

## Surprise!

John 20:1-18

### Introduction

A family was watching the life of Christ film entitled, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. One of the children in the family was deeply moved. As Jesus journeyed to Calvary, tears rolled down her cheeks. She was absolutely silent until after Jesus had been taken down from the cross and put into the tomb. Then, she suddenly grinned and shouted, “Now comes the *good* part!”

Now comes the good part! Indeed it does!

After several sermons on the agony of Christ’s crucifixion, it is wonderful to come to the good part – for without the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, there would be no “good part;” there would be no “good news”.

### The Resurrection – The Basis for our Faith

For one thing, the resurrection is the foundation, or basis, for our faith.

#### Without the Resurrection

Let me give a list of what we would have without the resurrection.

#### The gospel would be meaningless

1. First, the gospel would be meaningless.

Look at verses 1 and 2 of I Corinthians, chapter 15.

*Now I make known to you, . . .*

(or, “I draw your attention to,” like a teacher whose students are told to, “Focus here.”)

*. . . the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.*

Paul is saying, “Hold fast to these cardinal truths, otherwise, believing will be emptiness; a mere religious exercise amounting to nothing.”

What are we to hold on to? Continue to verses 3 and 4.

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day[!]. . .*

Just how important is Christ’s resurrection to the gospel? Paul wrote in Romans, chapter 10, verse 9,

*. . . if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved*

#### Forgiveness of sins would be hopeless

2. Secondly, without the resurrection, forgiveness of sins would be hopeless.

Look again at I Corinthians, chapter 15, and skip to 17.

***and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.***

It was not enough for Jesus to die for our sins, He had to rise from the dead – proving that His payment for our sins had been accepted by God.

The empty grave was God's receipt – the payment had been accepted!

### **Our present life would be joyless**

3. Thirdly, without the resurrection, our present life would be joyless.

Continue to verses 18 and 19 of I Corinthians, chapter 15.

***Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.***

In other words, you cannot really enjoy life until you are ready to experience death. And you are not ready to experience death until you have been saved by the conqueror of death – the resurrected Christ.

That makes sense. I would imagine that, if you were told you were going to die tonight at 10 p.m., and you had no hope for life beyond; you had never heard of Jesus Christ; you had no knowledge of a future heaven, what kind of mood would you be in right now? How about at five minutes to 10 p.m.?! I guarantee, you would be lousy company.

According to Scripture, if Christ had not destroyed death, you could not enjoy life.

Paul says, in effect, that if Christ was good for us only until He died, then we are to be pitied.

How I pity a man like Thomas Jefferson, a brilliant co-author of our own Declaration of Independence. He disbelieved anything miraculous, as did many intellectuals of his day and ours. He cut them from his Bible and, upon his death, his cut up version of the gospels was published. It was called, *The Jefferson Bible*. It ended with the last words of John, chapter 19, verse 42,

***Therefore on account of the Jewish day of preparation, because the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.***

That was the end of the verse, the chapter, the book; the end of the Bible. What joyless despair.

### **Godly living would be fruitless**

4. Fourthly, without the resurrection, godly living would be fruitless.

Turn to John's recording of Jesus' words, in chapter 14 of that gospel account. Look at verse 12.

***Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father.***

Skip to verses 16 through 17a.

***And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth . . .***

Skip to verse 26.

***But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.***

Did you notice the condition for the coming and indwelling of the Spirit?! The resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. If He goes up, the Spirit will come down. If He does not go up, the Spirit will not come down – and the divine Comforter, who will build into our lives the fruits of love, joy, and peace, will be just another empty promise from just another false, dead Messiah.

No wonder Paul wrote, in I Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 3b through 4a – and this is the heart of the good news,

***. . . that Christ died for our sins . . . and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day . . .***

### **Our future lives would be emptiness**

5. Lastly, without the resurrection, our future lives would be emptiness.

Look back a few verses to John, chapter 14, verses 1 and 2. We have studied this passage in detail, but let me make another point or two in relation to the resurrection of Christ.

***Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.***

Let us drive the point home – if Jesus Christ was lying to his disciples in these verses, He is lying to us about the future. Whatever He said He would do after

His resurrection, is obviously not being done if He is still dead!

One other point – if Christ did not rise again, He cannot return again. Continue to verse 3.

***And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.***

Jesus makes it very clear that He is our passport and our transportation! If He did not ascend to the Father, then He cannot return again and take us to heaven. In fact, the whole concept of heaven is now up for grabs too!

I still laugh every time I hear the well known story of the paratrooper who was making his first jump. It was essential, at twenty thousand feet, to place total trust in the instructor – for fear usually took control. As the paratrooper stood in the doorway of the plane, ready to jump, the instructor shouted, “After you jump, count to ten slowly, then pull the chord – your chute should open. If it doesn’t, count to five and pull the emergency chord – it never fails, your parachute will open. When you reach the ground, there will be a truck waiting for you.”

So, he jumps, counts to ten rather quickly, and pulls the chord. Nothing happens. He quickly counts to five and pulls the emergency chord. Nothing happens. As he plummets past his fellow soldiers, who are floating earthward, they hear him say, “Yea, and I’ll bet that truck won’t be down there either.”

He has every reason to doubt. The first things have not happened, so why should this poor fellow believe the last thing will happen?!

Do you understand what is at stake? If there is no resurrection, then there is no gospel, no forgiveness of sins, no present joy, no future hope.

## **The Resurrection – The Battle Continues!**

There is one more thing I will mention, and Dr. David Strauss, an unbelieving skeptic, even acknowledged that, “the resurrection is decisive for the whole view of Christianity.”

### **Christ’s Tomb**

Now, because the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the critical point which separates Christianity from everything else, and which validates Christ’s claims,

there has been, and still is, a battle over this great doctrine.

### **Occupied**

There are scholars, so called, who speculate that the grave of Christ is still occupied. The name of one book on this subject, that would be fascinating reading for you, by one of my favorite apologetic authors, is, *The Resurrection Factor*, by Josh McDowell.

There is the belief that Jesus’ tomb is unknown or that the wrong one was identified. This would mean that the women went to the wrong tomb, Peter and John ran to the wrong tomb, the Jews went to the wrong tomb, the Roman guards were stationed at the wrong tomb, and Joseph of Arimathea forgot which tomb he had put Jesus in, even though it was a new tomb and he was the owner.

Other theories include the spiritual resurrection, which says that a ghost came out; a spiritual vapor Christ – who, amazingly, was able to eat fish later, and show his hands and feet to doubting Thomas.

Then, there is the scholarly hallucination theory. This is best explained by J. M. Allegro’s book, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*. In this book, he alleges that Jesus was originally a code name for an ancient hallucinogenic mushroom that was used by people who were called Christians. They ate the mushrooms and had the same hallucinations. Frankly, I think Mr. Allegro ate one too many mushrooms.

I like what Paul Althaus wrote, from Germany’s University of Erlangen,

*The resurrection could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact.*

### **Empty**

Then there are the theories that believe the tomb was empty.

### **Natural explanation**

One such theory is that the body was stolen by the disciples. It would be amazing, when Peter was too cowardly to speak for a living Jesus, and nine other disciples fled the scene in fear, that now he and the others would become courageous martyrs by the

fact that they have a dead Jesus hidden away somewhere.

So then, was His body moved by authorities? Well, all they had to do was produce the body and the case against Christianity would have been undeniably closed.

Dr. Cassels writes about theorists. I love this statement. Follow this carefully.

*The amazing thing about all these theories is that they accept as much of the recorded gospels as they find convenient, then ignore or repudiate other parts of the same documents which contradict their notions.*

Let me give an example. I have had different people say to me, “I don’t believe there is such a thing as hell.”

I always respond by asking, “Do you believe in a heaven?”

“Oh yes,” they often say.

“Good. Where did you learn about heaven?”

“The Bible,” they respond.

“That’s right. And, did you know that the Bible refers to hell more than it does to heaven? Now how is it that anyone, who lives nearly two thousand years after the Bible was completed, can say that what it says about heaven is true, but what it says about hell is false?”

My friend, the record of Scripture is clear – Jesus Christ is alive, and He can forgive your sins and give your life purpose and fruitfulness and take you home to heaven one day. But, all of that hinges upon John, chapter 20.

### **Supernatural**

Let us find out what it says! Look at John, chapter 20, verse 1.

*Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.*

Now, if John’s biography of Christ were an ordinary biography, there would be no chapter 20. Death, burial – finished! But Jesus was no ordinary man!

## **The Resurrection – The Biblical Case**

As I rehearse the biblical case for the resurrection, we need to understand, from John’s gospel, that John is recording eyewitness accounts. Therefore, as in any courtroom case, what the eyewitness saw is of utmost importance. You could circle the words related to “seeing,” eight times in the first 18 verses of this chapter.

### **Three encouragements to believers – challenges to unbelievers**

He makes special mention of three observations that he believed would be sufficient to encourage the faith of the believer and to challenge the faith of the unbeliever. Remember, both people, then and now, are exercising great faith.

#### **Mary saw that the stone was moved away**

1. Observation number one is, Mary saw that the stone was moved and thrown off track.

According to verse 1, Mary saw something rather unusual – something that our English language does not describe nearly as vividly as the Greek language.

Now, you need to understand that the customary burial cave would have a groove dug along the entrance with a declining angle. A large circular stone would be cut and moved by many men, or with the help of pulleys and donkeys, until it stood on its side in the groove above the entrance. Then, a wedge, or smaller rock, would be used to keep the large stone from rolling into position before they were ready. It was common for such a stone to weigh as much as one ton.

Matthew tells us, in chapter 28, verse 2, that an angel moved the stone away. Mark’s record informs us, in chapter 16, verse 3b, that the women, who were with Mary, were discussing, among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the *entrance* to the tomb?”

Now, John uses an interesting word in verse 1 – it is the Greek word, “airo,” which literally means, “separated from”. Arndt and Gringrish’s lexicon translates this verb, “to pick something up and carry it away”.

The amazing thing that they would all see is that the stone was not simply rolled up the incline and then, wedged so that it would not roll back down, it was rolled up and away from the entire cave and

separated by some distance, as if a mighty push had dislodged it from its groove.

Luke's gospel, in chapter 24, verse 2, also uses a compound word that means that the stone was rolled so far up a slope that it was separated a distance from the tomb.

There had been a display of strength! That one to two ton stone had been thrown aside by divine strength.

And, do not ever forget that the stone was thrown aside like some pebble that Sunday morning, not to let Jesus out, but to let the world in – to see that, indeed, the tomb was empty!

Almost empty, that is. Jesus had left something in the tomb that would further confirm something supernatural had taken place.

Let us make a second observation. Have your pencil ready to underline three words, related to "seeing," in John, chapter 20, verses 3 through 8.

*Peter therefore went forth, and the other disciple, and they were going to the tomb.*

*And the two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter, and came to the tomb first;*

*and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in.*

*Simon Peter therefore also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he beheld the linen wrappings lying there,*

*and the face-cloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.*

*So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb entered then also, and he saw and believed.*

### **Peter and John saw that the graveclothes were undisturbed**

2. My second observation is simply this, Peter and John *saw* that the graveclothes were undisturbed.

Three times and with three different Greek words, the way is described in which John and Peter saw the evidence that was left behind.

### **"blepo" – "a casual glance"**

In verse 5a, it says,

*and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there . . .*

The word "saw" is from the Greek word, "blepo," which means, "a casual glance".

### **"theoreo" – "to observe carefully"**

John peeked in and saw the graveclothes and then, waited for Peter. Peter comes huffing and puffing and does not stop to peek in. Verse 6b tells us that he,

*. . . entered the tomb; and he beheld the linen wrappings lying there*

I would imagine that Peter and John are catching their breath – and, while there in the tomb, Peter is staring at the clothes. This word is the Greek word, "theoreo," which means, "to observe carefully". This word gives us the English word, "theorize," which means, "to look closely; to visually dissect".

Just what is Peter looking closely at? What does he observe?!

Well, look back at verse 6b again and verse 7.

*. . . and he beheld the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.*

This is an incredible sight! I will tell you why.

Henry Latham, at the turn of twentieth century, documented eastern burials that went all the way back to the time of Christ. His documentation matches perfectly with John's description.

Latham observed that the bodies were wrapped in linen cloths in such a manner as to leave the face, neck, and upper part of the shoulders bare. The upper part of the head would be covered by a cloth that had been twirled about the head, much like a turban.

As the body was wrapped, the overlapping edges of the linen would be coated with spices, some dry and some made from a gummy, sticky substance that would cause the linen to stay in place. Remember, nearly one hundred pounds of spices were used on Jesus!

The end result would look a lot like the way our imagination pictures an Egyptian mummy. The only difference would be that the face would not be

covered, but the head would be wrapped with a covering that looked like a turban.

Is that how Jesus was prepared? Let us read again verses 6b and 7.

*. . . and he beheld the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.*

The graveclothes were not disheveled and disarranged. They had not been torn apart by a resuscitating Lord; they had not been ripped off by grave robbers. They were lying there, literally, still in their folds.

After three days and nights, the spices had begun to harden. When the disciples entered the tomb, they were struck immediately, by what one writer described, “the graveclothes, in the form of a body, slightly caved in and empty – like the empty cocoon of a caterpillar.”

Imagine yourself stepping inside the tomb and seeing the linen and, just a few inches away, the headpiece. Now, if you had been in there at the moment in which Jesus was raised from the dead, would you have seen Jesus stir, struggle, sit up, and unwrap his linen burial clothes?! No, that would have been a resuscitation, not a resurrection, and the linen would have been scattered everywhere.

Had you been in the tomb at that moment, you would have seen Jesus one instant, and in the next, the Lord’s body would disappear and the grave clothes would shrink some, leaving the linen looking like an empty cocoon after the butterfly has flown away.

**“eido” – “to see and to comprehend”**

That is why verse 8 is so powerful.

*So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb entered then also, and he saw and believed.*

This third reference to “seeing” is the Greek word, “eido,” which means, “to see and to comprehend”. No wonder – seeing that empty shroud would make a believer out of just about anyone.

A casual look; a theory; understanding belief – ladies and gentlemen, how do you see Christ’s empty tomb?! You are not there physically, but you are listening to the inspired record of evidence. How do you see that almost empty tomb?!

- Do you give it a casual glance? – “Oh yea, it’s empty . . . but it hasn’t made a difference in my life.”
- Are you in the process of theorizing? – You are interested, curious, but still undecided.
- Or, do you see with understanding through the eyes of faith? – Do you believe?

### **Mary saw the Lord and was the first to tell**

3. Observation number three is, Mary saw the Lord and was the first to tell.

Continue in John, chapter 20, and look at verses 10 through 15.

*So the disciples went away again to their own homes.*

*But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb;*

*and she beheld two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying.*

*And they said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.”*

*When she had said this, she turned around, and beheld Jesus standing there, and 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, . . .*

(It is hard to see through tears isn’t it?)

*. . . she said to Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”*

Can you pause long enough to feel with Mary? This whole paragraph is overflowing with her sorrow and love. She had come back to the tomb, after taking her message to Peter and John. Then, she must have been left behind in their race to the tomb, so that, by the time she got there again, they were gone. So she stands there alone, weeping, or literally, sobbing. She was so overwhelmed with grief, that she was not even startled by the presence of angels and she did not recognize Jesus, as she said, “Just tell me where my Lord is . . . please.”

Jesus first responded to Mary, in verse 15, by calling her, “woman”. But, in verse 16,

***Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher).***

Now, evidently Mary hugs Jesus. Most likely, she falls at His feet and clutches them, as her body shakes with joyful sobbing.

You know, when I see Jesus, I am not quite sure what I will do – neither are you. Will we say “Hello!”; shake His hand; give Him a hug; will we fall on our face; hug His feet? I do not know. But, what a wonderful thing that will be, when our faith is exchanged for a face-to-face meeting with our Savior!

Continue to verse 17.

***Jesus said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”***

At first this struck me as a cold rejoinder to Mary’s joy.

D. A. Carson, a Greek scholar, has taken all the nuances of this verse, in its original context and language, and has expanded the translation to read,

*Stop holding on to Me as if I were about to disappear permanently, for I am not yet ready to ascend to My Father. This is a time for joy and sharing the good news, not for clutching Me as if I were some private dream-come-true. Stop clinging to Me, but go and tell My brothers that I am in the process of ascending to My Father and your Father . . . I want them to know the good news too.*

You might notice that Jesus does not say, “I’m returning to our Father and our God,” but “My Father and God” and “your Father and God.” While there is shared intimacy, Jesus Christ has something we do not have.

Jesus has a unique relationship to His Father and God by means of His divine nature. We have a special relationship to our Father and God by means of divine grace.

So, Mary is the first person to dry her tears for joy!

I find it interesting that the first witness of the resurrection of Christ was a woman. According to the custom of Christ’s day, a woman was not allowed to

present evidence in a court of law. The rabbinical teaching of that day is summarized by the cruel, uncaring belief that, “it is better that the words of the Law be burned than be delivered to a woman.”

It will be Christianity that will give women dignity and honor. It will be the teachings of Christ’s apostles that will pick up women from under the sandals of men and cause them to be heirs together with Christ. While the roles of women and men in the church are different, the value of women and men to the cause of Jesus Christ is absolutely the same.

It is interesting that the first person to see the resurrected Christ and be told to go and testify to others was not a man, but a woman. Why?! Perhaps this was God’s way of saying, “This is a message, not of Law, but of grace.”

The Savior was alive!

Did you notice that He did not rise from the dead and then, march into the temple to confront the hypocritical, religious leaders – see to it that Caiphaz and Annas were royally embarrassed and then exiled? He did not make a mad dash to the praetorium and say to Pilate, “I told you I was telling the truth.”

He did not stand in the center of Jerusalem and bring down a plague on all those who had earlier shouted, “Crucify Him, crucify Him.”

He does not do that today, to all those who scoff and reject.

Instead, He met a woman whom, years earlier, had been a demon possessed woman of the streets, and He had healed and forgiven her. Now, He calls her by name and tells her to go and tell the others. What better person to tell the news that the day of grace had come?

A pastor, named Ed Ross, told the story of his three-year-old daughter, Nicole, who was anxious for Easter to come. Nicole had picked out a new dress and her mom had given her a new white bonnet. As they stopped at a store to buy a new pair of shoes to go with her outfit, she once again said, “I can’t wait for Easter, Daddy!”

He asked her, “Do you know what Easter means, honey?”

She replied, “Yes sir.”

“Well, what does Easter mean?”

In her own sweet, three-year-old way, she raised her arms and, with a big smile on her face, said, “Surprise!!”

From the human perspective, what better word could sum up the meaning of the empty tomb?

“Surprise! Surprise death! Surprise sin! Surprise weeping disciples! Surprise modern mankind, He’s alive!”

Will you see Him and believe? And if you have believed, will you tell the news to someone else?

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/12/1995 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1995 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.