faith would have stopped dead in its tracks there and then.

It would never have got off the ground. I bet the authorities wished they had the body so that they could have done that. But the whole thing stands or falls on whether Jesus was raised from the dead, and if they can prove with his body that he wasn't, it all evaporates.

The disciples clearly don't have the body. They don't know what's going on. They think the authorities might have stolen it. They're looking around. They don't come across as a very together group at this point, that they've maybe hatched a plan.

And apart from anything else, these disciples gave their lives for the message that Jesus was raised from the dead. They're not going to do that for a lie.

[8 : 40] They're simply not. I wouldn't take a paper cut for something I knew was a lie. Never mind. Give my life for it. And I don't think you would either if you're prepared to be honest.

Ricky Gervais, the British comedian, is well known for his vocal atheism. A number of years ago, I heard him criticizing Christianity because it rested on the miracle of the empty tomb.

Dead people don't come back to life. He said it in his kind of characteristic snare. And he's right. That's right. Normally that's the case. But Jesus, the Son of God, is no ordinary person.

And John has given eyewitness testimony that he did. How else could we know if not for eyewitness testimony? I would ask Ricky Gervais, was there a comedy series in Britain called The Office? Yes. How should I know that? Well, you can see it. What about the people that haven't seen it? That doesn't change the fact that The Office was a thing.

[9 : 42] Whether they've seen it or not, it was a thing. Oh, but they don't believe that David Brent was actually a character. How could they be convinced? People that saw The Office tell them about it.

And some will write it down that they've seen it. And people will read their testimony in years to come. The fact of The Office will only be a reality to people in 2,000 years. People will not be watching The Office in 2,000 years. Whatever YouTube thing we have 2,000 years from now, they won't be watching The Office. So people that have written about it, it will still have happened.

And the people that hear about it then will know because it was written down by eyewitnesses. That is how it happens. John wants us to see here, he writes as he does because he wants us to see that Christ is absent.

That is, when Jesus cried, it is finished. Three days earlier, it was really finished. Jesus has completed his mission from the Father.

[10 : 40] And as we said last week, as the second Adam in the second garden, verse 1, on the first day of the new week, he has inaugurated the new world, the new creation. What we need to see is that his absence, the fact of the empty tomb, declares the truth of the gospel.

Death really is defeated. If you go to the place of death, looking for death, you won't find it. John is saying, it's not there. He's not there. Death is dead. Love has won.

Christ has conquered. That's what we sing. That's the first thing John wants us to see. Christ's absence. But then he draws our attention.

Second point, to Christ's presence. Christ's presence. Mary has taken up with Christ's location. Where is he? The disciples go home, but she won't leave the tomb. She's overwhelmed.

She's weeping. She's worrying. And then verse 12, 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?

[11 : 45] She said to them, they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him. Still taken up with location. Where is he?

I don't know where he is. And then she turns around, and John tells us Jesus is standing in front of her. But verse 14, she doesn't know it's him. He then asks the same question as the angels.

Verse 15, 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.

Think of the great distress. If you've ever lost someone dear to you, someone close to you, and those days after the funeral, when you haven't slept, your head is spinning, it's emotionally been terrible.

There have been people coming and going, there have been plans to try and get the funeral and the burial sorted out. And the day after the funeral, the next couple of days after the funeral, you're thinking to yourself, did that really happen?

[12 : 55] Was that really real? Are they really gone? And you think, I don't want to see anybody. I just want to go to the grave. And she goes in all of this distress.

And he's not there. Some heartless soul, as I say, has taken the body. It's ramped up many times the sadness, the frustration, the grief.

And here she is face to face with Jesus. Face to face with the Lord that she thinks is absent. And she thinks he's the gardener. Perhaps he's taken the body, put it somewhere. And then he speaks, verse 16.

Mary. Now, we don't know what Tony took, but we can assume it was warm and tender. And immediately Mary knows it's Jesus. His sheep hear his voice.

Immediately she knows it's him. And she cries out, what must that have felt like? The shock, the wonder, the delight, the joy. Rabboni.

[14 : 07] I imagine it's a bit like, you know those videos that we see of dads who return from military service. And they come to surprise their children.

Whether it's at their school or something like that. And some, obviously, their wife knows. And there are other people that know. And they're filming. And they come in.

And they call their child's name. The child knows instantly. They stop. They turn around. And they run. And grab them. They know instantly their voice.

And they go in for the embrace. Well, John has shifted here from absence to presence. And what we're supposed to see in this personal meeting in the garden is an enacting of what the empty tomb has achieved.

You see, Mary's fixation with the physical location misunderstood that his absence was actually a sign that he was closer than he had ever been.

[15:09] Why? Because he had just on the cross destroyed every barrier that separated them. The gardener has come to tend the garden of his new world.

He is here. He is present with his disciples. And as with last week, the details that John includes here mean that he wants us to know that he is present in a particular way.

And he's present, in fact, in three particular ways I want to highlight this morning. The first is we're supposed to see here that he is present to save. Present to save.

That's why we're told about the angels in verse 12. Do you notice that? It's a strange reference, isn't it? Because the angels just simply ask a question that Jesus also asks a moment or two later.

And yet we're given this detailed description about their location in the tomb. And he, she saw two angels, verse 12, in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain. One at his head and one at his feet.

[16:09] One at the head, one at the feet. Now, why is that there? Well, it's because we've heard about angelic beings taking their position at either side of something significant in God's arrangement before.

Remember Moses in the Ark of the Covenant. Exodus 25, make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover. Make one cherub on one end and the second cherub on the other. Make the cherubim of one piece with the cover at the two ends.

The place between the two angels, the cherubim, was the place of propitiation. To be specific, it is the mercy seat. The place where God atones for sin.

The place where sin is dealt with. And so the careful description here of the place of the angels at the head and the feet, of the place where Jesus had been lying, is designed to portray the tomb as the Ark of the New Covenant.

Where Jesus has atoned for sin. And is now present in power to save. It's a picture of what he's just done on the cross.

[17:15] The rulers killed him. But in that death, the sin of the world was being dealt with. That's why the Lord laughs. The question for us is, have you received that forgiveness that he offers?

Have you put your faith in the risen Christ who is present to save? You can do that in your seat this morning. If you recognize that you have sinned against God and his world.

That you've lived your life on your terms in his world. And that he doesn't approve of that. That incurs his anger, righteous anger.

But that actually he has made a way for you to be reconciled. And it is through the work of his son. The one who died on the cross for our sins and who is raised for our justification.

He is present in power to save. Second thing John wants us to see here is that he is present by the Holy Spirit.

[18:22] When Mary realizes the Lord is in front of her, she wants to hold on to him. But Jesus tells her, verse 17, not to cling to him because he had to return to his father. He's promised that already. Do you remember in the farewell discourse?

He must return to the father in order to send his spirit. And he, his spirit, is the means by which Christ will be present in the new family that he is gathering, the church. So Jesus shows himself to his disciples and says, verse 22, Peace be with you.

As the father has sent me, even so I am sending you. And when he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. Now given all that John has been telling us, chapter 19, chapter 20, this makes perfect sense.

At the beginning of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, it is the Spirit of God who directs his activity in the world. He breathes and things happen. And here we are at the beginning of the new creation. So it is no surprise that the ongoing activity of God in the new world would be carried out through that

same Holy Spirit.

The last Adam, as the Apostle Paul calls Jesus, comes to his church as the life-giving Spirit. 1 Corinthians 15, 45. All that Christ has won for his people comes to us through the Spirit.

[19 : 39] But it is important for us to see here that the Spirit is not an extra gift to us from God, but a continuation and an expansion of the gift of the Son from the Father. God so loved the world that he sent his Son, and he also sent his Spirit as an expression of that same love.

The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. And Christ's command is that we receive his Spirit. Now this command came first to these Apostles and their foundational role as the newly created people of God, the new Israel, who are commissioned to declare the peace of God, verses 19 and 21, and the forgiveness of sins, verse 23.

But it also comes to us. And we receive the Spirit not by seeking out a particular experience, or by manifesting certain spiritual phenomena, whether that's falling over or speaking in tongues, or whatever manifestation is required by the people that say it is.

We receive the Spirit by surrendering our lives to God. To receive the Spirit is to receive Christ. Indeed, it is to receive the fullness of God the Holy Trinity in repentance for sin and faith in Him. The risen Christ, who is present to save, is present now by the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. He is present to save.

[21 : 11] He is present by the Holy Spirit. And thirdly, He is present for mission. For mission. This is why we're told about Thomas. See, we've just seen how Jesus chose the disciples to be eyewitnesses of His resurrection.

The purpose of that is that they would become witnesses for the church. And then the first person that they tell about the Lord, who hadn't seen Him in His risen state, refuses to believe.

They say, verse 25, Now, the eyewitness testimony from the disciples should have been enough for him to believe.

But it isn't. He refuses to believe on that basis and insists instead on this remarkably detailed list of requirements in order for him to believe that Christ was raised.

But then verse 26, The following Lord's Day, in Jewish way of reckoning time, both the first and last days are included. That's why it's eight days. It's the following Lord's Day.

[22 : 22] Jesus appears to Thomas and insists he does exactly what he had demanded. Verse 27, have a look. It's like he says, Go on then. Put your finger here. See my hands.

Put out your hand. Place it in my side. And then Jesus rebukes him. Do not disbelieve, but believe. Now, this phrase is a cumbersome phrase.

It's hard to translate because it's not that Thomas doesn't believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

We're told back in chapter 11 that he would be prepared to die for Jesus. Rather, what's going on here is he's acting in an unbelieving way.

He wants Jesus on his terms. He wants Jesus in the flesh, present with him. He doesn't want Jesus by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thomas doesn't need to be converted from an unbeliever to a believer.

He needs to shift his understanding from the old to the new covenant. A shift to the life of faith in the crucified Lord that has lived in the power of the Spirit.

[23 : 21] That's why he gets rebuked. He wants Jesus on his terms. But the penny drops, verse 28, My Lord and my God.

Now, how do we know that the penny drops? We know that the penny drops because he doesn't reach for Jesus physically. He does it verbally. He does it by a declaration, a confession of faith, a declaration of his adoration for the Lord.

The fact that Thomas was absent when Jesus appeared to the disciples enables John to use him as an example of how future disciples will come to believe. They won't see Jesus in the flesh, but would believe in Jesus on the basis of the testimony of the eyewitnesses.

Thomas failed in this regard at first, but then showed what faith looks like in his declaration of faith. Thomas is a model for us. And it shows us here how the mission of the church will advance.

Just as Jesus mediates the presence of the Father and is the one through whom the Father is known, so the disciples mediate the presence of the Lord through their testimony, which brings about faith through the work of the Spirit.

[24 : 35] The Lord who is present to save makes himself known through the Spirit and the testimony of the church proclaiming the gospel. That is how he becomes present in the world.

And that is how, verse 31, people believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing may have life in his name. The absence of Christ, the empty tomb, proves that everything that he's just accomplished on the cross has worked.

But he comes and is present with his people as the risen Christ, in power to save by his Holy Spirit, for the sake of the world. So here's the thing.

John's gospel is an invitation to you and to me to do what he says in verse 31, to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and therefore to receive life in his name.

To give yourself over to Christ in all things, every corner of your life, and in doing so, to participate in the victory that he has accomplished. To receive life that is truly life.

[25 : 46] Life in all its fullness. And when you have life in all its fullness, you can face what is going on in our culture, in our world, and join the Lord in laughing at his enemies.

Let's pray. Let's pray.