JESUS APPEARS TO MARY AND THOMAS

John 20:1–31

Key Verse: 20:17

“Jesus said, ‘Do not hold onto me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’”

Who *are* you? What are you *doing*? Where are you *going* in life? Though we don’t often talk about it, these questions are actually so important. When we don’t know *who* we are, *what* we’re doing, or *where* we’re going, we feel lost. But where do we get the answers? Today’s passage tells us: in the resurrection of Jesus. At first that sounds unlikely. The resurrection of Jesus seems not only implausible but also pretty irrelevant. But John’s account of this event tells us that the resurrection of Jesus is not only real; it also provides answers to our deepest questions in life. How? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Unlike the other Gospel accounts, John trims down the details of what happened that morning, in order to focus on three of Jesus’ closest followers: Mary Magdalene, Peter and John. Look at verse 1. The phrase “it was still dark” tells us not only the time of day, but also the current spiritual condition of these people. Darkness can represent many things, but in this case it especially refers to the influence of death and unbelief. The crucifixion of Jesus made death seem like the end of everything to his followers. It knocked all the meaning out of life. It made Jesus’ life and ministry seem in vain. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark, while she and the others had no idea what it all meant.

What did she see? Verse 1 says she “saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance” of the tomb. It was a very large stone, and hard to move. What did Mary think? Read verse 2. She thought Jesus’ body had been stolen. Who would *do* that? No doubt his enemies. She thought they weren’t satisfied with humiliating him on a cross; they didn’t want him to have a decent burial, either. Mary went and told Jesus’ two closest followers, Simon Peter and “the other disciple, the one Jesus loved.” He was none other than the author John himself. She wanted them to know what happened and to help her find the body of Jesus. Mary took one small fact, the stone removed, jumped to conclusions, assumed the worst, and went off on the wrong direction.

How did Peter and John respond? Look at verses 3,4. They ran to the tomb to see for themselves. But why run? Obviously they were upset by the news. But their running all the way out of the city to the tomb shows us something else. At first it seems they liked to compete. But really, their running shows how loyal they were to their Master, Jesus. Though they’d been powerless to stop his arrest and execution, they still loved him, they still wanted to protect him, they still eagerly wanted to do something for him. In telling this story John highlights the differences between himself and Peter. First of all, in running to the tomb, John arrived first. Perhaps he was younger, more fit, and Peter was older and heavier. But it probably highlights John’s ambition at this time in his life—he really wanted to be first. Secondly, John tells us that he saw the strips of linen lying there but did not go in the tomb. On the other hand, Peter did go in. It highlights John’s consideration and respect, and Peter’s boldness.

And when Peter went straight in, he could see something else. What was it? Read verse 7. It was the cloth that’d been around Jesus’ head, separate from the linen. It was something only an eyewitness would remember. To John, this detail was crucial. Why? What did it suggest? It looked like Jesus had awoken from the sleep of death and evaporated through these cloths. Grave robbers would never take the strips of burial linen off a dead body or remove the head cloth so carefully. It was like a crime scene detail that was really hard to interpret. What happened? Read verse 8. We’re not sure what Peter thought, but this detail, it says, caused John to “believe.” What did he believe? He believed a miracle had happened, that Jesus had risen from the dead. That he “believed” meant he was sure of it. It seems wonderful. But John adds something else. Read verse 9. It was not enough to believe the miracle that Jesus had risen; they needed to understand from Scripture that it “had” to happen.

Why did Jesus “have to” rise from the dead? It was the fulfillment of God’s salvation plan, which he’d predicted all throughout the Old Testament. Just as the prophet Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, then spit out, so Jesus would be killed and buried in the earth, but on the third day he would rise again (Mt12:40). The prophet Isaiah predicted that after Jesus’ suffering, he would “see the light of life and be satisfied” (Isa53:11a). Through the resurrection of Jesus God had planned all along to crush the head of Satan and remove the shroud of death over all human beings (Ge3:15; Isa25:7,8; Heb2: 14,15). Through his resurrection God would prove himself to be God Almighty, over whom it is impossible for death to have any power (Ac2:24). Through his resurrection Jesus the Son would return to God the Father and open the way for all who believe to come back to their eternal home and have eternal life (13:3; 14:6; 3:16). The crucifixion of Jesus was only half of God’s will revealed in Scripture; his resurrection was the other half. Jesus not only died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he also was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1Co15:3,4). Read verse 9 again. For John especially, believing miracles is not enough; for faith to become genuine, he repeatedly tells us that we need to believe based on the word of God. Our faith needs to shift from a miracle to the word of God itself; only then does it have real conviction. When our faith is based on God’s word, we gain a spiritual understanding that changes us. Though they saw the greatest miracle of Jesus’ empty tomb and the linen and head cloth, Peter and John were not there yet.

In the next eight verses John turns to the story of Mary Magdalene. This part of the story is recorded only in John’s Gospel. John already told us that near the cross of Jesus was his mother, some other women, and Mary Magdalene (19:25). But there’s been no other mention of her in this Gospel. Who was she? Luke tells us that she was one of the women who had followed Jesus from Nazareth and cared for his needs out of their own means. So Mary Magdalene was a woman with some money. Luke also puts her first on that list and says Jesus had driven seven demons out of her (Lk8:2,3). She experienced his healing in her soul, which is why she followed and served him so faithfully.

Mary Magdalene had been near his cross, and now, after Peter and John had gone, she was back outside his tomb. What was she doing there? Verse 11 says she was crying. Obviously she had not seen what Peter and John had. She was still thinking that grave robbers had stolen his body. She couldn’t get over all the evil that’d happened to him. His death, and all the cruelty and evil that went with it, had broken her heart. Her standing outside his tomb, all by herself, crying, may seem foolish to some, but to John it was beautiful. It shows how much Mary Magdalene loved Jesus; maybe of all his followers she loved him the most.

When she loved him with such an undying love, what happened? It says she looked into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot (12). It was an incredible sight, but because she was still weeping so much, she couldn’t appreciate what she was seeing. Read verse 13. The angels ask her, “Woman, why are you crying?” They were trying to help her see there was no reason to be crying. But she just repeats her fixed idea that her Lord’s body had been stolen, and her great anxiety that she didn’t know where it was. Not knowing about his resurrection, life looked so sorrowful and bleak, and she didn’t know what to do.

What happened? Look at verse 14. How could she not realize that it was Jesus? She knew him so well. But sorrow had clouded her vision to the point that she couldn’t even recognize him. What happened? Read verse 15. There’s a contrast here between who Jesus really is, and who Mary thought he was. She thought he was the gardener. She thought he might be the one who’d removed his body for some reason. She didn’t realize that she is standing before the Risen Lord. We also see that she really wants to do something. What? She wants to find Jesus’ dead body and put it back in the tomb. In her mind this is most important. But actually it’s totally wrong. Why try to put him back in the tomb when he’s risen? Without knowing the Risen Jesus, we too get focused on things that seem so important but are really unnecessary.

Mary was blind, and stuck in a fixed idea. How did Jesus help her? Read verse 16a. Jesus called her by name, and that’s when she finally recognized him. He called her name with deep understanding and love. It shows that Jesus is our Good Shepherd who knows us by name. Believing his resurrection is not just about theology; it’s about personally encountering him. We need to experience that the Risen Jesus knows me very personally, he loves me, he really wants to have a personal relationship with me. This encounter also tells us that the only way to meet him is to hear his voice. His voice pierces through our fixed ideas and our deepest sorrows and grief. His voice opens our spiritual eyes to see. We can hear his voice, even in all our problems, when we really seek him like Mary.

When she realized that the man standing before her was Jesus, Mary was so excited, she cried out and grabbed hold of him. What did Jesus say? Read verse 17. He gave her a new direction—not to hold onto him but to go and tell his brothers, the disciples, that he’d risen from the dead and was ascending to the Father. Jesus gave her a completely new mission. Mary Magdalene, a woman, became the first apostle sent by Jesus with the good news of his resurrection. It shows us that meeting the Risen Jesus gives all us a new mission in life. We’re no longer stuck in our own neediness, trying to hold onto people; we’re sent by God to help others know the good news of his resurrection. It’s not a meaningless activity; it’s what we should really be doing with our lives.

Read verse 17 again. Jesus calls his disciples “brothers” and repeats that he’s ascending “to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” It’s not just flowery words; it has deep meaning. Through his death and resurrection all believers have a brand new identity, a brand new set of relationships, a brand new destination. What’s our brand new identity? We’re all now brothers and sisters of Jesus. It means we’re all sons and daughters of God, part of God’s family. We each can call God “my” Father and “my” God—now we have an intimate, personal relationship with him. How did this change happen? Because of our sin we were cut off from the Holy God and lived in darkness. But Jesus atoned for our sins on the cross, and through his resurrection he restores our personal relationship with God. We’re no longer slaves of sin or spiritual orphans; as his children we have close personal fellowship with God. The Bible urges us, “Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings…” (Heb10:19–22a). Ephesians 3:12 says, “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” In light of what Jesus has done for us, we need to stop seeing ourselves as losers, as hopeless people, or as nobodies; we need to learn to see ourselves as the most blessed people, as the precious children of God, who can come to God our Father at any time through our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus said he was returning to God, he was also telling us where our lives are going. We aren’t here on earth aimlessly; we aren’t just headed for the grave; through faith in Jesus we too are returning to our God and Father to live with him forever in our eternal home. When this is our hope, when we’re convinced of our final destination, we can endure all the hardships of this world, and we can carry out our mission to the end.

In the next five verses we see how the Risen Jesus appears to all his disciples. It was later that evening. They were behind locked doors, paranoid that the Jewish leaders would come after them next. Jesus came right through the locked doors and told them, “Peace be with you!” It’s repeated three times. It wasn’t just a common Jewish greeting of shalom. He’d told them earlier, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid” (14:27). Only the Risen Jesus can heal us of our fears and give us a deep inner peace that remains.

He also showed them his hands and side to prove that it was really him, and his presence filled them with joy (20). Read verse 21. This shows us the point of all his discipleship training. Jesus was preparing these people in order to send them into the world, just as he said in his prayer (17:18). He was sharing his own mission with them. They would continue to do his work after he was gone, by faith and by prayer (14:12–14). It was part of their new identity, and ours: being sent by Jesus. When we believe in him, it’s not only for our salvation and healing; it’s so that God can use us as his witnesses in the world. How would it be possible for them and for us? Read verses 22,23. To carry out their mission they would need the power of the Holy Spirit. It was only a preview of what would later happen (Ac2). Jesus also gave them a specific direction what to do: to share with people the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus. He shared with them his authority and his discernment to see who is ready to receive it. Whatever we may be doing in ministry, we need to focus on helping people experience personally the forgiveness of sins in Jesus.

In the next six verses the Risen Jesus appears to one other disciple, Thomas. He had not been with the others when Jesus had appeared to them. Not being there, he missed the blessing. All ten of them had testified to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord!” He knew them so well, but he refused to believe them. He insisted on putting his finger where the nails were and his hand into Jesus’ side. The Risen Jesus came and did what Thomas demanded. It again shows us that he is our Good Shepherd, so humble and personal. But he also rebuked Thomas, “Stop doubting and believe.” And he said that those who do not see him literally and yet believe are truly blessed. It means that instead of demanding God give us great spiritual experiences, we need to believe the testimony of eyewitnesses in the Bible who were there. It is enough for us to actually encounter the Risen Jesus.

Today we learned that in the resurrection of Jesus we find who we really are, what we really should be doing, and where we’re actually going. We’re God’s precious children. We should be telling others the good news. And we’re going back to our Father God. This Easter may the good news of Jesus take away all our sorrows and fears and give us a bright new conviction, direction and hope.