

# CCLEB SERMON NOTES

SUNDAY MARCH 31, 2024  
JOHN 20:1-18

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## APPROACHING THE EMPTY TOMB



If you could have looked in Jesus' empty tomb yourself how would you have approached it? With fear, or confusion? Or maybe humility and wonder? Or considering conspiracy theories? How would you approach the empty tomb?



Today we are going to look at how three different disciples approached the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus. We are going to look thru their eyes and see what they saw, and observe what their body language suggests to us about their approach. Yes its three eyewitness, and yes three is significant.

**John 20:1-2** John gives us context here that is helpful and important for painting the backdrop of this passage. He tells us it's "Early". This is a different word in the Greek than was used in 18:28 where the word implied "daybreak". The word in John 20 means the hour or so before daybreak - and John adds for visual effect "while it was still dark". I wonder if that is as much a description of the ambient light as it is the disciples' grief and outlook on life? We know from the text that a grieving disciple of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, is up "early", well before daylight, and she is at the tomb of her beloved rabbi, Jesus.

The NLT says this was “Sunday morning” - more traditional translations say “on the first day”. Now this text is not from our Western or European culture, so the phrase “on the first day” means “the first day of the Jewish week, which technically starts at “sundown” at the end of Sabbath. Sundown ended Sabbath and began the Jewish “new week”, hence this “the first day” of the new week. This definition of a “Jewish week” holds true thru out the OT as evidenced from the 3rd verse in the book of Genesis where we see in the repeating “refrain” Gen 3:3c “and evening passed and morning came, marking the first day”. The day starts with evening, then morning follows etc... Which is what we see in our passage, John 20:1 is the first day of the Jewish week that begin at sunset.

There are two other “countings” of days happening in this context as well. “Passover” which is celebrated for a week, officially began at sunset, one Jewish day prior - making John 20:1 the 2nd day of Passover. The other counting that is happening in context is that this is the 3rd day since Jesus was crucified and buried. Jesus was crucified and buried on the day of preparation for Passover, at exactly the time that the “Passover lamb” was sacrificed in the temple.

When it comes to understanding much of bible context we in the west must “decrease” our reliance on western thinking and “increase” Jewish thinking and perspective.



So if you hold to a traditional Friday crucifixion, John 20:1 is 1st Day of the Jewish week, 2nd day of Passover week, and “3rd day” since Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. The phrase “third day or “in 3 days ” is a repeating pattern in the OT, occurs 2xJohn 2 - and as tantalizing as that is, we are not going to indulge in that at the moment...but will in the future. Stay tuned.

Now you may be questioning if this level of detail, including a date and time stamp, from John is necessary. John provides the detail that he does because he wants you and I the readers to be convinced that this was a real historical event, that happened on a real historical day, in a real historical city, with real historical people. John’s written testimony is such that the account in our passage today is not just some subjective spiritual experience - It was a real observable event. And for Mary Magdalene it involved the three senses: sight, hearing, and touch. This is why John uses concrete language, like a clear date and time stamp in v1, to communicate this account was real.

**20:1b** say “Mary Magdalene came to the tomb..” So who is Mary Magdalene? We know from the descriptor “Magdalene” that she was from the fishing port town on the sea of Galilee called “Magdala”.



There is archeological evidence of docks and fish sorting tanks of stone used at the fish market.



It's a real place, I've been there, I took these pictures. This is an impressive sight with original mosaics and two synagogues. Note this was within an walking distance of the very secular Roman city Tiberias just to the south. There is some indication that suggests Magdala was the largest city in Galilee prior to Herod building Tiberias, just a few decades prior. Magdala is also not far from Capernaum, the home sea port of Peter and his fishing friend John - Both of those characters are in our passage today.

We learn from **Luke 8:2** that Jesus had delivered Mary Magdalene from "seven demons and infirmities." And there is no other record in the gospels about Mary until we learn from **John 19:25** that Mary Magdalene stood with the other "Mary(s) near the base of the cross as Jesus was crucified and died. It seems clear that after Mary Magdalene's encounter with the freeing presence of Jesus, that Mary Magdalene became a devout disciple of Jesus who had delivered her from much suffering.

In the end of **20:1c** it says "Mary came to the tomb and found that ff...." Tombs that were cut out of stone required some type of "blocker" to cover the entrance to the tombs.



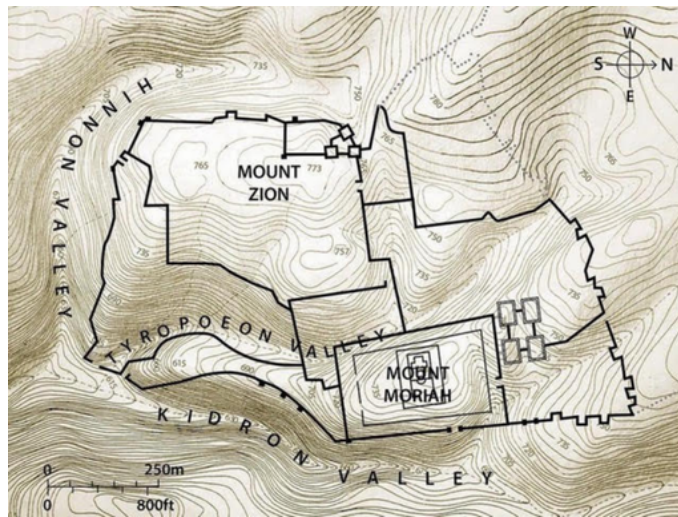
Typically these were solid round disc shaped stone blockers rolled in place covering the entrance, then sealed with plaster, until the placed bodies decomposed. Due to the stones extreme weight, even the smaller stone blockers required many hands or animals to move them. The text tells us that when Mary came to the tomb she found that the stone was rolled away from the entrance.

**V2** tells us that upon this discovery she ... The text does not tell us that she looked in the tomb at this point, however its implied that she did look in based on what she says to Peter and John.

Now note here all the “action words” associated with Mary Magdalene in the first two verses. **V1-2** This adds to the picture of who Mary Magdalene is. It seems from this account so far, that she is a deeply devoted, caring person with big feelings, and a person of action.

And look at what she says to Simon Peter and the other disciple.. who we interpret to be John the apostle and author. Mary says, **V2b** “They have taken away the Lord’s body from the tomb and we don’t know where they have put him.” Now her statement tells us several things. One, that Mary Magdalene was not alone at the tomb as she uses the word “we”....This is consistent with the other gospels that include the two other Mary’s present with her at the tomb. Another unique thing her statement tells us is because she uses the word “they”- it indicates that Mary assumes that “someone” did “something” with Jesus body..i.e. “moved it”. Possibilities of who the “they” are could be: the “gardener” - which we see proposed later in the story. Another possibility are the religious leaders or Roman authorities who may have interest in Jesus body, and some commentators have also proposed “grave robbers” looking for valuables, as who the “they” are that may have done something with Jesus body. What is clearly absent tho in Mary’s statement to Peter and John is any indication that she may have believed that a resurrection happened.

I imagine Mary’s announcement to Simon Peter and John being “very dramatic - a dramatic entrance and completely unexpected” (like a Kramer entrance on Seinfeld) and the result of Mary’s unexpected announcement is that these two disciples start running toward the tomb. **V3-4a** So more disciples “running” here. And to add to your mental picture, the only flat spot in Jerusalem is the temple mount and top of Mount Zion, its hills in every direction



so they are running up and down hills. And note its dark.. maybe they are carrying torches? That's kind of like running with scissors isn't it?

The text doesn't tell us why Mary went to Peter and John, it doesn't tell us where Peter and John were, but obviously she knew - and again for context, all this running was before daybreak. Any of you early morning runners? There you go.. it's biblical! We can tell from **v3** that Mary's pronouncement meant a lot to Peter and John because they then started out for the tomb.

**V4b** tells us "the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first". Now we start to have some comparison of characters. John the author offers us no further clue as to why he told us he arrived first. So it's probably not wise to surmise anything spiritual from his statement. It probably only means that John was younger and faster, ...and just maybe his personality was a tad competitive. I imagine the author John in his old age writing this, reminiscing on his youthful vitality.

**V5** tells us that John.. Its seems that John had some restraint that kept him from entering the tomb of his dead master. Maybe his Jewish practices of remaining ceremonially clean kept him from going in, especially during Passover. It's unclear why he showed restraint, but there was certainly some caution, some hesitancy at first. But it says he "looked in and saw the linen wrappings". The Greek indicates he was "peeping" in from outside of the tomb, and even from his cautious outside vantage point John could see the empty grave wrappings. FF Bruce describes the Greek word imagery here as the "wrappings" being "unoccupied" as if the body suddenly became free of its wrappings and the wrappings stayed in place, just collapsed, empty, unoccupied. And John's intentional inclusion of detail even informs the type of cloth, linen, which was consistent with burial wrappings of this time period.

Then Peter, bringing up the rear arrives on the scene. It doesn't tell us how long of a gap there was between John and Peter arriving at the tomb, it just tells us John was first. In **v6** we see the side of Peter we now have grown to expect -he blows past "cautious John" and goes right into the tomb. Some commentators call this "impetuous" - meaning done without thought, but maybe Peter is just bold and excitable!

We saw what John saw, now we see what Peter saw. John is careful to include in his writings that Peter also saw the linen wrappings as John saw them, making Peter the second witness. Having a second witness in the Greco Roman world is critical in the process of establishing truth by eyewitness. John is careful to include both John and Peter's witness for his Greek and Jewish readers because the report by Mary Magdalene, although she was an eyewitness, in their day would not be considered with nearly the same weight as Peter and John's witness. Both the Jewish Mishnah and Roman legal system at the time considered a woman's testimony "of little public account".

John also recorded in **v7** that Peter saw the “folded up face cloth”. There is much scholarly work done on researching the meaning of this and why John’s inspired gospel included this detail. Two proposed meanings were that someone took the time to be “neat” and “fold it up”. Or, that the Greek also means “rolled up” and thus perhaps lying as it would have been used, where it would have been used. How it was used is unclear and debated. Whatever the meaning, most scholars agree that the text supports that the glorified body of Jesus passed thru the grave wrappings and the wrappings were found where they lay, empty, unoccupied. The unoccupied grave wrappings, although “mute”, are a material witness.

Contrast those images of Jesus’ grave wrappings to John’s account of Lazarus’ grave wrappings coming out of his tomb in **John 11: 43-44**. Lazarus came out fully wrapped even his face.

In **v8** “cautious” John then went into the tomb. This appears to be an immediate “aha” moment, “light bulb fully on”, “mind is now blown” type of thing. John “went in, he saw, and he believed.”

So let’s track the “approach” of John to the empty tomb, and his journey of coming to believe in the resurrection of Jesus on the 3rd day. John hears the tomb is empty from Mary early in the morning, he runs to the tomb, peeps in cautiously/respectfully from outside and he sees the “unoccupied grave wrappings”. Then when Peter rushes into the tomb, John goes into tomb as well, and it says he “saw and believed”.

Now **v9** fills in more of this process for John of coming to belief. It seems to imply that when John saw the evidence indicating a resurrection on the Third day, that then OT scriptures pointing to the resurrection started falling into place in his thinking. Now keep in mind that his “belief” happens even tho he had not yet seen a risen Jesus. What the text adds here is important, it says in **v9** “for until then”, this critical point, they had “not understood the scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead.”

The text doesn’t tell us what scriptures these were. We will just look at one option: **Hosea 6:2 NIV** That we may live where? In his presence.. That sounds like what Jesus said would happen after he returned to the Father, which was after the resurrection **John 14:23b** .. “My Father will love them and we will come and make our home with each of them.” (in his presence).

The text in **John 20:8-9** does not include Peter coming to believe in the resurrection of Jesus at this point. Rather it just tells us in **v10** that they both left and went “home”. **Luke 24:12** tells us that Peter left the empty tomb “wondering what had happened.” I wonder how much shame and guilt Peter was carrying for the three denials? What we also know from Luke’s gospel is that later on this same day Jesus appeared specifically to Peter. **Luke 24:33-34**. And of course the rest of Peter’s life and writings and dying as a martyr would substantiate his belief in the resurrected Jesus.

So let’s track the approach of Peter to the empty tomb and his coming to believe in the resurrection of Jesus on the 3rd day. Initially Peter’s coming to belief is very similar to John’s process. Peter hears the tomb is empty from Mary early in the morning, he runs to the tomb, boldly runs right into the tomb, and sees the “unoccupied grave wrappings”. We know from Luke’s account that Peter leaves “wondering what happened”. And at some point that same day Jesus appears to Peter – Peter then tells the other disciples that Jesus is risen.

Now let’s return to Mary Magdalene’s approach to the empty tomb and her journey of belief in the resurrection of Jesus. **v11** There is some information not included here. The text does not tell us when she returned to the tomb after telling Peter and John that Jesus’ body was missing. In **v11** it just tells us she is there. In my mind, I imagine her running with Peter and John to the tomb, but the text doesn’t say that. And then when John and Peter leave, Mary stays.

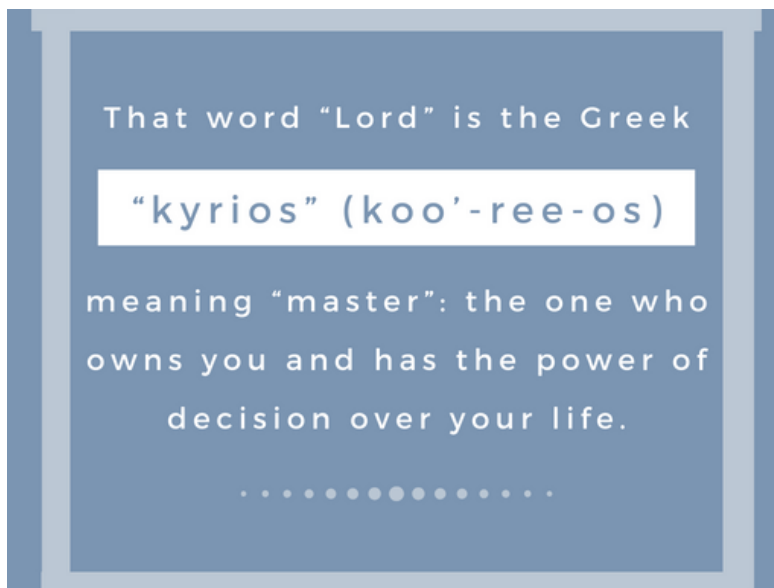
The text tells us Mary was “crying”, and tells us she “wept”.. so think a significant outpour of liquid emotions - grief....And John records that Mary, like both John and Peter, also looks in. This is the sense of sight - 1 of the three senses recorded by John in Mary’s experience.

What she saw was amazing and unique to her. **V12** A couple of observations. Note the angels where not mentioned by Peter and John so we can assume this angel appearance is unique to just Mary. Mary also noticed the angels were in “white”, which would stand in contrast to the darkness of the predawn, and the darkness of Mary’s mood. Mary also reported where the angels were sitting, one at the head, and one at the foot of where Jesus had been lying.

Some of have connected the positioning of the angels where Jesus laid, to the positioning of the angels over the “ark of the covenant”. **Exodus 25:19-20** Should **John 20:12** be an allusion to cherubim and the Ark of the Covenant, the spiritual meaning is unclear, other than to provide cool imagery and biblical continuity.

And in **v13a**, the angels speak to Mary and ask, “Dear woman, why are you crying?” Now just pause for a second here. Mary is at a tomb where there was a recent burial, and she is crying, which I think is the expected emotional display for someone who just lost someone. So the question itself indicates Mary’s “crying” is not congruent with the reality of the moment meaning no longer necessary, even tho Mary is in the tomb where her master was laid to rest. The question indicates something changed - as if the question itself is implying “there is no longer any need to cry”.

Mary responds to the angels question, **v13b** Mary’s response to the angels is similar to what she reported to Peter and John in the end of **v2b** except in Mary’s response to the angels she calls Jesus not “the Lord”, but “my Lord”.



That word “Lord” is the Greek “kyrios” (koo’-ree-os) meaning “master”: as the one who owns you and has the power of decision over your life. This word clearly fits her situation as Jesus is the “Lord-master” who set her free from the other master that she was a slave to who controlled her thru the seven demons. ....And in that context one can understand her deep devotion, and her sense of loss at Jesus death.

The angels don’t respond to Mary, rather in **V14** we read: John notes that she doesn’t recognize Jesus. We know there are at least two things indicated in the text that maybe preventing her from recognizing Jesus. The first is that Mary assumes that someone has taken away Jesus dead body. It’s what she told Peter and John and it’s what she told the angels. Her answer for the empty tomb seems to be an “assumption” without consideration of the supernatural. “Assumptions” can be blinding.

The 2nd thing we know that maybe preventing her from recognizing Jesus is her grief. Mary may be blinded by her tears, which is real, and she may be blinded by “grief” itself. John records Mary as “weeping” in **v11**, the angels note she is weeping in **v13**, and Jesus notes that she is weeping in **v15**. Being blinded by grief is a real thing. Grief can taint, twist, and shroud ones perception of reality. Grief can hold on to a person and cruelly not let them go, causing long time despair and depression. And grief can cause what comes out of ones mouth to be bitter, angry, sarcastic, despairing... And grief can “discourage” belief. Mary is grieving.

**V15** Jesus repeats the same question the angels asked... again the question implies “there is no longer any need to cry” – but that truth just hasn’t registered yet for Mary. And here Jesus asks her a second different question, “Who are you looking for?” Now this second question is a clue for the reader that something totally awesome happened. Where else did Jesus ask this question recently? .... It is the exact same question that Jesus asked back in **John 18:4 -5a** when Judas and the cohort of troops came to arrest Jesus in the Garden. When Jesus answered “I AM he”.. in the Greek it’s literally “the I AM is here”. That was Jesus saying he is Yaweh, Jehovah, The Great I AM. And remember that all the troops in including Judas, fell back when he said it. But here in **John 20:15** Jesus uses the same question “who are you looking for?” and it may cause the reader to lean in expecting something really cool to happen again related to Jesus being the Great I AM. The effect is different tho this time. The voice of Jesus as the I AM doesn’t cause the hearers to fall back, rather the voice of the I AM “draws the hearer to himself.” Watch how that happens.

**V15b** says Mary “thought he was the gardener..ff”. So once again, for the third time in the account, Mary asserts her assumption that someone took the body, but this time she ups her commitment, that if she knew where his body was she would “go and get him.” I love that. I tell you from my perspective, Mary Magdalene sounds like a force of nature. She’s going to feel what she is going to feel - and feel it deeply, and she is going do what she is going to do, and believe what she is going to believe until someone changes her thinking. No anyone like that? Who possibly could change her thinking?

**V16** This time when Jesus speaks to her he only speaks “one word”, her name. “Mary”. Jesus called her by name and she heard him. **John 10:3-4** Look how she responds. “Rabboni” doesn’t just mean “teacher” it means “my teacher”- in a possessive, honoring sense. And you can almost feel the immediate change in Mary- her distress vanishes.

And Mary doesn’t just respond with her voice, the next line (**v17a**) “don’t cling to me” implies she responds by rushing to and clinging to Jesus. That is a beautiful moment. That sudden lifting of heaviness, the instant relief that makes you feel like your levitating, that first deep cleansing breath of restored hope and assurance. My wife and I felt that after each of our son Daniel’s surgeries. I imagine Mary’s tears of grief turning to tears of joy. Jesus described it this way **John 16:20**

Jesus says to her in **v17a** “Don’t cling to me”. Given the context of Mary’s grief followed by huge “relief”, those words may seem harsh to us the reader. What the text does not tell us is how long or how hard she was literally holding on to Jesus. I think Jesus was, and I may be inserting my own personal feelings in this, I think Jesus after a long moment of Mary clinging to him, said to Mary.. “ah, Mary, you have to let me go” (sort of like, when you are on the receiving end of a suffocating hug).

Then Jesus said **17b** “for I have not yet ascended to the Father”. This is tougher to discern the meaning, but what I suggest it means is that Jesus is telling Mary several things here. One, as Jesus said before Jesus will be leaving her and the other disciples again”. Jesus is preparing her for another departure, not by death, rather by “ascension” to the Father. And the second thing Jesus is telling Mary, is that she is going to have to learn a new way to “cling to Jesus” after he leaves physically. This is consistent with what Jesus taught the disciples about “abiding” in **John 15**. She will have to learn to “cling” to Jesus thru “abiding”, thru His abiding Spirit in her, thru his abiding presence in her, thru His words in her heart and mind. And this new way of clinging to Jesus is better for her in this world.



The Jesus says in **v17c** “But go and ...ff”. This is the first time Jesus calls the eleven his “brothers”. This is the resurrected Jesus in an eternal glorified body, calling the “mortal” disciples - “brothers”. How are they “brothers”? Because they now thru the sacrifice of Jesus can share an eternal relationship with God their Father. And it clearly implies that “Mary” is a sister in this eternal family. The prophetic Psalm 22 says this in **v22** “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters”.

In **v18** we see Mary in action again. (Do you think she was running?)

And the first thing she did was “testified to the brothers” that she saw the risen Jesus, the Lord. Then she obediently gave them Jesus message.

How do you approach the empty tomb?



In our account today all three characters Mary, John, Peter, approached the empty tomb and looked in. They all saw what they were going to see thru their eyes, thru their filters. The text tells us “cautious” John, “peeped” into the tomb from outside”, saw the linen wrappings, then eventually followed Peter in, he went in, he saw he believed. John then understood what the empty tomb and grave wrappings meant thru the lense of scriptures he never understood before.

Impetuous Peter boldly ran into the tomb, saw the linen wrappings and face cloth and “left wondering what it meant” ... till Jesus personally appeared to him later that day.

But this passage today was really about Mary. **20:1b** say “Mary Magdalene came to the tomb..” That’s the first verse of this section. If you look at the last verse of this section, **20:18** you will see the last verse is also about Mary Magdalene. These two verses are “bookends of this section”, and both involve Mary. This is a Greek rhetoric device John uses in his writings called “inclusio” or “bracketing” and its used to draw attention to the main theme of a section of his gospel. Mary Magdalene’s approach to the empty tomb and her encounter with the resurrected Jesus are the focus of this passage. And we see her approach presented in comparison and contrast to the approach of Peter and John.

Mary came to the tomb broken in grief, she found the tomb empty, assumed the body was taken. She stated that it was taken three different times, to Peter and John, to the angels, and then to who she thought was the “gardener”. Mary was asked “why she was crying” twice. Mary was then asked “who she was looking for”. Then when she heard Jesus call her name, she recognized the voice, saw it was Jesus, she believed and physically touched - clung to - the risen Jesus. Thru Mary Magdalene we have the witness of the three senses - “see - hear - touch”. Mary’s saw the risen Jesus, heard the risen Jesus, and clung too, touched, the risen Jesus. We will see that again with Thomas in the next passage.

All three of these disciples had a different approaches to seeing the empty tomb, but in the end they all came to believe that there was a risen Jesus. In Greek culture three is more than enough to substantiate truth. We have three witnesses to the risen savior. We have three different approaches from three different people telling us that not everyone comes to believe via the same path. If there were a fourth person in this text, their approach and pathway would also be different. Every person has their own approach to the empty tomb, every person has their own pathway to belief, and in our account today - all came to believe. And it doesn't just stop there with belief, then they all testified about it, Mary was the first to do so.

How do you approach the empty tomb and the claims of a risen Jesus? Cautiously like John? boldly but with wonderings like Peter? Thru the lenses of heavy emotions? Thru the lenses of assumptions, like Mary? Does your heart and mind have room for the supernatural? Today you have looked into the empty tomb thru the eyes of Mary, John and Peter and saw what they saw.

My witness to you today, and the witness of Mary, Peter and John is that the reason there was an empty tomb is because there is a risen Jesus.

For you that are already disciples and followers of Jesus, He is risen and ascended to the Father. Learn to "cling" to the risen and ascended Jesus by "abiding" with Jesus, and be faithful to testify that Jesus is risen.

# SUPPLEMENTAL

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## NOTES:

- **20:1** Regarding second day of Passover and how the days were counted. Passover was celebrated for 7 days - day 1 being when the Hebrew slaves exited their homes for the last time walking under the blood of Passover lamb that was painted on their door frame as they walked out of the bondage of Egypt into freedom. The 7th day of Passover marked the miraculous crossing of the red sea when they were delivered from Pharaoh's army.
- **20:2** Who is the "they" that took the body? We know from another gospel, that after the religious leaders learn that Jesus body disappeared from the tomb, they propose that it was the disciples that stole Jesus body. So at least 3 possibilities for who the "they" is in v2. What they all would have an interest in Jesus body is up to you to research and answer.
- **20:9** Another "they". The text doesn't define who the "they" is in this verse. It reads as if it includes Peter, but in a collectivist society where there is less individual thinking, the word "they" could also include the other disciples.
- **20:10** The translation of the Greek word as "homes" in the NLT is distracting, rather it means they went to where they were staying.
- **20:17** ON Mary, seeing, hearing, touching Jesus. Look at what John the author later writes in his first letter **1 John 1:1-2** see if this fits.