

The Tomb Is Empty!

John 20:1-10

Call: Ps 22:22, 24 (2nd person), 27-28 (NLT)

Scripture: Heb 12:1b-2 (ESV)

I. Introduction

Today we continue our studies in the Gospel of John, a series I've titled "Come and See."

Today, I invite you to *come and see* that it is finished, but it has not ended. It is finished, but it has not ended. John's Gospel continues after Jesus is dead and buried, implying that death does not have the last word.

Over the years, Adidas has run a series of commercials for their athletic shoes involving several international soccer stars. In these commercials, they've included stars such as Messi and Ronaldo and Neymar and Kaka and Beckham, and I think James Garcia was in one too. And, in general, the commercials begin with some reflective words about each star, then you see some hot dog moves, which soccer players are known to do. Eventually, the ads end with an amazing goal being scored, then the caption comes up: "Impossible is nothing." "Impossible is nothing."

I believe that's an accurate description of our passage today, a passage about that first Easter morning. "Impossible is nothing" for our God!

John gives us four resurrection scenes in his Gospel: Sunday morning, Sunday evening, one week later and then later still near the Sea of Galilee. We will spend 2 weeks, this week and next week, on that first Sunday morning, then one week each for the other three scenes. In the springtime when we celebrate Easter, we only get one week to explore the resurrection, but this fall, we get five full weeks to soak in the resurrection. He is risen! ... He is risen indeed!

Preview

If you were here last week, you'll know that we ended our studies on Good Friday. Jesus had died on the cross on Friday afternoon, after he had said, "*It is finished' ... and he gave up his spirit*" (John 19:30). After that, two men, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, took Jesus' body off the cross, packed his body with 75 pounds of spices and laid his body in a new tomb. John tells us the tomb was in a garden. John then skips Saturday, the Sabbath, and jumps straight to Sunday morning. And, that's where we begin today.

I invite you into today's text, John 20, beginning in verse 1, and I'll be reading from the ESV.

II. To the Tomb (1-2)

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

A. “The First Day”

So, let’s make a few observations about these scene-setting verses. John begins our text by saying it is *“on the first day of the week”* (20:1). Isn’t that an interesting way to put it? I mean he could have said, “Three days later,” or “On the third day,” as we sing in our hymns. Jesus died on Friday, that’s day 1. Day 2 begins at sundown on Friday, and Day 3 begins at sundown on Saturday. That’s how the Jews count days because that’s how the song of Creation in Genesis 1 counts days. It is day 3, which is actually how Jesus spoke about his resurrection, that he would rise after three days (Mk 9:30-32; Matt 17:22-23).

Why does John say *“on the first day”*? Well, it is Sunday, the first day of the week, but I think John is making a more important point with this language. It is not only the first day of a new week, it’s the first day of a whole new world. As I said last week, the new world which Jesus died to bring into being has now come. John wants us to clearly see that we have now entered the first day of the new world!

B. The Lord’s Day

By the way, this is why the early Christians made the huge move to change the sacred day from Saturday to Sunday! Most of them are Jews, so this change is simply massive! And this move gives this story the ring of truth! The reason they did it is because what is now most important is not the 7th day of the first creation, but the first day of the new creation. And, now, every Sunday we celebrate this whole new creation that Jesus brought into being.

C. Mary Magdalene

Next we meet Mary Magdalene. As we explore our text today and next week, notice the first-hand nature of this text. Many scholars believe this account to be “an authentic memory preserved and handed on by Mary herself” (Newbigin, 265). It certainly reads that way as we will primarily see how Mary came to experience the reality and wonder of the resurrection.

This is the second appearance of Mary in this Gospel. She first appeared in chapter 19 at the foot of the cross (John 19:25). In early Christian interpretation, her character was usually conflated with Mary of Bethany, especially surrounding the anointing scenes in the four Gospels. However, these are two different Marys.

So, who is this Mary? Mary Magdalene appears as a faithful disciple of Jesus in all four Gospels. In Luke 8, she’s said to have been healed of seven demons. In Matthew, Mark and John, she shows herself to be courageous by staying at the cross watching Jesus suffer and die (Matt 27:56; Mr 15:40; Jn 19:25). And in all four Gospels, she is the one to discover the empty tomb (Matt 27:61, 28:1-10; Mk 15:47-16:11; Lk 24:1-11; Jn 20:1-18). Indeed she has to be one of the most fortunate people to have ever lived!

She also may have been a woman of means, because Mark tells us she brought costly spices with her to the tomb. Because of this, it is also thought that she helped finance Jesus’ ministry.

D. Modern Popularity

It's interesting that Mary has become a bit of "a pop culture icon" in our time (Hunt, 626). She has appeared in several recent books, movies, paintings and music. In fact, I'm told she has her own musical. I don't know about that, but much of the modern stories and art are built on legends and non-Biblical writings. It seems that people are very intrigued by her story. And, for good reason, she's a primary person involved in the events which changed the world.

E. Women?

Although John focuses on Mary, there are other women with her, as the first person plural pronoun in verse 2 suggests ("[...we do not know...](#)"). But, even in the other Gospels, where the other women are listed, Mary is always listed first, meaning she's the primary actor within this group of women. And John spotlights her and not the others.

As you may know, it's the women's inclusion in the resurrection accounts which *also* give the resurrection story the ring of truth. In scholarly circles, it's argued that the first Christians made up these resurrection stories for a number of different reasons. But, the fact that all four Gospels tell the Easter story with Mary and the women as the first witnesses, powerfully argues against the fabrication of this story. If the first century males, who wrote the Gospels, were making up stories to win other males in their culture, they simply would not have made up a story with females as the first witnesses. In the first century, no one ever argued the truth of one's claims by appealing to the testimony of women. Sorry about that women. That's simply how it was back then. For example, Celsus, a Greek Philosopher, was a strong opponent of Christianity *because* the resurrection narratives had Jesus appearing to women (Keener, 204). The fact is that, in the first century, if a man's case in court involved the testimony of a woman, it was thrown out immediately. As Ben Witherington III says, "[Early] Christianity had labored under the burden of trying to explain the idea of a crucified Messiah. It is [simply] implausible that they would make things *doubly difficult* by conjuring up appearance stories to [women] witnesses that outsiders would be disposed to doubt from the outset" (Witherington). No one would have made up these events with women discovering the empty tomb. What we have here is an eye-witness account of what actually happened in history on that first Easter morning.

F. Going to the Tomb

John doesn't say why Mary is going to the tomb, but we know from the other Gospels that she is going there to anoint the dead body of Jesus. In other words, she's not going to the tomb to see if a miracle has happened. Mary goes to the tomb to sit by the body of Jesus and weep, and anoint his dead body.

G. The Stone

When Mary arrives at the cemetery garden, she realizes the stone has been "[taken away from the tomb](#)" (20:1). And, she is horrified! This is just terrible! We miss this reaction of Mary because in our hymns, we speak of the good news of the empty tomb, of course! But, initially, the tomb being empty was horrible! The sight of the stone taken away struck terror in Mary's heart, and she immediately concludes that someone has stolen the body. In other words, she

doesn't conclude that he has risen, because she's not expecting a resurrection. No one was expecting a resurrection, even though Jesus had predicted it.

It's a known fact that grave-robbing was a common crime in the 1st century. It was so common that in the 40s, Emperor Claudius made a decree prohibiting this activity on pain of capital punishment (Witherington, 324). So, why would people rob graves? To get the expensive linens in which bodies were wrapped, as well as to get the expensive spices packed between the linen.

Mary is so disturbed by the stone being removed, she runs back to tell Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, John.

John regularly calls himself the disciple whom Jesus loved, again, not because he thinks he is more special than anyone else. But because, what else do you say about yourself after you know the whole story, except that you are a disciple whom Jesus loves. My hope and prayer is that we all can say that we are disciples whom Jesus loves.

III. Inside the Tomb (3-7)

3 So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. 4 Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, 7 and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.

A. Introduction

After Mary had told Peter and John, they get up and run to the garden cemetery.

B. Fastest Disciple?

John then makes this interesting point that he outruns Peter to the tomb. Why does he tell us that? Years ago, commentators would have said that there was a rivalry with Peter and John, or between Peter's churches and John's churches, and John's churches were superior. Or they would have said that John was a better athlete than Peter or maybe was younger than Peter.

But, those ideas are probably not why John adds this detail. I think the main reason is simply to set up their entrances into the tomb. As we will find out, what is inside the tomb is very important to John. So, even though John gets there first, he, in obedience to Jewish customs at the time, does not enter the tomb. The reason: Because the tomb of a recently deceased person would be an especially unclean place to go. So John stays outside.

But, Peter, even though he arrived second, goes right in! And, that's Peter, isn't it? He barges right in. At this point, what has he got to lose? I don't think he cares if he's unclean. He's lost his friend, and he's probably feeling pretty miserable about his denials. Forget the rules, he goes right in!

C. The “Cloths”

John notes that both men see *“linen cloths lying there”* (20:5-6). John actually mentions the linen cloths three times in three verses. He is referring to strips of cloth which Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had lovingly and carefully wrapped around the body of Jesus on Good Friday. And, they are lying there as though Jesus had simply evaporated out of them. When Peter enters, he also sees the face cloth, *“which had been on Jesus’ head,”* folded up in its own place (20:7). In that time, bodies were wrapped in two parts. Feet to neck with one set of strips and the head wrapped with a separate set of strips.

So, the first set is lying there presumably still wound, but collapsed. The second, the face cloth, is found by itself, as if Jesus had removed the cloth, folded it nicely, as if to say, “I don’t need that anymore,” and set it to the side.

So, why is John paying so much attention to these cloths? I think for two reasons:

1. **No Grave Robber:** The first is that it tells Mary that the tomb had not been robbed. There were no grave robbers. Her conclusion that someone stole the body is not correct. Everything inside the tomb is far too orderly. No grave robber would have left it this way. Furthermore, the very treasures a robber would have wanted are still there, namely the linen cloths.
2. **Contrast to Lazarus:** But, secondly, and most importantly, what John and Peter see here is being set over against what happened to Lazarus back in chapter 11, which was maybe a couple weeks before this first Easter morning. And, by setting up this contrast, John is revealing the true nature of the resurrection for us.

Let’s review. In chapter 11, in the village of Bethany, Jesus had called Lazarus out of the tomb. And, Lazarus came out wearing the linen cloths. John said it this way, *“[Lazarus] came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth”* (John 11:44). Lazarus would have looked like a mummy coming out of the grave! And, as he comes out, with the linen strips still on, Jesus says, *“Unbind him, and let him go”* (11:44). In other words, Lazarus still needs to be freed from the chains of death.

The scene here in chapter 20 is a profound contrast to Lazarus. What happens to Jesus is very different than what happens to Lazarus. Lazarus was resuscitated; Jesus is resurrected. Lazarus went into the grave, and came back from the grave, but will one day go back into the grave. Jesus does not come back from the grave. Jesus went through the grave and through death and came out the other side, thereby conquering death. As one writer says, “Resurrection is not a rescue from death. It’s a passing through death. Resurrection is not a coming back to this order of existence [like Lazarus did]. It’s a passing through [death] into a new order of existence” (Johnson Class). Lazarus will die again. Jesus goes through death and comes out the other side into a whole new existence where he will never die again.

And, this is the key reason why John pays so much attention to these grave cloths. A true resurrection, not resuscitation, has happened to Jesus! He is risen! He is risen indeed!

IV. Belief at the Tomb (8-10)

8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples went back to their homes.

A. Introduction

Up until this point, John had only looked into the tomb. He now enters the tomb, and seeing everything, he believes. Coming, seeing and believing has been a common theme throughout this Gospel. This is the great invitation of this Gospel, echoing Jesus' first invitation in chapter 1 and John's invitation at the end of this chapter, chapter 20.

B. John's Belief

So, what does John believe at this point? It appears that after seeing the empty grave and how the linens are arranged, John comes to believe that, in fact, Jesus has been resurrected. However, according to verse 9, it appears that perhaps complete understanding may still be lacking. John wants to check Scripture.

It seems that John is saying that without the testimony of Scripture, the disciples would not have had a "complete" understanding of the most important event in history. Without the testimony of Scripture, they would be unable to fully believe that Jesus had actually risen from the dead.

C. Scripture for the Resurrection

So, they're going to go search the Scriptures. What Scripture would Peter and John go to as they were doing their research? The most common ones are:

1. **Ps 16:10:** *For you, oh God, will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.* In a few weeks at Pentecost, Peter would go to this Psalm to explain the resurrection.
2. **Isa 53:10:** *Yet it was the LORD'S will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.* Isa 53 is the great song of the suffering servant. Here's the pinnacle of Old Testament prophecy. And, within the predicted suffering of this servant, there is a hint of resurrection. Even though the servant will give up his life as an offering, there will be a future. He will see his offspring, and his days will be prolonged. Peter will quote most of this song in his first letter.
3. **Hos 6:2:** *"He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, that we may live before Him.* A more obscure verse, but it speaks specifically of God being a God of resurrection.

Those are some of the possibilities for where Peter and John may go specifically.

It's also worth noting that 1 Corinthians 15, the longest exposition of the resurrection in the New Testament, starts with Paul saying, *"3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures..."* (1 Cor 15:3-4). And, that text would have already been written before John wrote his Gospel.

D. Return Home

To close our text today, Peter and John return home with at least some understanding of what has happened. We'll pick up next week with Mary Magdalene, who went back to the tomb with the men and stayed there.

V. Implications

So, what do we learn from these first 10 verses? Well, a few things.

A. Confirmation of Jesus' Identity: Last week we talked about what John wants us to see at the crucifixion. And, one of the key things was the identity of Jesus. Actually, John showed us five different identities of Jesus:

- The True Son of the Father
- the True king of the entire world
- The True High Priest that intercedes for us
- The True Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world
- The Spirit-Giver who can now pour out the Spirit on all people

Now that Jesus has been raised, the resurrection confirms that Jesus is all of these things. With the resurrection, we can be assured that Jesus is all of those things.

B. Confirmation of the Way of Jesus: The resurrection also confirms the way of Jesus, which is the way of the cross. In other words, the resurrection is not just about life in the future, it is also about the way we live life right now in the present! Many times we come to Easter morning, and we think, "Whew, we finally made it through all that suffering stuff! We can now stop talking about losing our lives. We can now stop talking about denying ourselves. We can now stop talking about sacrificially giving of ourselves. We can leave all that behind now and begin pursuing the "good life!" No! Easter doesn't put an end to the way of the cross. Easter confirms the way of the cross as the true path to life. Jesus had said, *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."* (Lk 9:23). Easter is God's great yes to Jesus and to the way he lived and the way he died. Easter is God's great yes to self-denial and giving oneself away for others. And, of course, we just shared today some ways to give yourself away for others: serving our kids and youth or helping out at Fall Festival or putting a shoebox together. And, of course, there are many other ways to get involved, following the Jesus' way of self-giving, self-sacrificing love.

C. Impossible is Nothing: Because of the resurrection, impossible now drops from our vocabulary. There is a new power unleashed in this world, resurrection power. In this new world, the same power which raised Jesus from the dead, raises us from the dead in all of our forms of death, whether that be bitterness or jealousy or greed or fear or addiction or anything else. The empty tomb is a symbolic declaration of the victory of God over the power of sin, evil and death. For the first time in history, death did not have the last word. The reign of death is done. The reign of life has begun. And, because of that, because the tomb was empty, the word impossible now drops from our vocabulary because the impossible happened! With Jesus in the picture, we can have an unshakable hope within our circumstances! Impossible is nothing for our God!

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.

Benediction

The tomb is empty, and remains empty! So, now, may Christ, the risen one, so live within you through his Spirit that you go from here with the light of his unshakable hope in your eyes, and his way of self-giving love guiding your hands and feet. Impossible is nothing for him!

He is risen... He is risen indeed!

Resources

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Burge, Gary, *John (NIV Application Commentary)*

Johnson, Darrell, *John 17 (Regent College Course, #3810)*

Keener, Craig, *John Volume 2a (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Light Has Come*

Witherington III, Ben, *The Wisdom of John*