

The Word Made Flesh - A Study in John

The Day Everything Changed

Running to the Lord, Believing Through Grief, Sent in His Peace

— JOHN 20 —

The Darkest Hour

The darkest hour in history has just happened. Jesus has been crucified. The disciples who followed Him had scattered, and now they are defeated, disoriented, and disillusioned. Their God has been killed, seemingly defeated. The crucifixion was never part of their plan, even though Jesus had told them plainly it would happen. They had no grid for a crucified Messiah, and so they were not looking for a resurrection. They are gathered together, licking their wounds, quietly rethinking and deconstructing everything they once held to be true.

The Empty Tomb

JOHN 20:1-2 (ESV)

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran 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."

This is an important detail. Mary, and the disciples who followed her, did not assume the resurrection had happened simply because the stone was rolled away. They assumed the Jewish leaders or the Roman authorities had moved His body and hidden it so that no one could steal it and claim He had risen. It is an irony worth noticing: in the writings that survive from that era, both the Jews and the Romans explained the empty tomb the same way, by accusing someone else of taking the body. But Mary is not theorizing. She is distraught. She came to mourn and to grieve, and Jesus is not there.

Peter Runs to the Tomb

JOHN 20:3-10 (ESV)

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. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 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. 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. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

Remember where we left Peter, because this moment is profound. The last time we saw him, he had both disobeyed and denied. He disobeyed in the garden, swinging a sword and cutting off the ear of Malchus, and then he followed that with not one, not two, but three catastrophic failures. When following Jesus was finally going to cost him something, he bailed. Three separate times in a single night he denied that he ever knew, loved, or followed Jesus. And then, in Jesus' darkest moment on the cross, Peter is nowhere to be found.

Peter's failure is extraordinary. Has anyone ever failed quite like that? Imagine what he must have been carrying: the guilt, the shame, the regret, the pain, the disillusionment, the endless what-ifs. I think if the average Christian found themselves in Peter's shoes, they would deconstruct and walk away. They would be unable to grapple with the guilt, unable to face the shame, and they would quietly call it quits and go live life on their own terms.

Not Peter. Yes, his failure was extraordinary. But so was his faith. Coming straight off the heels of the worst failures of his entire life, his gut reaction was to run to the tomb. To run toward the Lord, not away from Him. He knew that forgiveness is found in Jesus. He knew that grace is found in Jesus. And he knew that if he could just get to Jesus, redemption was only a breath away.

"In your failure, run to Jesus. Do not run away."

Mary at the Tomb

JOHN 20:11-15 (ESV)

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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."

There is something almost funny here. The men come looking for Jesus and, in classic fashion, take one quick look, decide He is not there, and head home. (My wife reminds me that this is very much a man thing to do.) Mary, with a little more patience, lingers. But she lingers out of grief. Her whole world has been turned upside down.

This is Mary Magdalene. This is the woman the town had once written off, the one who had been tormented and was delivered of seven demons by Jesus. She became one of the most devoted followers in all of Scripture. When the other disciples fled, she stayed. She was there at the cross. She watched Him die. And now she is here at the tomb, and once again, when everyone else had scattered, she remained.

What I find most admirable is not simply that she stayed. It is what she calls Jesus even though He is dead: "My Lord." In what may be the most painful, confusing, and disorienting moment of her life, her faith in the Lordship of Christ never wavered. Though she has just suffered unimaginable loss, though Jesus is working far outside her theological expectations, though He appears defeated and dead, her history with Him will not allow her to reach any other conclusion. He is the Lord.

A MOMENT TO SIT WITH

You need to know that these moments come for everyone. Things do not always go according to plan. We lose the ones we love. Situations arise that make us question everything we thought we knew. The bad diagnosis comes. Hard things are unavoidable. And in those moments, it is completely alright to break, to stand there and weep, to feel lost for a while.

Because Mary shows us something beautiful. You can have that moment, even many of those moments, and still be full of faith that He is the Lord.

You can be full of grief and full of faith at the same time. Your grief does not nullify your faith.

Like Mary, if you hold fast to that confession in spite of your pain, He will appear to you. And in this moment, He appears in the most ordinary way imaginable. He looks like a simple gardener, so unremarkable that Mary assumes He is the groundskeeper. It makes you wonder how long He had been standing there. I tend to think He was near the whole time she wept, and she simply had not realized it yet.

He Calls Her by Name

JOHN 20:16-18 (ESV)

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary sees Him, and it is implied that she immediately grabs hold of Him and clings for dear life. And honestly, that is the right response to grief, pain, and confusion. In my imagination, Jesus is a good evangelical and gets a hug and a polite side hug. The line He gives can sound harsh and gets a little lost in translation, but what He is really saying is this: you are holding on to me as though you will never see me again, but I am not going anywhere yet. I have not yet ascended to the Father.

Then He says, "Tell my brothers." That is telling. Though the disciples are not present, though they have failed Him, Jesus still calls them family. He calls them brothers. Sometimes family transcends blood. They are family because they share the same Father.

If you belong to Jesus, you are part of a family that runs deeper than DNA. There was a moment recorded in the other Gospels when Jesus was surrounded by a crowd and His mother and brothers were trying to push through to reach Him. When someone told Him they were there, He answered, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." There is a family reality woven into the universal church. If you belong to Jesus, you belong to a family. Family is messy. Family sometimes requires boundaries. But when push comes to shove, to quote the great theologian Vin Diesel, we are family. None of this is meant to replace your biological family. Ideally, your spiritual family begins right there in your own home.

Then Mary carries the news. Jesus commissions her with the very first preaching of the Gospel. Before this, the disciples had proclaimed the Kingdom. Now comes the Gospel itself: that Jesus is the Christ, who died on the cross for the sins of the world and rose again, defeating hell and death. Mary is the first to proclaim His death and resurrection.

This detail alone strengthens the case for the resurrection. If the resurrection were a fabrication and John were trying to spread a lie, he never would have written it that way. First, he would not have chosen a woman, since the testimony of a woman at that time was considered so untrustworthy that it could not even be used in court. Second, he would not have chosen this woman. Remember her reputation. She had been the town's tormented outcast. No one was going to take her word for it. But John was not concerned with what was convenient. He was concerned with the truth. And the truth is that Jesus handpicked a woman, a woman with a hard past, to carry the good news of His resurrection to a room full of men.

Peace in the Locked Room

JOHN 20:19-23 (ESV)

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Here we find the disciples covering in a locked room, afraid of the authorities. Jesus comes and stands among them. As with the gardener moment, He arrives so quietly that no one seems to notice until suddenly He is simply there, throwing back the gray cloak to reveal that He has returned, back and better than ever.

In the middle of their fear, Jesus meets them with peace. Some of you need to remember that Jesus offers you peace, because He is the Prince of Peace and the very Author of peace. Then He tells them He is sending them, breathes on them, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This moment is tied directly to where they found themselves. They had been running from people in fear; now Jesus commissions and empowers them to pursue people in peace. They were afraid, so Jesus gave them peace. They were hiding, so Jesus told them to go.

And He says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." He is not handing them the authority to forgive sins themselves. He is giving them the authority to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, and the confidence to declare that forgiveness over everyone who repents. In other words, they are commissioned to preach the only way sins can ever be forgiven, and to declare with confidence that the repentant truly are forgiven.

Room for Doubt

JOHN 20:24-29 (ESV)

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

There is room for your doubts. Jesus can meet you in your doubt, as long as you remain open to the truth. Thomas is the proof. And notice the blessing Jesus pronounces over everyone who would come after Him: blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. That blessing is for us.

Why This Was Written

JOHN 20:30-31 (ESV)

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John tells us plainly why he wrote all of this. Not to record every sign Jesus performed, but to give us enough to believe, and in believing, to find life in His name. That is the whole point. This is the day everything changed: the day grief met the risen Lord, the day fear was answered with peace, the day a scattered and defeated group of failures was made into a sent and forgiven family.