

Introduction

Good morning, Union Church! If you are new here, or we just haven't had a chance to connect, my name is Kyle Rodriguez, I'm one of the pastors here, and I have to say, I see a lot of people who I haven't had a chance to connect with yet! One of the things we're eager to do as pastors, both myself and Pastor Ethan, is to get to know you and for you to get to know us, it's one of the best parts of pastoring. So, I just want to invite you to coffee, or lunch, where we can get to know you a bit. Come talk to me or Ethan after the service or fill out the connect card and make a note on the bottom. We'd love to do that.

What would you do if I told you that this past Friday, at 5:25 PM, somebody had posted clear footage of Bigfoot on YouTube, incontrovertible proof that Bigfoot really had existed all these years? Let's try another one. What would you do if I told you that last week, someone had published a peer-reviewed study proving that the earth was flat? Let's try one more. What would you do if I told you that Arkansas State University was the favorite to sign the number one football recruit in the country?

Do you know what the common denominator to all of those questions is? You would do nothing! Sure, some of you might go on YouTube and look for Bigfoot out of curiosity, some of you might get angry about flat-earthers and spend lunch bemoaning the lack of education in our country, and some of you might go look at the 2024 [Rivals.com](https://www.rivals.com) rankings to see who your team still has a chance at signing.

But the reality is that none of those *highly improbable* events would actually cause you to *do* anything significant. Because the most important question for most people today when they process information about the world is not: "Is this true? Did that really happen?" The most important question for most people is: "Does it matter?"

And the same thing is true as soon as we start talking about the resurrection. The primary that really determines what somebody thinks about Easter is not: "Did Jesus rise from the dead?" It's "Do I care? Does it help me? Does it help me flourish and be happy?"

And if it doesn't feel like it fits in that category, then we'll toss it aside and move on, whether it actually happened or not. It goes in the category of things other people care about, like Bigfoot and flat-earth and other people's sports teams. It might matter to them, but it doesn't matter to us.

And so, this morning, whether you are a skeptic, a disinterested family member, or you are a Christian, my aim is not to convince you that the resurrection happened—but to convince you that it *matters*.

Because if Jesus Christ rose from the dead, it means that at the center of the universe, at the center of existence itself is a person—and he can relate to us and meet with us in the ways our souls most long for and crave. If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then the most fundamental

aspect of reality is not impersonal structures like laws of physics and neutrons and electrons, but the most fundamental aspect of reality is a person.¹

If Jesus Christ is alive, then he can relate to us and care for our deepest longings.

And to show this to you, I want to look at three scenes from the book of John. Rebecca and George just read the classic resurrection text for us, but we're actually going to push past that scene to three different scenes, three encounters that Jesus has with real, flesh-and-blood people after he rises from the dead. If you want to know why Jesus should matter to you, then we should start by asking: Why did he matter to them?

So, let's pray, and then we'll get into it.

I. Jesus knows us.

We're going to begin by reading what happens directly after the disciples found the tomb empty. The first encounter that somebody has with Jesus after he is raised. Look at verse 11 with me:

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.

Mary, if you remember from the other gospels, had come to the tomb originally that morning with several other women to treat the body of Jesus with spices and oils—to give him a burial send-off that they felt he deserved. He was their leader, their teacher, their master.

But his body is gone, and Mary, still not realizing what has happened, is distraught. She has been robbed of one last bit of closure as the most important person in the world to her has passed. She is overcome by grief, experiencing the pain of loss once again. The wound of watching her Lord die on Friday has been torn open again here on Sunday.

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."

Mary still is not quite grasping what has happened. She's already processed the reality that Jesus has died—and she's stuck in this mode of thinking: He's gone! And not only is he dead, but they've even taken his body away, the one last chance she had to serve him, even if just his body, a shadow of the master she remembers.

This was the man who had saved her, the man who had saved her from seven demons! She had devoted her life to following him, to serving him, and now he's been ripped away from her in every possible sense. So, when the angels ask why she is so upset, all she can say is: "He's gone, and I don't know where he is. I don't know where to go. I don't know what to do."

¹ See recent thread by Dr. John Frame for more implications of this:
<https://twitter.com/DrJohnFrame/status/1638483037284384768>

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.”

So, Jesus asks her the same thing the angels did: Why are you weeping, what are you looking for? And again, overcome in grief, Mary is looking for anything, any place to put her grief. “Tell me where the body is, all I want is to take it and serve my Lord one last time.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

He said her name. Do you hear the beauty, the tenderness, the compassion, love, in his voice as he says her name: “Mary.” All he has to do is speak her name, and the scales fall from her eyes. What was lost has suddenly been found, grief instantly turned to joy. She falls at his feet and cries out “Rabboni,” or “Teacher.”

One of the most interesting books I’ve ever read is *The Book of the Dun Cow*—which tells story of a group of farm animals war against evil with such depth and richness that no children’s book has the right to have. But in that book, as the animals are trying to sleep in the night before battle, fear and paranoia begin to spread through the camp. And as he hears the doubt spread, their leader, Chauntecleer, begins to crow. But he doesn’t crow an inspiring battle cry, he simply begins to name the animals. Listen to one of my favorite passages I’ve ever read:

“Nimbus,” Chauntecleer crowed, “the Lord’s peace is with you.”

And Nimbus the Deer, whose flanks had begun to shiver, who was jerking his head, ready at a crack to leap and flee, Nimbus heard his own name in the mouth of his Lord, and he came to his senses again. Dark was suddenly not so dark anymore. He lay down encouraged—for who had known that he was so well known?²

Oh, brothers and sisters, do you see the wonder of what has happened here? Jesus has **known** Mary. In those two syllables are hidden the most intimate of knowledge: Jesus is not merely appearing to Mary, revealing himself visibly. He is knowing her, relating to her, meeting her.

Jesus knows Mary. He knows her present—how full of grief and fear she is. Mary was at the foot of his cross, grieving for him. He sees her weeping in distress now. He knows exactly what she has been through for the last three days. He knows her quivering fear at the uncertainty of what may come next.

He knows Mary’s past. He’s seen her at her worst, possessed not by one, but seven demons. He has seen her at her best, turning from her former life and committing everything to following him. He sees her deep desire to love and honor him, even after his death. He knows her, utterly and fully. The good and the bad. The admirable strength and the frail weakness. Her unbelief and her faith. She is known.

² Wangerin, Walter. *The Book of the Dun Cow*. London: Allen Lane, 1980.

Don't you want to be known?

Surely you have heard about the “loneliness epidemic” that is a part of our modern culture today. The most recent studies report that about 60 percent of American adults feel regular, chronic loneliness.³ It's especially high among young adults, parents, and minority groups, but it's found everywhere.

We long to be known and to know others, and we seek any and all avenues to do so. We may pour everything we have into a spouse. We may create social media profiles and seek connections where we can share our thoughts and creations. Earlier this spring, *The LA Times* reported on “gyms for your feelings”—basically emotional support groups where you could go to share anything and everything with a random person.⁴ We long to be known.

But being known is also terrifying because our weakest and most shameful parts can be known. Which is why our social media profiles are most often masks, carefully constructed facades of who we wish we were, with a constant threat of being canceled. It's why some are seeking out strangers with whom they have nothing to lose. Because if we're *really known* by others, they might reject us. And if we *really know* other people, we might find out things that would disappoint or even horrify us.

But because Jesus is a living, breathing person, he is somebody who not only can know us, but does. He—more than our parents who fail us, more than our friends who falter, more than our spouse that misunderstands us—knows us wholly and completely. He knows our greatest strengths and our greatest weaknesses. He's seen our most vulnerable, shameful moments and he's seen the ways that we can be redeemed and transformed into the people he created us to be.

Brothers and sisters, as a dark and fearful world rages around you, there is one who will speak your name—with the fullness of knowing you hidden in that single word. He's not merely some ethereal force out there; he's a person, he's alive, and he knows you.

II. Jesus assures us.

But let's keep moving.

After Jesus appears to Mary, he then appears to his disciples. Later that same day, in the evening, we read that Jesus appeared to his disciples. He showed them his hands and side, blessed them, and commissioned them. But one man was missing: Thomas. Look at verse 25:

³ “The Loneliness Epidemic Persists: A Post-Pandemic Look at the State of Loneliness among U.S. Adults.” The Cigna Group Newsroom. The Cigna Group. Accessed April 6, 2023.
<https://newsroom.thecignagroup.com/loneliness-epidemic-persists-post-pandemic-look>.

⁴ Raphael, Rina. “A Gym for Your Feelings? Emotional Support Now Comes with a Membership Fee.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, March 4, 2023.
<https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2023-03-02/social-wellness-startups-offer-emotional-support-circles>.

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.”

Thomas hasn't seen what the other disciples have seen. He wasn't there. And having not been there, he doesn't believe. Which is understandable. He hasn't seen it. He doesn't know.

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.”

Now, there is a lot of incredible things happening in this story, but what's fascinating to me is that Jesus **assures Thomas**. He assures him. Again, just like we see with Mary, he knows Thomas, he knows his doubts, he knows his frustration with the other disciples and his insecurities over having not been with them. He knows the wrestling Thomas has had between what he has heard with ears and what he hasn't seen with his eyes. He knows Thomas's doubts. But he doesn't leave Thomas there.

And in knowing Thomas's doubts, Jesus doesn't respond in anger: “Well, he doesn't believe in me, forget him!” And Jesus doesn't respond with indifference: “Well, he didn't believe, some other people will believe, what are you going to do?”

No, Jesus does not respond to the doubts and weaknesses of his people with anger or indifference, he responds to them with assurance: “Feel the hole where the nail was, Thomas, thrust your hand into my pierced side. Do not disbelieve, but believe!”

This is the thing, the thing you have to get: Gravity doesn't care whether you believe it or not. The earth doesn't care whether you think it's flat or not. And a dead messiah doesn't care if you worship him or not.

But Jesus is alive, and he cares about the people he came to save. This is the shepherd that leaves the 99 to find the one lost, the widow that searches everywhere to find her coin, the father who kills a fatted calf to welcome home his prodigal son. This is a God who longs to assure his people.

And the unimaginable beauty of Jesus as this active agent of assurance is that he not only assures his people in our doubts, he also assures us of our forgiveness. Because he is alive, he actually can assure us that we are right with God himself.

The fundamental question for every human being is not: Do I believe in God? The fundamental question for every human being that has ever existed is: Am I right with God?

This is the primary question that determines everything about you: how much joy you experience here and now, what you center your life around, the kind of legacy you are leaving for your family, and especially what your eternity will look like. Not: Do I believe in God, but am I right with him?

James 2 says: “You believe that there is one God, good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” If you’re looking for real peace—both for eternity and right now—the real thing you need is not Jesus to assure you of your doubts whether or not God is real, but to assure you that you are forgiven.

Because the Bible teaches really clearly that each of us has failed to live up to the standard that God has set for humanity, that God created each of us to reflect his image upon the world, including reflecting his holiness and morality. But we have failed to do so. We, like Thomas, have doubted God himself, have distrusted his Words, have failed to live into the calling he’s given us. In the Bible’s terms: We have sinned—and the natural consequence of sin is death.

But God, in his infinite love for us, sent his Son, Jesus, who was God himself but also a man, to live the perfect life, to reflect the holiness and perfect morality of God upon the world, fulfilling what we could never do. And then he subjected himself to death on a cross in our place, as a substitute, taking the punishment that we deserve.

And the wonder of the resurrection is that it is the vindication of Jesus, the proof that his sacrifice worked!

As one pastor put it “Death could not hold Jesus because the wages of sin is death, and he paid all the wages of sin, and since death no longer had claim on him, he could not stay dead.”⁵ If Jesus is alive, that means that the sins of his people have been totally and completely paid for—there is no debt left to repay, no divine anger to left to appease, no wrong left to be appeased. If Jesus is alive, then it is finished!

So, when Jesus shows up to his disciples, it’s not a coincidence that he shows them his scars. Isn’t that kind of a strange detail? Couldn’t he have just said: “Look at my face!” Couldn’t he have just spoken to them, like he did Mary? Don’t they know his voice? For that matter, why does he even have the scars? He’s in a resurrected, supernatural, glorified body! Who wants ugly scars on their resurrected body?

Brothers and sisters, he showed them his scars because it is the scars—on a living, breathing body—that are the ultimate assurance, the final proof that redemption has been secured.

Look, we all are looking for assurance. I know it, you know it. We want to hear that we are doing something right—whether it is from our friends, our family, our idols, or God.

But the assurance of the resurrection is not that you are doing something right, but that something right has been done for you!

⁵ Pastor Kevin DeYoung: <https://twitter.com/revkevdeyoung/status/1249726065481744386>

Don't be assured because you have put together a great life: your life may fall apart tomorrow! Don't be assured because you please people and receive their likes and retweets: their approval is fickle and fleeting. Don't be assured because you are a better person than most: sin has just so corroded the air you breathe that you can't even smell it on yourself anymore.

Be assured because Jesus bought your eternal forgiveness, and he has the receipt engraved on his hands and his feet. He has the proof of purchase carved into his side. Do not disbelieve, but believe!

And perhaps its true too that one day, when we see Christ face-to-face, we'll still have our scars too. Perhaps, even in eternity, in resurrected bodies, our mental, emotional, and moral scars will not fade from memory, but remain. But they won't remain as sources of shame, but as trophies of God's wonderful grace—proof of the work Christ has done for us and in us. Our weaknesses, our failures, our hurts—they won't be painful memories of what we once did, but glorious reminders of who we really are: the redeemed children of God!

And the same is true right now.

Thomas saw the wounds of Christ, we do not. But we do see his wounds by faith as we hear the gospel witness of other people who have seen him and see the ways that they have been healed, transformed, and made whole through him.

Christian, we often talk about how we are the hands and feet of Jesus—well, his hands and feet had scars. You have scars. But those scars—the painful wounds of failure and weakness that have been healed by the risen Christ—are the way in which Christ assures other people of their forgiveness in the midst of their doubt.

Let him speak resurrection power through you, that others might see him with eyes of faith and cry out: "My Lord and My God!"

To the doubter, the skeptic, I plead with you, bring your skepticism to the Lord. He's a person, he is alive, and he longs to assure his sheep. Ask him, and he hears you. He may not show up to you physically, but like he told Thomas, it's actually better for you if he doesn't show up physically, if you believe without seeing. But he will show up in other ways: His Spirit will testify to you that you are a child of the King, his sons and daughters will testify to you of his healing, forgiving power. The resurrection matters because a living Savior can assure you.

III. Jesus can receive and equip you.

Okay, last encounter with Jesus. In the very next chapter, chapter 21, we see the disciples going fishing. And like most of the stories about the disciples' fishing—they are surprisingly unlucky. They don't catch anything, all night—which surely would be discouraging after arranging a fishing trip for seven people.

But once again, Jesus shows up.

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish.

Now, this isn't the first time Jesus had done this particular miracle. If you're familiar with the Gospels, you'll remember that in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has a similar encounter when he went out on the boat of some fishermen, told Peter to let down the nets after they hadn't caught anything the night before, and produced a massive catch of fish. And perhaps it's for this reason that the disciples now recognize this man on the shore as their Master:

That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not too far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

I just have to make a quick aside: the action of Peter here is the action only someone who has been known and assured by Jesus can have. The first time that Peter had a miraculous encounter with Jesus in the context of a great catch of fish, do you know what he did? He fell down on his knees and cried out “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”

He recognized the holiness, the god-like character of Jesus, and knew that he was not right with God! He said: Leave me! But now, having been known by him and assured by him, Peter leaps into the water, willing to do whatever it takes to get to God's Son.

But, back to our encounter. What's fascinating about this encounter is not what the disciples do, but what Jesus does. Look at verse 9. When they got to land, they found that Jesus had made them breakfast. And he invited them, verse 12: “Come and have breakfast.”

And what's the reason why he gives them breakfast? Well, I think two things: One, he cared for them, which has been a recurring theme this morning. He cared for their needs, and after a long, frustrating night of futile fishing, Jesus knew that what they needed was a meal.

But I think there's something else happening here as well: Jesus is feeding them because he's about to give them a job. What happens next is Jesus's famous commissioning of Peter, which of course, though specifically said to Peter was a summary of what he called all of his disciples to:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of

John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he had said to him the third time “Do you love me? And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

Oh, there is so much here in this rich, rich little vignette, but what’s important for us this morning is simply this: Because Jesus is alive, he not only knows us and assures us, but he also equips us—equips us for a new purpose.

And listen, friend, we need purpose. We all know it. We see it from the smallest of ages: almost 90 percent of the time, when my two-year-old, Judah, is getting upset, what he needs is a job. He needs something to do. He needs something to focus his attention on in order to be able to reset from whatever circumstantial crisis has rocked his world—like the dog eating one of his Cheerios.

But the same is true in adults. Even secular studies will show that increased levels of a sense of purpose generally is correlated with:

- Longer life, including lower risk of heart disease and Alzheimer’s
- Being better at handling pain and suffering
- Being more engaged in satisfying relationships⁶

And there’s not just a sociological reason for this, there is a theological reason for this: Because God created us for purpose. We are not mere molecules floating along as a result of random chance, we are people made in the image of God for a purpose. And listen, who better to give you purpose than the one who created you, who lived for you, who died for you, and who rose from the dead? Who better to give you purpose than the one who really knows you (your strengths and your weaknesses), who assures you (therefore affirming you despite your weakness), and the one who serves and equips you (putting you in the best position to succeed)?

Even Peter, who had failed Christ in the most crucial moment: denying him three times when Jesus was arrested and alone, even he is called and equipped for purpose.

Resurrection matters because a *living* Savior can equip you and call you to purpose—even if every moment before was marked by frustration and failure.

Conclusion

So, no matter who you are this morning, Jesus Christ can know you, assure you, and equip you. Are you drowning in grief, like Mary? Have you wrestled with doubts, like Thomas? Are you a follower of Jesus ashamed of falling short and disappointing him, like Peter? He can know you, assure you, and equip you because he is ALIVE.

⁶ Leonard, Barb, and Mary Jo Kreitzer. “Why Is Life Purpose Important”. University of Minnesota. Accessed April 7, 2023. <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/why-life-purpose-important>.

He may not show up to you visibly, but he has sent his Spirit to testify to your soul that this is true. You may not see him, but Mary and Thomas and Peter did, and their testimony remains on these pages. You may not have yet encountered him, but these men and women all around you have, and as they sing their lungs out, as they take communion, as they serve you as fellow sheep of the Good Shepherd, they witness to you that it's real! It matters! I've been known and assured and equipped by my Savior!

The resurrection matters, because if it's true, then the most fundamental longings and desires of your heart can be met. Your desire to be known, to be assured and forgiven, to achieve the things you were made to do: all of them can only fully and finally met in Jesus.

Do you want that? Then take the leap off the boat. Go to him. Don't let another moment stop you. Trust that the living Jesus Christ will not reject you but will be waiting at the shore with breakfast made. There is nowhere else to go but into his scarred, outstretched hands.