

While It Was Still Dark

John 20:1-18 (PART 1)

Baxter T. Exum (#1729)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Good morning, and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting this morning or joining us online or on the phone, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

We are here this morning to thank God for saving us and to share this salvation with the world around us. God loves us so much that he sent Jesus to die in our place. He was buried, and he was raised up on the first day of the week. We obey this good news by being buried with him in baptism, and by rising out of the water to live a new life. Brian Giselbach, a friend on Facebook and the preacher who married Ann and Aaron Grodi, posted a challenge this weekend. He suggested that you test your preacher this morning: If he preaches the resurrection without emphasizing the importance of you dying to sin and being raised up out of the waters of baptism to live a new life, he is lying to you. I appreciate that. Baptism is an important application of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And we do have several examples to share this morning, starting with an update from Mark Landis, who preaches in the Philippines. Mark posted a few days ago and says, "Today, God blessed us again by adding to His church. Rolita Wenceslao (age 78) and Jade Maragana (age 16) were both baptized into Christ. As you can tell from the extra pictures it took a lot of effort for Rolita to be baptized there. She usually uses a cane and the banks were steep, but there were lots of helpers. We had one other young man who wanted to be baptized and even went to the baptism, but his mother refused to allow it. He looked very sad. Please welcome Rolita and Jade to the family of Christ!" Good news from the Philippines this week!

This second one comes to us from Kevin, who preaches in Nairobi, Kenya, and says, "Among who got saved is this mum 89 years old, she was die-hard catholic believer and after we have explore scripture, she accepted to have true baptism of immersion." He says, "Let's cherish with angels and welcome her to the family of the Lord."

And this last one comes to us from Tabu Eden, who preaches in Uganda. He says that "A woman of 96yrs got baptized and she's now born again. born of water and spirit....let's welcome our new baby to the kingdom. She was lost but now she's found and she is not late for her to be part of the church." There are many others we

could have shared this morning, but we share these by way of encouragement: If you would like to study God's plan for your life, if you have any questions or concerns, please get in touch using the contact information on the wall up here (or on your screen at home). If you are joining us on the phone, you can send a text or give me a call at 608-224-0274.

Nearly a year ago, as we were on our way home from our daughter's graduation in Tennessee, we stopped for worship in Springfield, Illinois, and early on the first day of the week we stopped to visit the tomb of Abraham Lincoln, and although I grew up in Illinois, this was a first for me. Lincoln, of course, was assassinated on April 14, 1865, and over a period of several weeks, his body finally arrived in Springfield, Illinois, on May 3, 1865, and he was buried the following day. What some people may not realize, though, is that Lincoln's body was moved more than a dozen times over the next several decades – from a receiving vault, to a temporary vault, to a temporary location in the monument as it was still under construction, and several more times after that. And all through this process, there were multiple attempts to steal the body. And as a result of some rumors, the casket was opened at least five times to confirm that his body was still there. And then finally, after 36 years, the casket was locked in a steel cage and covered under two tons of concrete ten feet deep, where it is to this day. It is an interesting study, and I would encourage you to look into it. But the point is: Lincoln's body is in his grave this morning, and there are many witnesses to it, including one man who died as recently as the early 1980's.

On the other hand, the body of Jesus is NOT in his grave, and there are many witnesses to that as well. This morning, I would invite you to turn with me to John 20 as we study one of the understated accounts of the Lord's resurrection (p. 1695). We'll get started on this passage today and plan on wrapping it up next week, if the Lord wills. But the events that we are studying today most likely took place in April of the year 30 AD, somewhere between 5-6 in the morning on the first day of the week. And the account here in John 20 is simple, yet profound, and so different from the Easter celebrations that we see in the world around us these days. I don't know about all of you, but my social media feeds have been flooded with invitations to various Easter services, "Come join us for this big thing!" And we get the sense that we're being invited to a huge production – with bright lights, and flowers, and highly trained musicians with their instruments, and the choirs, and the new outfits, and the slick invitations – a huge, flashy ordeal. John's account, though, is simple, and calm, and relatable. John's account speaks to US. In John, we don't have earthquakes, and soldiers passing out in fear; we have no description of Jesus actually rising out of the tomb; we certainly don't have lilies and orchestras. But by the time John writes his account roughly 50 years after it happens, John has boiled it down to the basics – the eyewitness accounts of three people who came to the tomb that morning.

To put this in context, Jesus was crucified on Friday and buried rather quickly just before sunset that evening. This was the Passover, and the Sabbath started at sunset and lasted through the day on Saturday. I might compare what happened on that Saturday to what we experienced several years ago with "Safer at Home." Jewish law said that you had to rest and couldn't even travel for more than about 2/3 of a mile. The Sabbath was a day of reflection, and for the disciples it was a day of mourning, a day to think about what had just happened. Well, this brings us to the first day of the week. All four gospel accounts are written from different perspectives, but what they all have in common is that the women show up first, which is interesting, because in those days women weren't really allowed to testify in court. God, though, makes sure that the first witnesses were women. And among the women, Mary Magdalene shows up first. John, in fact, tells us that she shows up ***"while it was still dark."***

What do we know about Mary? Some have suggested that she was a prostitute. And this goes back to the fact that Mary is mentioned in the first few verses of Luke 8 as being one of several women who supported Jesus financially in his ministry, and this passage comes right after the description of a woman in the city who was a

“sinner” (in Luke 7:37), the sexually immoral woman (perhaps a prostitute) who washes Jesus’ feet with her hair. Some, then, have made the leap that Mary must have been this woman, but that is, in fact, an assumption with no real evidence. What we do know from Luke 8 is that Mary at one time had been possessed by seven demons, and Jesus had freed her from that. We aren’t given the details, but we do know from other passages that demon possession could be horrific. We think of the man who ran around naked, screaming in the cemetery, cutting himself with stones, the guy who couldn’t be held down with chains. We think of the possessed child in Mark 9, unable to speak, foaming at the mouth, grinding his teeth, stiffening out, with the evil spirit often throwing him into the fire or into the water. We can hardly imagine. Over and over in the New Testament, we read about demons making people absolutely miserable. Well, Jesus saved Mary from that, and Mary responded by following Jesus from that point on, supporting Jesus financially.

This brings us to John 20. Let’s look together this morning at John 20:1-18,

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. ² So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.” ³ So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; ⁵ and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. ⁶ And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. ⁹ For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. ¹⁰ So the disciples went away again to their own homes.

¹¹ But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher). 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.’” ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and that He had said these things to her.

- I. As we look at this passage, I want us to go back to the beginning of it as we notice that the disciples start out (in verses 1-10) in a state of CONFUSION.

And thinking back to Mary, where this account starts, this woman loved the Lord probably more than most of us can even imagine. Jesus had saved her from those seven evil spirits. And now, this woman is on a mission. From Mark’s account, we know that her goal is to make it to the tomb with spices to anoint the Lord’s body. On Friday, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea got that process started, but they were interrupted by the

Sabbath, and now Mary and the other women are coming back to make sure it gets done properly. And we learn here that Mary, at least, gets up before the sun comes up to get this done. But Mary gets there first, ***“while it was still dark.”***

Let’s also notice how John refers to this as happening ***“on the first day of the week.”*** Several times, Jesus had promised to come back ***“on the third day”*** after his death (which this is), but John emphasizes that this is ***“the first day of the week.”*** This is a new day, the day God’s people would come together for worship from this day forward. But on this ***“first day of the week,”*** Mary gets to the tomb first, ***“while it was still dark,”*** and the first thing she notices is that the stone was ***“already taken away from the tomb.”*** That’s all she knows, so at this point her mission changes. She now ***“runs”*** back into the city to find Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved (most likely John), and her conclusion based on the evidence she’s seen up to this point is that ***“They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.”*** So, somebody has moved the body; it’s gone! We can hardly imagine burying a loved one and coming back a few days later to see that the grave has been dug up. I have stood at the head of many graves through the years, including with some of you here this morning. We can hardly imagine going through that, and then returning a few days later, perhaps to grieve privately, and when we drive into the cemetery we see that the grave has been dug up. That would be devastating, and so, in her mind, somebody has moved the body. Maybe grave robbers, or perhaps even the Jewish leaders had desecrated the body to further insult the Lord and his followers. And to Mary, that was not okay. We think of that time when King Saul and his men were killed in battle and their bodies were displayed in enemy territory. I believe they chopped off his head, stripped him of his armor, and displayed his weaponry in their pagan temples, and then they put his body on display by fastening it to a wall. The men of Israel, even though they lost that battle, they got a special forces team together, they went behind enemy lines, and they brought those bodies back home, even though many of the people were not really huge fans of King Saul. Desecrating a body was a huge deal back then, as it is now, and Mary is upset. She’s confused.

So now we have Simon and the other disciple running to the tomb (there’s a lot of running in this passage), and although they started at the same time, the other disciple gets there faster than Peter. And I love this! If this is indeed John, here he is writing this as an old man many years later, and for the inspired record, he wants it known that he is a faster runner! Peter is perhaps older, we know that John was younger, but for whatever reason, John gets there first. He looks in and ***“sees the linen wrappings lying there,”*** but he hesitates, and Peter is the first to actually barge into the tomb. Leave it to Peter! In addition to the linen wrappings, Peter now (in the tomb) realizes that the face cloth is separate, having been rolled up separately and sitting over to the side. The face cloth was usually a band of cloth that wrapped around the ***“face”*** so that the jaw wouldn’t pop open. This cloth was rolled up by itself. Now, the grave clothes left behind in this way help prove several things: First of all, this is the right grave. And secondly, this helps prove that the body was not stolen as Mary first thought. If you’re robbing a grave, there’s no way you are unwrapping a body that had previously been rolled up with a hundred pounds of what is basically sap on Friday night. If you’re stealing a body, you are taking the whole package. And then also, if you loot a grave, there is no way you are folding up something nicely on your way out. Some have suggested that Jewish carpenters had a custom of folding their handkerchief when they were done with a project. Others have suggested that this is a lesson to all children everywhere to make their beds. I don’t know, but we do know that the linens and the rolled up face cloth proves that this was not a grave robbery.

Now, it’s interesting to me that when John sees this he ***“believed,”*** and this is in contrast to Peter. All three of these disciples may be confused, but John is a bit further along than Mary and Peter. John is halfway there! I might compare it to what all of us felt when we saw the second plane hit the World Trade Center. At that point, something clicked. This was intentional. We didn’t know who did it, we didn’t know how they did it, we

didn't know why they did it, we might have still been confused on some of the details, but we knew it was intentional. In perhaps the same way, John hasn't connected all the dots, ***"For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead,"*** but John was on to something here. He ***"believed."*** And how interesting that he tells us that they still ***"did not understand the Scripture."*** Later, of course, it'll all come into focus. In Matthew 16:21 (up in Caesarea Philippi) Jesus had told them that he ***"...must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day."*** Then, in Matthew 17:22-23 (up in Galilee), Jesus had said that ***"The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day."*** And then in Matthew 20:18-19 (just a short time earlier on his way to Jerusalem) Jesus had said, ***"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up."*** The prediction of the resurrection was so clear that even his enemies heard it and prepared for it by having Pilate secure the tomb with a guard. They said to Pilate (in Matthew 27:63-64), ***"Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.' Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."*** Everybody knew it would happen, but the disciples couldn't see it. All Mary and Peter can see is evidence of a crime, but John is starting to see something else. And personally, I think this is why the author makes it abundantly clear that both he and Peter saw the wrappings. The wrappings are important here. They go home, though. Even though he ***"believes,"*** he doesn't tell anybody. Maybe because he's still processing this. Maybe because he feels like he doesn't quite have enough evidence yet. I think of it in terms of songleading. There are some songs that I know, but I don't know well enough to lead. Maybe that's what's going on here.

But even with this evidence, and even with the predictions Jesus had made (over and over again), the disciples (especially Peter and Mary) still don't get it. Why not? First of all, these people have been severely traumatized. They have just seen their teacher murdered in one of the most brutal ways a person could ever be murdered. And when we experience trauma, sometimes we don't think too clearly. With the way God designed us, the mind has a way of protecting us. They weren't thinking in terms of prophecy right now. The other possibility with Peter is that Peter's faith had really taken a beating with his denial of Jesus. Jesus predicted it to Peter's face, Peter did it anyway, and now, Peter is probably just devastated. In fact, there may be a small part of Peter's brain that may be a little terrified at the possibility of seeing Jesus again. If Jesus is back from the dead, that means we need to deal with what I just did. So, there may be this fear of confrontation that's skewing Peter away from believing at this point.

But before we're too rough on the disciples for not "getting it" here, maybe we need to be asking ourselves why we don't always "get it." Today, we have the written word of God right here in front of us, and it says, ***"Do not be anxious."*** So why are we anxious? Because we're human! We have this passage where Jesus tells us it's a sin to be angry, it's a sin to have inappropriate thoughts about other people, it's a sin to gossip, and so on. So why do we do these things? Because we are human! Well, so also with the disciples. Just because we "know" something doesn't always mean that we truly believe it or that we live it out or that we obey it. We might think about those two disciples on the road to Emmaus later that night. They didn't get it either, and Jesus condemned them as ***"foolish men"*** and said that they were ***"slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!"*** We have a reminder, then, that all of us are human.

Conclusion:

This morning, then, we have opened up the word of God, we've started looking at John's account of the resurrection, and we've noted that Mary gets there first (while it was still dark), she sees that the tomb is

open, goes back to get Peter and the other disciple (probably John), and we've learned that these three are basically in a state of CONFUSION. The tomb has been disturbed, something is up, and upon further examination the tomb is actually empty, but they are not really sure why. I hesitate to leave us with the cliffhanger, but I do want to save the rest of this passage for next week and focus in on Mary and what happens next.

The question for us is: How do we deal with the empty tomb? Unlike that tomb down in Springfield, Illinois, the tomb of Jesus is still empty. And we've learned this morning that the body was not stolen. So, are we like Peter, racked with guilt, even to the point where we miss what the word of God says? Thankfully, Jesus and Peter work that out in John 21: All is forgiven, and Peter goes on to preach Jesus going forward. Or are we like the other disciple, pretty sure that something amazing has happened, but not quite sure about telling others yet, needing additional evidence? Thankfully, John will go on to get the evidence he needs, but what's not okay is that we believe in Jesus but refuse to do anything about it. Or are we like Mary, in love with the Lord because of what he's done for us, but still confused and perhaps a bit angry? We'll get back to Mary next week, but for now, let's just know that there's room for all of us.

Before Josh leads us in a song, let's go to God in prayer.

Our Father in Heaven,

You are a God who does amazing things! You've made our salvation possible by sending your only Son to the cross and raising him from the dead – for us. This morning, we ask for a deeper understanding of who you are, and we ask for greater faith in the resurrection. Thank you for these eyewitness accounts we've studied today. We pray for a time when the wrongs of this life will be made right, for a time when what we are going through right now will make sense.

Father, several of our members are recovering from various surgeries right now – some were planned and some were not. We pray for calm hearts, and we pray for your healing on these people we love. Give them the strength they need to work and to serve.

Give us humble hearts that are always willing to turn to you for help. We come to you this morning through Jesus our Savior. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com