

“He Must Rise from the Dead”

The Sixty-First in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John – Easter Sunday

Texts: John 20:1-10; Isaiah 25:1-12

Easter Sunday is a day of joy and celebration for Christians because it is on this day we celebrate Jesus' victory over death and the grave. The very fact that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead means that Jesus' has accomplished our salvation by satisfying the holy justice of God, paying the debt which we owe to God, and washing away the guilt of our sins. The fact of the empty tomb also means that Jesus has overturned the curse, and Easter marks the birthday of a new creation. The empty tomb, the eyewitnesses, and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy provide the content of Christian preaching and serve as the foundation of Christian truth claim. No resurrection, no Christianity. In his Gospel, John has told of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. When we left off last time, John described how Jesus was hurriedly buried before sundown on Friday (Passover). John now tells us that when he entered Jesus' empty tomb and saw the grave clothes left behind, it was at that moment he believed that his Lord had risen from the dead.

We have spent sixty Sundays so far in the Gospel of John, and in the providence of God, it just so happens that the Sunday on which we come to John 20 (and John's account of the resurrection) is also Easter Sunday. The bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the great climax of John's Gospel, as well as the foundation of the Christian faith, which stands or falls with the resurrection. To put the matter as simply as possible, if Jesus bodily rose again from the dead that first Easter as recounted by John (and the other gospel writers), then Christianity is true even if no one believes it. And if Jesus did not rise again from the dead on Easter then Christianity cannot be true, even if the entire population of the world believes it. If Christianity ends with the events of Good Friday and a dead Messiah, then we are still in our sins, and we have believed a lie. That is how important the resurrection is to Christianity.

Thankfully, God has given us good reason to believe in the resurrection of Jesus. First, there is the fact of the empty tomb. Second, there are the reports of numerous eyewitnesses who saw Jesus quite alive three days after he died on a Roman cross. Third, the resurrection is the fulfillment of a number of Old Testament prophecies which predicted this very thing hundreds of years in advance, in addition to the prediction of Jesus. We have good and solid reasons to believe that Jesus rose bodily from the dead.

As recounted in the second chapter of John's Gospel, shortly after he began his public ministry, and when he cleansed the Jerusalem temple the first time, Jesus told his disciples as well as the angry Jewish religious leaders that he would indeed rise again from the dead. When the Jews demanded that Jesus perform a miraculous sign to prove that he was who he claimed to be, John recounts that *“the Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”* Jesus made this prediction three years earlier, and now with his crucified body buried and sealed in a tomb just outside the city of Jerusalem, the time has come when the disciples will remember what Jesus said to them in the opening days of his messianic mission. Jesus has kept his promise.

In the twentieth chapter of his Gospel, John describes the most significant miracle in redemptive history. Although Christian readers of John's Gospel, which was written a generation after Jesus' death and resurrection, know what happened on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, at the time Jesus' resurrection from the dead was beyond all human expectation. Just weeks before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus kept speaking of the need to go to Jerusalem, where he would suffer and die, and then rise again after three days. But the events of Jesus' arrest, trial, and death by crucifixion pushed far from everyone's mind the thought that Jesus would rise from the dead just as he had raised Lazarus. No one who died the way Jesus died ordinarily comes back to life. Although Jesus promised he would do so, his disciples seem not to expect Jesus to rise again, although the Sanhedrin tried to prevent Jesus' followers from making such a claim. Again, more irony from John.

On the first Easter Sunday, Jesus' last words from the cross on Good Friday "it is finished" can now be seen for what they are—a declaration that Jesus' suffering is finished because he has consumed every drop in the cup of the Father's wrath, by bearing in his own flesh the wrath of God rightly due each one of us because our sin and rebellion. Throughout the entire Passion of Jesus (which begins with Jesus' arrest on Thursday evening), John has repeatedly emphasized that Jesus is fulfilling Old Testament prophecy and that in his suffering and death, the glory of God is revealed. A dead man hanging on a cross is the last place you would expect to find God's glory revealed. Yet this is the very place to which God himself directs us to find forgiveness of sin and peace with our Creator-redeemer.

When we left off last Sunday with the closing verses in John 19 (and as we saw on Good Friday), Jesus was dead and buried. Once the Romans were certain that Jesus was truly dead—the spear thrust deep into Jesus' chest proved as much—Jesus' body was released to the custody of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin. Joseph was a wealthy man, who secretly believed in Jesus and was said to be seeking the kingdom of God. On Sunday morning (the first day of the week), the kingdom of God would find Joseph! Along with another member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus, Joseph purchased a newly carved tomb in which to bury Jesus, while Nicodemus secured the seventy-plus pounds of spices with which Jesus was embalmed. The women who had been with Jesus from the beginning, and who remained to watch as Jesus died, now prepared his body for burial, washing it, wrapping Jesus in white linen cloth, and then placing him in the tomb. Mark adds the fact that the Joseph made sure the tomb was properly sealed in accordance with Jewish law and burial customs. Jesus was buried before sundown Friday, the day of Passover, and the Day of Preparation for the special Sabbath the day following (Saturday).

Matthew (27:62-66) informs us that on Saturday (the day after Jesus died and was buried), some of the members of the Sanhedrin began to get a bit nervous because of persistent rumors tied to Jesus' claim that he would rise again from the dead. They went to Pilate with a request. *"The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, 'Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first.' Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.' So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard."* The problem was not that Jesus' disciples might break into the tomb—they were all in hiding, and didn't have collective fortitude to do so. The Sanhedrin's problem is that Jesus will walk out of the tomb the next morning!

This is the scene when we read in John 20:1, *"now on the first day of the week [Sunday] Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb."* John recounts only that just before dawn on Sunday morning (the first day of the week)

Mary Magdalene went to the tomb but found it empty. She was soon followed by others. It is not accidental that all four gospels at this point speak of Jesus as rising on the “first day” of the week, not “three days” after the Passover.¹ The implication is that by occurring on the first day of the week, Jesus’ resurrection is tied to the new creation, a very loud but easily overlooked echo from the creation account. Along with the other gospel writers, John is alerting the reader that the event he is about to recount—Jesus’ resurrection from the dead—is of monumental consequence. A new creation is at hand.

Matthew’s account fills in the details, which John’s brief account presupposes. In Matthew 28:1-3, the tax-collector describes how, “*after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.*” John tells us that Mary Magdalene saw the stone rolled away. Matthew tells us how the stone was moved. Matthew even tells us what happened to Pilate’s soldiers guarding the tomb. “*And for fear of him [the angel] the guards trembled and became like dead men.*” Something happened in the tomb just before dawn which shook the earth and sent the soldiers fleeing. The appearance of an angel to announce a wonderful work of God should harken us back to the night on which Jesus was born. In Luke 2:13-14, we read, “*suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’*” Something very similar occurred Easter Sunday when Jesus is raised from the dead, and he exits the tomb. An angel makes another remarkable announcement.

According to Matthew, the angel outside the tomb has an important message for Mary and the others who joined her. “*The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.’ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*” It is truly remarkable that God has chosen the women who followed Jesus throughout his ministry to receive the first news of the greatest victory in human history. Death has been defeated, and God reveals this to a woman (Mary Magdalene) who at one time had been possessed by seven demons (Luke 8:2). Having few rights and a low social standing in first century Judaism, women were ordinarily not even allowed to give testimony in a court. Yet it is to Mary Magdalene and then the other women that God first reveals this wonderful news. If you were reporting the facts of what happened, you would include this—as John does. But if you were making-up fictional gospel accounts, you would never have the women be the first to receive the news that Jesus was risen from the dead.

John’s account picks up with Mary and the others doing as the angel told them, going to tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead. In John 20:2, John tells us that Mary ran from the tomb, “*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.’*” The angel told Mary precisely what had happened—that Jesus has risen from the dead—but in her understandably excited and breathless state she reports to Peter and to John only that Jesus’ body is missing from the tomb. “They have taken the Lord.” “We don’t know where he is.”

Grave robbing was a huge problem during that time—so much so that the emperor Claudius (who ruled from AD 41-54) declared grave robbing to be a capitol offense throughout the Roman empire. The

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 635.

natural assumption was that if Jesus' body was not in his tomb, someone entered the tomb to loot it, and in the process discarded Jesus' body. In fact, in Matthew's gospel, the reality of grave robbing is certainly behind his report (28:11-15) regarding what the Jews and Romans did when reports came in of something dramatic happening at the tomb. *"Some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, 'Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day."* Jesus' body could not have been stolen by the disciples, because they are just now learning that Jesus' body is missing from the tomb.

Peter, who just before dawn Friday had denied knowing Jesus three times only to have a rooster crow as Jesus predicted, is overwhelmed by the women's report. Since the women were so startled that they ran all the way from the tomb to give Peter and John this disturbing news that Jesus' body was missing, Peter must go and see for himself what happened. John (who was present when Mary arrived) tells us in verses 4-5, *"so Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first."* Peter was much older than John (the "other" disciple), and John cannot help but tell his readers of the fact that he outran Peter to the tomb, a humorous note which only an eyewitness and someone who knew Peter well (like John) would even think to include in this such important testimony.

Having arrived at the tomb before the older and slower Peter, *"and stooping to look in, [John] saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in."* That John looked into the tomb likely indicates that this was the typical burial cave dug out of stone which went back into soft rock twenty feet or so. The garden tomb in Jerusalem—which may or may not have been Christ's tomb—is certainly representative of what such tombs were like. Even though John could see that the only thing remaining in the tomb was the linen cloth in which Jesus had been wrapped for burial, he was going to wait for Peter. In verse 6, John says that *"then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself."* John waited before going in. Peter could not restrain himself.

The women were right—Jesus' body was gone. All that was in the tomb was a neatly folded linen cloth which had been over Jesus' face, and the strips of linen in which Jesus' body had been wrapped. Yet, Jesus' body was nowhere to be seen. Again, this is clearly the account of an eyewitness—in fact, two eyewitnesses which means their testimony was admissible evidence in a Jewish court. This was a much different situation than when Jesus raised Lazarus, because Lazarus remained bound by the linen cloths in which he had been buried, and he was struggling to get loose once he came back to life. This was much different. The linen was there. The head cloth was there—neatly folded in fact. But Jesus was not.

In verse 8-9, John recounts *"then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead."* From John's testimony, he apparently realized right then and there that Jesus had risen from the dead, and he believed. Luke tells us that Peter *"saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened."* John believed that Jesus had been raised, Peter was still pondering what he had just seen. At this point, however, neither man understood that this is exactly what the Old Testament had foretold. John tells us that at this point *"then the disciples went back to their homes."* Given all that happened from the time Jesus entered Jerusalem the Sunday prior, until now, Peter and John were no doubt struggling to figure out the meaning of what they had seen and witnessed. They were bone tired,

had slept little if at all, and were emotionally frayed. John already believed. Peter marveled and knew not what to think.

Meanwhile, two of Jesus' other disciples (from the wider circle of disciples but not of the twelve) were about to get a lesson in redemptive history like never before. In Luke 24, beginning at verse 13, Luke recounts how on that *"very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened."* These two unnamed disciples had much to talk about, and they were likely going to this small village (Emmaus) outside the city because of fear of arrest. *"While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him."* Jesus was very much alive, had left the tomb, and would now begin appearing to his disciples. As we will see next time, John tells us that Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb, before appearing to all the disciples as recounted in John 20:19 and following.

But after he appeared to Mary Magdalene, yet before the disciples assembled together and Jesus appeared to them, Jesus appeared to these two disciples, but they were prevented from recognizing him. Mary Magdalene did not recognize Jesus either when he appeared to her outside the tomb. According to Luke, Jesus said to these two disciples, *"what is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?"* *And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?' And he said to them, 'What things?' And they said to him, 'Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.'* Like the other disciples, these two men also had their hopes completely dashed when Jesus was arrested, tried, unjustly found guilty, and then put to death by crucifixion. This is not what they expected. They were obviously trying to make sense of it all while en route to Emmaus.

But something occurred early that morning, and they recount what they heard to this mysterious, but apparently ill-informed stranger. *"Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."* The report that Jesus' tomb was empty spread quickly.

The risen Jesus speaks to these men, gently rebuking them for not believing his promise to rise again from the dead. *"And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."* Jesus himself explained from the Old Testament why these things happened and how he (Jesus) was the central figure in all the Bible from Genesis to Malachi. Oh, to have a recording of that conversation! In fact, Luke recounts that after Jesus departed from them, *"they said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?'"* By the time these two disciples returned to Jerusalem later in the day, completely blown away by their encounter with Jesus, Jesus already appeared to Peter and the others.

John reports that even though he believed when he saw the empty tomb, neither he nor Peter understood that Jesus' resurrection fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Luke's account of the risen Jesus explaining that he is the central figure in all the Old Testament, likewise directs us to turn our attention to several

Old Testament passages which predict that what happened the first Easter Sunday in garden tomb was foretold hundreds of years in advance. No doubt, one passage to which Jesus referred was Psalm 16:10. *“For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.”* Hosea 6:1-2 may also have been mentioned. *“Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.”* No doubt, Jesus mentioned Job 19:23-27, where Job desired *“that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”*

And we can be sure that Jesus explained to them the meaning of Isaiah 25:6-9 (from our Old Testament lesson), when YHWH says *“on this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”* By dying to remove the guilt of our sin on the true mountain of the Lord (Mount Zion—upon which Jerusalem is built), and so as to satisfy the holy justice of God, Jesus has overturned the curse and destroyed the power of death.

In this wonderful prophecy—written hundreds of years before Jesus’ death and resurrection—Isaiah tells us that a great messianic feast will be prepared by YHWH for his people because of the things accomplished by Jesus on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The covering (our sin and the curse) has been removed. Death has been conquered. One day, when Jesus returns, we will celebrate this magnificent meal (which John calls the marriage supper of Christ the lamb in Revelation 19). Until then, God has given us the Lord’s Supper as a sign and seal of Jesus’ victory over death and the grave. We commune with a risen savior, who gave himself for us Calvary’s cross, and the secured for us eternal life when he walked out from the tomb on the first Easter.

Having won this great victory for us, Jesus appears to his disciples, explaining to them the meaning of those Old Testament texts which foretold of both his death and resurrection. The Jews expected their Messiah to be a conquering king. Yet, Israel’s rejection of Jesus came about because they lacked the faith to see that the victory which God had promised them throughout the Old Testament was a much greater victory than the one they expected. The Jews of Jesus’ day hated Pilate, Herod, the Romans, and all their ilk so much, that when Jesus did not lead a rebellion against Rome, Jesus’ became just another prophet who crossed the line while challenging the status quo. And for this, Jesus was put to death.

But Israel’s problem was not Rome. Israel’s problem is the same as ours—human sinfulness. Israel’s Scriptures foretold of a conquering Messiah who would also be a suffering servant, who will save them from their sins by suffering and dying, before conquering death and the grave. The people of Israel demanded an immediate solution to Roman occupation. Blinded by sin and self-righteousness, and with the help of Rome, they put their own Messiah to death, and then stubbornly refused to believe in him even though he rose bodily from the dead—the greatest of his many miracles. The great irony of John’s Gospel, is that by putting Jesus to death, Jesus now wins our salvation, and he fulfills numerous Old Testament prophecies which foretold that *“he must rise again from the dead.”* And Mary Magdalene is the first of many, chosen by the Lord, to see firsthand, that Jesus is alive. He is Risen!