

Long Live the King! - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **John 20:1-31** (#507)

Introduction: These last few messages in John's gospel have been difficult, haven't they? Between Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial, the absolute injustice of the trials – not to mention the inhumanity of the crucifixion – there just hasn't been much in the way of encouragement, has there? True, we pointed out how God's plan to rescue sinners was front and center, but these chapters have still made for some tough reading, with little here that is pleasant.

I begin our time this morning reminding us of those facts, because I think that too often, we Christians skip through Good Friday in an attempt to get to Easter. It's been said that we Americans don't know how to weep, that we don't understand lament. I've sat in enough hospital rooms and funeral parlors to know that this is often true. While our American optimism serves us well in a number of areas, it can prove a hinderance when it comes to grappling with the deep things of life: sin, our own failures before the Lord, true injustice, and death. Those are the reasons why it was so necessary to spend time in Christ's final teachings, in His trials, and in His execution. Only with a full understanding of why Christ had to die; only with a true picture of what is necessary to save sinners from themselves – only then! – can we even begin to respond rightly to the joy of Easter.

And Easter is where we shall joyously turn this morning! John's record of it comes in **chapter 20** of his gospel, and I'd urge you to join me there. As with most of the chapters in this gospel, it would be very tempting to slow down and turn this into several sermons. That would make for a wonderful series. But one of our points in working through this book is to try and see the whole thing together – to see it from a higher angle and try to grasp more of the bigger picture. That's something that becomes harder the more we stretch the series out. So, for today, we'll be taking the entire chapter in view. Lord-willing, we'll return sometime in the future to see the individual trees in this wonderful forest of grace. Now, let's open our eyes and see what the Lord has preserved for us in His Word...

20:1-18 This chapter contains three scenes. These first eighteen verses speak primarily of Mary and the Lord. After we work through these, we'll see the next scene, which focuses on the disciples. And then we'll conclude with the third scene, where John himself tells us the entire point of his gospel. It is because of John's words that I think seeing this entire chapter as a single unit to be grasped in one sitting will be helpful for us today.

Let us begin, then, with Mary Magdalene. Her story comes in two parts. The first is found in **verses 1-10**. She comes to the tomb of Christ early in the morning on that third day. Upon arrival, she sees that the stone has been taken away – it had been moved and the tomb was open and exposed. This brings up two questions: first, why are we reading about Mary? Why aren't the disciples there? Why weren't they first to the tomb? We'll read more of them later in this gospel, but most plainly it is because they have scattered from Jesus, just as He predicted in **John 16:32**. Their scattering wasn't just a momentary loss of courage, but – as we see here and later – it was a lasting fear, a deep wound.

With the disciples scattered, who remained? Who was there at the cross? John himself seemed to be the only exception, otherwise it was the ladies connected with Christ who had the courage to be present. Fitting, then, that this Mary be the first to come to the tomb.

But that brings up the second question: why is she here? What does she intend to do? After all, if the tomb had been sealed – as would have been expected – then surely she would not have had the strength to open it? It's true that **Matthew** and **Mark** tell us that the other Mary and Salome were there also, but even between the three of them, I don't think it's likely that they were going to get into the tomb on their own that day. And don't forget that the tomb was also to have been placed under guard. **Mark** and **Luke** provide us with at least part of the answer: these ladies were coming to prepare Christ's body in a more full and permanent way than Joseph and Nicodemus had been able to. Perhaps these ladies thought that the soldiers would take pity on them and open the tomb up? Whatever the case: their arrival with anointing spices shows that they weren't

expecting to find an empty tomb. They didn't understand any more than the disciples did – and they are in for just as big a surprise!

John focuses on Mary Magdalene, so that's what we'll do here. What an amazing shock it must have been for her, then, to see the tomb opened! She runs and finds Peter and John, telling them that somebody has moved Christ's body. These two then run to the tomb – and I love the eyewitness detail here of John being a faster runner! – and peer in, then when Peter arrives, they actually go in. What they find is not at all what was expected: not only is Christ's body gone, but the grave cloths are lying neatly folded, as if they had been carefully put that way.

But, as I mentioned, these verses really aren't about the disciples. After looking, we find that they still don't fully grasp what is happening, and they eventually go back to their homes. The story catches up with Mary again in **verses 11-18**. She is by the tomb once more and is weeping. In the midst of her sorrows, she suddenly becomes aware of two angels sitting inside the tomb, who ask her why she is weeping. Mary's reply is the obvious one – somebody has taken her Lord. As she is explaining, she turns and sees Jesus but doesn't recognize Him. He asks her the same question and she responds with a question of her own: where is Christ's body? In essence: "release it to me, so that I can prepare Him honorably."

And here is the moment. A single word. A name. Names mean something, don't they? When somebody speaks your name, it matters. So it does here. "Mary." That's all it takes for her to recognize Jesus. What a wonderfully sweet moment that must have been! Jesus has a further task for Mary, and it is to take the news about Him to the disciples.

What do we learn from Mary? It's simply the fact that she observed and responded to what was true: our Lord is not dead. He has conquered our foe. Consider, for a moment, what that means. A little over a year ago, our entire world was radically changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was turned upside down by this disease that we didn't have a direct cure for, and suddenly folks became very afraid of death once more. I say "once more," because we often act

as if medicine will cure all our woes. In fact, I'd say that modern society does its best to try and ignore death as much as possible. So, in some ways, I think that COVID has revealed something that has been an idol for many of us: our health. Think of all the advertising that goes on about health, all of the life advice, all of the money in that industry. Don't misunderstand, I'm not saying that health doesn't matter. But I find it interesting that we focus so much on physical health now, whereas the Scriptures focus much more on spiritual, eternal health.

Be encouraged, then: Christ has defeated our foe. Death is still here, but it no longer has power. Unless Christ returns first, our bodies will die. But those who trust in Christ shall have new life, an eternal destiny with Him. In that sense, all of our prayers for health have been answered in the best way possible – perhaps not in the here and now, but forever. That is what we learn in these verses.

But what about the disciples? Let's catch up with them next...

20:19-29 The disciples, we read, are basically in hiding at this point. They have locked themselves away because they are afraid that the same folks who killed Jesus will soon be coming after them. Which, I should point out, means that they aren't trusting what Christ has taught them about their mission for the future.

My favorite part of this scene is how locked doors do nothing against an infinitely powerful God. Jesus can't be kept out! And so He appears in their midst, with words that we need to take note of: "Peace be with you." This theme of peace is one that He has taught on repeatedly, and it is one that you and I need to internalize: if you are in Christ, then part of what you gain is peace in Him. The troubles of this world don't have to unsettle you. They don't have to tip your boat. I know that sounds strange, but it's true. I'm not saying that we shouldn't care about the world, or that we should live with our fingers in our ears. But what I'm saying is that our confidence in Christ should be – can be, must be! – greater than our fears and worries for this world and its troubles. Our King is in control.

Part of Christ's peace is reassuring the disciples that it's real. They can have peace because what He predicted – what He told them about how He would rise again – is now shown to be true. This isn't just some sort of ghostly Jesus – no, this is Christ in the flesh, living and breathing again. And this Jesus is the One who sends the disciples out, giving a preview of how they will soon be equipped with the Holy Spirit in a new way, with the discernment to know what forgiveness is and is not. It's not that the disciples somehow gain the power in themselves to forgive or not forgive. Instead, it is that the Holy Spirit will give them the understanding and discernment to declare what is right and true and correct about somebody's sins: they can be forgiven. Then again, for those who don't seek forgiveness according to what Christ has taught – which is the very message that these disciples will soon be spreading – those folks sadly won't be forgiven.

Now, all of this is good points forward, but it also isn't the whole story, because one of the disciples is missing. Thomas was not present that day. And poor Thomas has gotten something of a bad reputation among many Christians, who have named him "doubting Thomas." We shouldn't. In fact, what Thomas asks for in **verse 25** is no different than what Jesus showed to the other disciples back in **verse 20**. So Thomas isn't asking for anything different – rather, it is as if he is saying "I want to see those same things that you all did, then I – too – will believe." Without the same evidence they benefited from, he won't believe. Eight days later – as in, a full week in Jewish thinking – Thomas would get his wish.

Christ once more appears in the same way – saying the same thing "Peace be with you" – and invites Thomas to have the same experience that the other disciples did. Notice that there are no words of condemnation from Jesus, but there is a blessing. Thomas – and all the disciples – have experienced Christ's resurrection firsthand. As hard as it was for them to believe, they simply couldn't have denied it with Jesus standing right there in the flesh. But there would be folks coming along in the faith after the disciples – the ones Jesus prayed for in **chapter 17** – and they would not have the same benefit of seeing their Lord with their eyes and touching Him with their hands. Does that mean that folks like you and me have missed out? We would have – except that Jesus pronounces a blessing on those

who believe even without seeing. It gives the lie to that old phrase, doesn't it? The blessing comes not to those who think that "seeing is believing," but instead for those of us who believe even when we have not yet seen. Take heart: just as we are blessed now, we shall be in the future as well; remember the Beatitude – "blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." And on that day when we are with Christ, we shall see how true that is!

Friends, fill your mind, fill your time, set your hopes not on the things of this world. It has been said that "you are what you eat." Or, to take Aristotle: "you are what you repeatedly do." If you are miserable, then do you ever ask yourself how you spend your time? If you are upset about the world, then could it be that watching the news all the time isn't helping you to follow Jesus? If you are constantly afraid of others and unsure of yourself, might it be that social media isn't helping you to see yourself as Christ does? And what about the things we like and enjoy in life: if all you or I think of is finances, vacations, and the good life, what does that say about what we hope in most? We are deceiving ourselves if we think we can somehow think about depressing, distressing, or worrisome things all day and not be affected. Similarly, if you give your thoughts only to the here and now, you will be led on a path far from Christ. The solution? Fill your mind and your time not with this world, but with the world to come. With Christ and His Kingdom. With His Word. Looking to His grace. I guarantee that you won't regret it. The result will be joy. In part now; but fully in eternity.

20:30-31 We close, in some ways, with a summary of the entire book. This is why John wrote what he did, why he recorded certain events and not others. Christ did many things, but these specific things are highlighted so that, one: we would clearly see that Jesus is God and that we are to believe in Him. And, two: that we would have eternal life. Do you have that eternal life? Have you confessed your sin and called upon Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Don't miss John's purpose. Trust in Christ. And if you have, then go and give your life to Him in all you think, say, and do. Your sins are paid for, your resurrection is sure. That's a living hope worth giving your best thinking to and your best energies to sharing. Amen.