



John 20

It is Easter Sunday, the day on which, more than any other, we celebrate Jesus' resurrection. It is a day of celebration and joy but at first glance, the title of my message does not look very joyful and celebratory—Help My Unbelief. There's good reason for this and I think you will see how relevant it is to all of us.

John 19 ends with Jesus' burial. He didn't just swoon or faint. He was indisputably dead and his body was lovingly cared for and placed in Joseph's tomb. Chapter 20 opens the same way that chapter 19 ends—with no belief, no hope. Only sorrow and despair.

That's how the chapter starts but here's how it ends.

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.

John is called the Evangelist for good reason. He wrote this gospel for one reason—that we might believe in Jesus. All four gospels have this same goal to some degree but none of the other three are quite so explicit as John: "these are written so that you may believe." His purpose is in the purpose clause—so that.

Now this applies to everyone who would ever read John's gospel and be led to saving faith in Christ, from the day Jesus walked the earth until he comes again in glory. Countless people have been converted by reading this gospel, just as John had hoped. And again, it will continue until the last day. While John uses the good news about Jesus to bear witness to believers in the future, he is also telling us his own testimony and that of the disciples. At the beginning of the chapter, no one is truly a believer in Jesus. They were committed followers of Jesus, but we know that many other followers walked away, as did one of the twelve. But in chapter 20 we see the conversions of at least twelve people. In other words, we see their journey of faith. We see their testimonies. We see people wrestling with facts, emotions and experiences as they came to full

faith in Jesus. Most of us are already believers and this is how we came to faith. Obviously we did see the empty tomb, but we wrestled until we believed. And if you're not yet a believer, I pray this chapter will move you closer to belief.

So in one chapter we move from unbelief but it's important to realize that all of these people already knew that Jesus said he would rise from the dead. He plainly told them so.

²¹ And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, ²² saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Luke 9:21-22

This prediction occurred sometime in Jesus' last year. So when they woke up on Sunday morning, they should have believed. But they did not. It is easy to pick on the disciples because they did not see these things, but it is far better to simply see them in their journey. How many times did we hear the gospel before we believed, right? So rather than critique their struggle it is better to be encouraged by their struggle. Does that make sense?

The story starts with a very important woman, Mary Magdalene. Mary is the first person to see the empty tomb and the first person to see the resurrected Jesus. Christians are told that we are misogynists—women haters. Or they say that the Bible is hopelessly stuck in the gender roles of the first century. First of all, Jesus was never stuck anywhere. He chose twelve men as disciples because he created men and women to have different roles while still equal in essential importance. Because that is true, it is all the more wonderful that a woman got to experience the empty tomb first and see Jesus first. Believe me, that was no accident. Jesus was intentionally elevating women in general and Mary in particular.

Mary went to the tomb to bring additional spices. She was still mourning and still worshipping. She was the first to see the empty tomb but rather than move her to belief in Jesus' resurrection, it freaked her out. She immediately went back and told the disciples that "they have taken the Lord out of the tomb."

Here's where we need to stop and consider how Matthew describe this same scene. Matthew tells us that there was a violent earthquake and then an angel moved the stone. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead."

So if Mary was told that Jesus had risen from the dead, why did she go back and tell the disciples that someone had carried the body away? There are two possibilities. The Option 1 is that she did hear the announcement from the angel but did not believe it. Option 2 is that she left before the angel announced it to the other women. I prefer Option #2 because it rings more true to me. If she had heard the angelic announcement of Jesus' resurrection, wouldn't she have mentioned that fact to the disciples? The angel specifically said to tell the disciples that "Jesus has risen from the dead." It seems inconceivable to me that she would have withheld that information and instead just told the disciples that someone had taken the body.

That's the beauty of having more than one eye-witness and more than one gospel. Skeptics love to point out that the gospels don't always agree on small details like this. But in reality, these differences actually strengthen the reliability of the story. First of all, if all of the gospels were exactly the same at every turn, first of all, they would be redundant and second of all, the skeptics would say that the four gospels were obviously just copied from one another. Second, the differing details are indications of multiple eye-witness accounts.

Less than two weeks ago, Danny Green witnessed a head on collision on Hwy 35 when he was coming home from a CRU meeting. A drunk 19-year old kid driving at least 80 miles an hour tried to pass Danny and the driver in the oncoming lane had zero reaction time before the two cars violently crashed. Amazingly, no one was killed in that accident.

Jodie gave me permission to share a conversation they had yesterday about the accident.

This is probably not of interest as you share about Danny as a witness to the accident. But, this morning Danny and I were talking about the accident he witnessed. He said the cars had to be inches from him or even hitting him, but he feels like the only way to describe it is that there was a shield around him. He also had a peace that he and the car would be fine.

It's fascinating because the day it happened, I was praying for our boys, that the Lord would shield them from evil and danger. I mentioned 1 Peter 1:5 in my praying which refers to God's elect who are "shielded by God's power" and then sang the song "Thou, O Lord, Art a Shield about me (us), your my(our) glory and the lifter of my head." (from Ps 3:3). Danny said it was awkward explaining to the sheriff what happened because he knows he should have been IN the accident.

Danny was clearly an eye-witness to the accident. Assuming there are multiple eye-witnesses to the same accident, will all of their stories agree word for word? Of course, each will be a little different. Any detective will tell you that when two stories agree on every small detail, that's when you can't believe them because they prepared their stories in advance. That's the way it is with the gospels. The difference in details lends not less credibility but more credibility. Not only does each gospel writer have a different eye-witness account, each one has a slightly different purpose for sharing certain events and leaving others out.

Remember, John is telling faith stories in his gospel. His gospel was written last—about 80 AD, so he knew all about the angel announcing that Jesus was alive. But that's not the story he chose to tell. He is telling the faith stories of twelve people in this chapter and for him, the angelic announcement was not relevant.

We'll get back to Mary but here's when Peter and John get involved. As soon as Mary said the body had been moved, impetuous Peter immediately started running to the tomb. The distance from their location to the tomb was about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile. You could walk it comfortably in about 15 minutes. An elite runner could cover the distance in four minutes. I doubt that John was an elite runner, but he was younger than Peter, so he got to the tomb first. But John hesitated Peter still went in first and saw the linen clothes and face cloth. Nothing is said of Peter's reaction, though

Luke records that he went away marveling at what he had seen. However, in John's reaction we get our first conversion of the story. He "went in, and he saw and believed." Such a simple phrase for something so profound.

What did John believe? At that moment he believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. But how? How did he believe this before he had seen Jesus alive? The key is verse six and seven. "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." Out of the four gospel reports in regard to the most important event in Jesus' life and therefore in all of human history, only John tells us about the linen cloths and folded face cloth? Why? Because this was the tipping point got his faith. He saw and believed. He immediately knew that if someone had stolen the body, they would not have removed the grave clothes and they certainly would not have folded up the face cloth. For John, this was just as good as seeing Jesus alive. This was the very moment that John became a full believer in Jesus. Every time he told his testimony to someone—and he lived to be an old man, so he told it a lot—it would have included this detail about the folded graveclothes. I saw and I believed.

Now you might wonder about verse nine—"for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead." John added that line so he is obviously not saying that he didn't actually believe that Jesus was raised from the dead but rather at that moment, no one understood it from the Scriptures. It wasn't until later that they understood OT scriptures like Psalm 16:10 foretold Jesus' resurrection. "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption." Nevertheless, this was John's moment of belief and he recorded it for everyone to see for all of time.

And I think his personal testimony here in verse eight makes verse 31 all the more meaningful. "...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." He could have added, "That was me, folks. That's exactly how it happened to me." That was as much an ending to his personal testimony as it is a call for all of the nations to believe in Jesus Christ as the risen Savior. But then, that's true for our testimony as well, right? Our testimony speaks about how we came to saving faith in Christ but it is also a call for others to follow in our footsteps and consider the claims of Christ.

Now we get back to Mary. For some reason, she hung around the tomb after Peter and John left. Amazingly, she did not seem to be afraid when two angels suddenly showed up. Even then she was still in a state of unbelief when she told them, "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." Her crying also demonstrated her lack of belief. She was still mourning Jesus' death and not considering the possibility he was alive.

Just as suddenly, Jesus is standing next to her. Verse fifteen is just amazing to me. "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." I love that—"supposing him to be the gardener." Remember the men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24? They did recognize Jesus either until he revealed himself. And they spent hours with him! He was the same Jesus with the same body but his glorified body was different enough that he was only recognized when he wanted to be. But

you have to admit the irony in her confusion. Imagine thinking that the Creator and savior of the world was a gardener.

When the Moody Chorale was here, I introduced myself to an older couple that was sitting in the lobby during set up. I asked them if they were parents of one of the students. They explained that they didn't have any students in the choir, they were just friends of the chorale and like to travel with them. At the end of the concert, one of the students introduced him as the Vice-President and Provost of Moody Bible Institute. I grabbed him on his way out and said, "Ya know, I'm not gonna say you lied to me, but..." 😊 He was a VIP but he was flying under the radar. Jesus was the ultimate VIP and he was also flying under the radar.

Jesus asked her two great questions. "Woman, why are you weeping?" and "Whom are you seeking?" These are incredible questions. Jesus is doing several things at once here. First of all, he is comforting Mary by asking about her emotional state. But he also is drawing out her unbelief and leading her to be very specific about what she wanted. Her tears and her question about the body make it clear she did not yet believe. Jesus did not say, "Why are you blubbering lady? Don't you remember when I said this very thing would happen? I said I would be arrested and killed and raised to life on the third day. You're like two matzas short of a full deck, aren't you?" No, he didn't do that. He was very gentle with her through this entire conversation.

Likewise with the second question. "Whom are you seeking?" The angel also asked Mary why she was crying but Jesus took it a step further. "Whom are you seeking?" He was drawing her out her faith. He was testing her to see if she could possibly believe that Jesus could be raised from the dead. That's when John tells us that Mary thought Jesus was the gardener. She thought maybe he had taken Jesus body away somewhere. I don't know why someone would even do that but she was desperate for help. She wasn't quite there yet, was she? She required more evidence. But so did everyone else.

But then with a single word, he revealed himself. "Mary." Did she finally recognize her voice? Was she shaken out of her stupor because this stranger actually knew her name? Did Jesus suddenly reveal himself more fully? Or perhaps it was all three at once. But whatever it was, Mary instantly recognized Jesus. I love how DA Carson expresses that moment.

Whatever the cause of her blindness, the single word *Mary*, spoken as Jesus had always uttered it, was enough to remove it. The good shepherd 'calls his own sheep by name ... and his sheep follow him because they know his voice'. Anguish and despair are instantly swallowed up by astonishment and delight.¹

Right there we just witnessed Mary's faith explode to full belief. She immediately went back to the disciples with a new testimony in hand. "I have seen the Lord."

This was the most important day in human history as Jesus slowly revealed himself to the disciples and Mary. He could have demanded immediate worship but instead, he was leading each one slowly and gently toward belief.

Matthew tells us that Jesus fulfilled a prophecy in Isaiah, part of which read,

a bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not quench,
until he brings justice to victory;
and in his name the Gentiles will hope.” (Matthew 12:20-21)

Mary and the disciples were bruised reeds and smoldering wicks. They followed Jesus for three years only to see his life snuffed out. Heartbroken does not begin to describe what they felt like. His miraculous resurrection quietly broke onto the scene but with each interaction, he did not break their bruised reeds and he did not quench their soldering wicks.

Look what he did with Thomas! We call him doubting Thomas but that’s not quite right. He should be called “unbelieving Thomas.” He said, “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.” I will not believe. That is a very strong confession. Most of the people in the world, if they were honest, would say the same thing.

But Jesus was incredibly gentle with him as well. The law says that a matter can be established by two or three witnesses. Thomas had the ten most reliable witnesses in his fellow disciples and yet he refused to believe. Jesus could have castigated him for that but instead he showed him his hands and side, as he did with the other ten. Jesus did not tell Thomas to stop doubting. He said, “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Just like Thomas himself said, his problem was not a little doubt. It was absolute unbelief. Thomas was a bruised reed and a smoldering wick and Jesus handled him as such.

You and I are bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, aren’t we? Our faith is often so weak. We believe but we need help in our unbelief. If you have yet to place your faith in Christ, know that Jesus is compassionately calling your voice. He is asking, “Whom do you seek?”

And for believers, we need to remember that all of our behaviors are determined by our beliefs. All of our sins, worries and fears can be traced back to false belief and unbelief. We are bruised reeds and smoldering wicks. But he is patient with us. Calling us to a deeper faith with himself.

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April 21, 2019

ⁱ Carson, D. A. (1991). [*The Gospel according to John*](#) (p. 641). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.