



From Despair to Joy

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Christ's crucifixion and resurrection is the anchor of salvation and the motivation to live with joy, hope, and purpose.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: John 20:11-18

Good news and bad news. In life we hear both good and bad news on an everyday basis. Based on recent studies, roughly four out of five people prefer to hear the bad news first when it comes to situations where there is both positive and negative information to acknowledge. Why? In summary form, research seems to indicate that human beings prefer to process information with conclusions that leave us with a sense of meaning, transcendence, and poignancy—in other words, endings that elevate.¹



Do you prefer to hear the good news or the bad news first? Why?

Group Time

Point 1: The Despair over the Crucified Christ (John 20:11-13)

¹¹ But Mary stood outside the tomb, crying. As she was crying, she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² She saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus's body had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"Because they've taken away my Lord," she told them, "and I don't know where they've put him."

Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus had freed from the presence of demons (see Luke 8:2), went to Jesus' tomb seeking her Lord's presence during a distressing time. Though her intuition to go to Jesus was good, the obvious problem with her plan was that, at least in her mind, Jesus was still dead. As was often the case with Jesus' disciples, and with us, Mary felt a certain attachment to Jesus but did not believe in His power to conquer even death, not in that moment at least. Despite her misunderstanding of Jesus' final destiny, her longing to see Jesus was profoundly good and right.

 During a distressing time, what tends to be your default attitude, behavior, or recourse?

Those of us who are familiar with the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection sometimes neglect these narratives' significance for coping with death. Death is always sad, even in the case of Jesus. While we should not criticize Mary for expressing sorrow over Jesus' death, we nonetheless should learn from her example and avoid living as if sorrow is the final outcome. Because of the truth of the gospel, death doesn't get the last word. With Jesus, there is hope beyond the grave. Mary would soon learn this firsthand.

 When have you prematurely abandoned hope only to see later how God was moving you toward deeper resurrection hope?

Point 2: The Recognition of the Risen Savior (John 20:14-16)

¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus. ¹⁵ “Woman,” Jesus said to her, “why are you crying? Who is it that you’re seeking?” Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you’ve carried him away, tell me where you’ve put him, and I will take him away.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” Turning around, she said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!”—which means “Teacher.”

He said her name. That’s all it took. In order to raise Mary’s countenance and bring forth resurrection faith in her, Mary had to hear *Him* say her name. No, it wasn’t the gardener, as she first supposed; it was the second and last Adam, the One who came to undo the thorns and thistles the first Adam left us with. Mary knew at that moment that she was speaking with her Teacher, her Lord. When the risen Jesus calls our name, we know in the very core of our being precisely who is speaking to us.

Like the disciples on the Emmaus road (see Luke 24:13-35), Mary did not recognize Jesus immediately. Just as Jesus’ breaking and blessing of bread prompted the two disciples to realize Jesus was reclining with them, Jesus caused Mary to realize who was speaking to her by saying her name. Similar to how the two disciples perceived Jesus to be among them in the breaking of bread, we should recognize that Jesus is with us as we take the bread and the cup in the Lord’s Supper. And as Mary heard Jesus calling to her near the empty tomb, we likewise should hear His voice calling to us in and through the Scriptures.



Why do you think we often overlook how the risen Jesus is made present to us in God’s Word and in the church’s ordinances?



Voices from Church History

“Observe that the tears shed for Christ do not lose their reward, nor is it long before love for him bears fruit. Rather, his grace and rich restitution will follow closely in the wake of pain.”²

—Cyril of Alexandria
(c. 376-444)

Point 3: The Mission Given by the Son of God (John 20:17-18)

¹⁷ “Don’t cling to me,” Jesus told her, “since I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them what he had said to her.

“Don’t cling to me.” Why was it good that Jesus went away? Put simply, if Jesus didn’t leave, then the Holy Spirit wouldn’t come (see John 7:39; 16:7; cf. Acts 2:32-33). While the Holy Spirit was active throughout the Old Testament (see Gen. 1:2; Ex. 31:1-11; 1 Sam. 16:13-15; Isa. 59:21), the Spirit came in a more spectacular way following Jesus’ ascension. Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2, marked the dawn of a new age, an age where Jesus had officially taken the throne as the Messiah at the Father’s right hand, ruling His kingdom and empowering His disciples for mission by the Spirit.

Christ’s Exaltation: Christ was exalted when God _____ Him from the dead, and Christ was exalted when He _____ to the Father’s right hand. He will be exalted by all creation when He _____.

It’s one thing to see an empty tomb; it’s another thing to see our risen Lord. The pattern that is true of Mary in this passage should also be true of us: *recognizing the risen Jesus leads to being on mission for the risen Jesus*. Though the risen Jesus doesn’t appear before us in His glorified flesh as He did for Mary, the same resurrected Jesus nonetheless has transformed us through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Cor. 3:17–4:6).



What are some ways Jesus’ exaltation relates to our mission to proclaim the gospel?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read John 20:1-10

“Warts and all.” This well-known adage originates from Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector of England from 1653 until 1658, instructing the artist in charge of his portrait to make the painting as accurate as possible in terms of its likeness to him. In contrast to how portraits of that era typically were flattering of their subject, Cromwell desired that his portrait capture even the blemishes on his face—hence the phrase “warts and all.”⁴

When it comes to the Gospels’ portrayal of the early disciples during the moments when they learned of the empty tomb or heard reports of the resurrection, the authors did not brush over their blemishes. Instead, they described their initial responses in a “warts and all” kind of way, seeking realism over idealism, honesty over flattery. In John 20, we see this honest and non-flattering treatment applied to Mary Magdalene, as well as Peter and John, and later Thomas (vv. 24-25).

There are several reasons we can draw encouragement from these forthright reports, but among them is how these frank descriptions of the first disciples indicate the reliability of the Gospels. The narratives do not bear the character of fabricated accounts that venerate the prominent figures of the early church but instead come across as genuine portraits of the flawed, everyday people whom Jesus called as His disciples, warts and all. This is simply another reason we can rest confidently that the Jesus we follow truly is risen.

Voices from the Church

“On one hand, the resurrection is a fact to be believed. On the other hand, it is an experience to connect with. If you have one without the other—if you believe in the resurrection as historical fact but never experience the resurrection personally, or if you think of the resurrection as a spiritual experience but don’t believe it was a fact—you come out with a form of religion with no power.”⁵

—Tim Keller



What are the reasons you have for believing the Bible?

Day 2: Read John 20:11-13

Neither angels nor an empty tomb were enough for Mary. She still assumed that Jesus' body had been stolen (vv. 2,13). Dead or alive, she wanted to be near her Savior but did not know where His body lay. Though she was slow to believe in the resurrection, her allegiance to Jesus was nevertheless steadfast. She was committed to Jesus but failed at the moment to understand and trust in His power to transcend death.

We are like Mary in a lot of ways, and this instance is no exception. Just as she was failing to live in light of Jesus' resurrection, we likewise in many cases fail to live as if Jesus has truly risen. We live instead as if Jesus is present in our lives but not present with the same power that raised Him from the dead (Eph. 1:13-14,20-23; 2:6).

Rather than look down in despair, we need to listen for the voice of our living Savior in Scripture.



What steps can you take this week to keep the reality of Jesus' resurrection and ascension at the forefront of your mind?

Day 3: Read John 20:14-16

“My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). This is how Jesus described believers' capacity to hear His voice and obey it. In John 20:16, we see a concrete example of this dynamic. Mary, one of Jesus' precious sheep, heard Jesus say her name, and she knew with certainty that the good shepherd was speaking to her. Though we today haven't received the opportunity to see Jesus in His glorified flesh, those of us who have experienced the new birth from the Spirit have effectively heard His voice.

Since Jesus has called us by name, we have no excuse for failing to heed His commands and we have every reason to live with joy and hope, as Mary no doubt did. We have heard His voice and therefore know how to listen to our shepherd. Like Mary, once we've heard Jesus say our name, we should feel compelled to respond to our Teacher with honor, respect, praise, and joyful obedience.



On what occasions have you been able to discern Jesus' voice from among others competing for your allegiance?

Day 4: Read John 20:17-18

“Should I Stay or Should I go?” Yes, that’s the title to the famous song by The Clash released in 1982, but it also might have been the question Mary was asking herself as the risen Jesus stood before her. Yet Jesus, who so often did what seems counterintuitive to us, directed her not to stay but instead to go to His brothers, the disciples.

Isn’t it interesting that the woman who was so desperate and downtrodden about the whereabouts of Jesus’ body was so quick to leave Him? This is the effect of encountering the risen Jesus. A true disciple wants to be with Jesus but also wants to share Jesus with others—and that’s exactly what Mary did. Recognizing the risen Jesus led her to being on mission for the risen Jesus.



When has your desire to cling to Jesus led to the desire to tell others about Him?

Day 5: Read John 20:19-29

Have you ever noticed that most, if not all, of the resurrection appearances recorded in the Gospels take place on the first day of week? This should make our Sunday gatherings all the more meaningful. By joining our brothers and sisters in Christ for corporate worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, we are participating in a tradition that reaches back to the earliest disciples to whom Jesus appeared on that first Easter morning. The new-creation spark that Jesus’ resurrection ignited thus continues to blaze to this day as Christians worship around the world on any given Sunday.

Every time we make an effort to meet together with fellow Christians on Sunday, we need to keep in perspective that we are doing more than something religious and routine. We are gathering to hear from the risen Jesus through Word and ordinance as we confess together about Him, “My Lord and my God!”



What can you do to ensure that Jesus’ resurrection is never an afterthought whenever you assemble for worship with your church?

