

He Is Risen!!

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Easter Weekend

April 17, 2022

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John 20:1-18 (NIV)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

“They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”).

¹⁷ Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

The true story

Here it is. The truth. The TRUTH. Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected by God after his crucifixion at the hands of the Romans and the Jewish leaders. If this were not true, there would be no Christians and no one would speak Jesus’ name, in vain or otherwise. But it is true. Jesus is risen and lives still!

And so the crowds filed away. It had been quite a spectacle and yet disturbing in a way that other crucifixions had never been. Nonetheless, the body of this dead rebel king hung there on the cross with blood trailing down from where the Roman soldiers had stabbed it after death. Humiliated and scorned, Jesus of Nazareth had ended up just one more in a long list of disappointments. It was over . . . time to go find a new hope, a new messiah, a new horse to bet on.

Or so it seemed.

I’m sometimes asked why the disciples didn’t “get it.” Didn’t they know that Jesus must rise from the dead? Hadn’t he told them as much? In v.8 of his resurrection account, John reminds us that they did not yet understand. Frankly, it would have been odd if they had.

Jesus and all his disciples were devout Jews. For any first-century Jew, the Messiah was God's returning king who would usher in God's kingdom, doing so in power and might and wonder and glory, for all the world to see. Thus, even though Peter had confessed to Jesus that, yes, Jesus was the Messiah (Matt 16:16), Peter was completely bewildered and terrified when Jesus was arrested and tried.

Peter, and everyone else in Jerusalem, knew what the Romans did to would-be messiahs. The Romans crucified them in a most public demonstration of the fate that awaited anyone who challenged the authority of Rome. Here is the part that is most hard for us to comprehend 2,000 years later – to any first-century Jew, the fact that Jesus ended up dead on a Roman cross meant that he was surely not the Messiah! “Resurrected Messiah” simply wasn't in the Jewish vocabulary, any more so than “Crucified Messiah.” Little wonder then that Mary mistook the risen Jesus for the gardener (v. 15)!

Only after Jesus appeared to the disciples and more than 500 others (1 Cor 15:6) and only after the Holy Spirit came to the disciples on Pentecost did they begin to comprehend what had happened. Only then did they grasp that the Messiah's suffering and resurrection was fully in accordance with the Jewish scriptures. It was Jesus' resurrection that led them to proclaim: yes, Jesus was and is the Messiah. Yes, God's kingdom had come; not fully, but it had come. Yes, the resurrection had begun, though oddly so.¹ But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

“I have seen the Lord!”

Mary Magdalene has made her way to Jesus' tomb early on Sunday morning. *Very* early. It is still dark. She is going to help finish preparing Jesus' body for the year or so

“So that you may believe . . .”

John's gospel is the only one that tells us its explicit purpose – that the reader may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and, therefore, may have life in Jesus' name (20:30-31).

From end to end, this gospel is about believing, placing one's faith in Jesus as Lord and God. Then, and now, each person, man and woman, is asked, “Will you believe?”

In the gospel, one comes to believe in two seemingly contradictory ways. First, when Nicodemus comes to see Jesus in the night, Jesus uses the “language of faith, which implies a meaningful human decision to believe in Jesus, a decision that expresses one's conviction and moral intent . . . [there is] no fence straddling, one is in or out.”¹ (see 3:16-21).

Yet, on the other hand, Jesus also uses the language of being born a second time, or better, born from above (3:1-10). A baby does not participate in its birth. Life is God's gift to the baby. In the same way, faith is a gift.

We often struggle with these seeming contradictions. We tend to insist that it must be an “either/or,” in which faith results from either our free choice *or* God's gift. Yet, the Christian proclamation is grounded in true, but admittedly, challenging “*ands*.” Our decision to believe is genuine and freely made, *and* it is a gift from God. Here's a couple more of the foundational “*ands*.” Jesus is fully God *and* fully human. Not sometimes one and sometimes the other. Not half-and-half. Fully God *and* fully human. God is one, yet three. A unity of one *and* a community of three. One inherently relational God. How such things can be, are beyond our reckoning. But our ability to understand something is not the measure of its truth.

¹ First-century Jews expected that upon the arrival of the Messiah and God's kingdom, all God's people would be bodily resurrected – all of them, at one time. But Jesus' resurrection, accompanied by no others, meant that the resurrection had begun but was not completed. Hence, Paul describes Jesus as the “first fruits of those who have died” and promises that “all will be made alive in Christ . . . raised imperishable . . . in the twinkling of an eye.”

it will lie in the tomb,² as there hadn't been time to finish the burial preparations before sundown on Friday.

But when Mary arrives, she finds that the large, heavy, round stone blocking the doorway into the tomb has been rolled away.³ Something is terribly wrong and without even looking in the tomb, she races to find Peter and another disciple. After running back to the tomb, the disciples discover that the tomb is empty. And empty in a weird way. The burial cloths that had been used to wrap Jesus' body are still lying on the stone slab. But they aren't piled haphazardly, as if tossed aside when the body was removed. Instead, they look like they had been wrapped around a balloon that had been deflated.

After the other disciples head home, surely perplexed and frightened, Mary stays behind, standing quietly in the garden just outside the tomb. She weeps, knowing only that Jesus' body is missing, surely stolen by some of her Lord's opponents.

After a bit, she goes over to the open tomb to look for herself. I suppose most of us would do that. Still crying, Mary peers into the tomb and sees not an empty slab of stone, but two angels. They are dressed in white and sitting right on the slab where Jesus' body had lain.

As best you can, try to put yourself in Mary's place. Jesus' body gone one minute and then . . . and then . . . two angels. How could the mind take in such a thing? Interestingly, this is one of the few occasions in Scripture when the angels' first words aren't "Be not afraid." Instead, they ask her why she is crying, as if that isn't self-evident. Mary straightforwardly tells the angels that she is weeping because someone has made off with Jesus' body.

Then she glances outside the tomb and sees someone working; it must be the gardener. He has overheard her and asks who she is looking for. Thinking that the gardener may have helped to carry off Jesus' body, Mary asks only to know where the body has been taken.

And then the reality of the post-Easter world falls full square on this Galilean woman. The gardener turns to her and calls her name. She has been talking to Jesus.

Could we possibly pretend to know everything running through her mind at that moment? Could John, the writer of this story? Of course not. I doubt that Mary could articulate it herself. N. T. Wright offers us a few reflections on this poignant moment:

Mary's intuitive guess, that he must be the gardener, was wrong at one level and right, deeply right, at another. This is the new creation. Jesus is the beginning of it. Remember Pilate: 'Here's the man!' Here he is: the new Adam, the gardener, charged with bringing the chaos of God's creation into new order, into flower, into fruitfulness. He has come to uproot the thorns and thistles and replace them with blossoms and harvests. As we stand there and listen, overhearing Mary's conversation (a typical sequence, for John, of people getting the wrong idea), let the pain of the people you're with speak itself to Jesus, whether or not they know who he is.

Then listen for the name. It is greeting, consolation, gentle rebuke ('Come on! Don't you know me?') and invitation, all rolled into one. Of course we know him. Of course we don't know him. He is the same. He is different. He is alive, with a new sort of life, the like of which we'd never seen before. Let Jesus call your own

²Jesus was crucified on Friday afternoon. When Jesus' body is taken down from the cross, there isn't much time left, for no Jew would touch a dead body on the Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday. The Jews of Jesus' day practiced a two-stage burial. Jesus' body was to lie in the tomb for a year or so, until only the bones were left. Then, his bones would be collected and placed in an ossuary, a bone box, and placed in a tomb alongside other bone boxes.

³Because families needed regular access to first-century tombs, the doors were often blocked with a round stone that could be rolled away if needed but would otherwise keep animals out of the tomb.

name, and the name of whoever you've brought with you, whoever needs his love and healing today. And then take it from there. Let the prayer flow on into whatever new conversation is appropriate.⁴

Mary starts to embrace Jesus, but things are not as they had been before. Jesus tells her that she is not to cling to him. Jesus will not stay with her and the other disciples, he must yet return to the Father. So Mary, the first apostle, rushes to tell the other disciples that Jesus' body was not stolen. God had resurrected Jesus. "I have seen the Lord," she exclaims when she finds them. He lives!

Resurrection?

Most Jews of Jesus' day believed that God would bodily resurrect all the dead when the last days arrived and God put all things to rights. However, most Jews would never accept the claim that God had resurrected this one man only, this Galilean Jew who had died a humiliating death by crucifixion.

The Greeks, too, spoke of resurrection, *anastasis*, but they believed it could never happen. They could conceive of resurrection, but they just didn't think it could happen for, indeed, it never had. For Greek and Jew alike, resurrection meant newly embodied life after death. It would be like Achilles returning from Hades or Joshua from Sheol.⁵

There is one point here about which we need to be *absolutely clear*, for I hear Christians getting this wrong all the time.

We are *not* talking about resuscitation, being brought back from the dead to return to one's life (as on a modern-day operating table) and still having to face death. That was Lazarus: Jesus brought him back to life, but Lazarus returned to his home, aged, and died. The same is true of all the people in the Bible who are brought *back* to life.

In contrast, we claim that Jesus was resurrected by God, not merely resuscitated. He passed *through* death to a life after death (Friday evening to early Sunday morning) and then to newly embodied life on Sunday. He is brought *forward*. Resurrection is about the restoration of the whole person—body and soul, we might say. Resurrection puts back together what death ripped apart. After his resurrection, Jesus walked with his disciples and even asked one to touch his wounds. He ate fish with them so they could see that he was still "flesh and bone" (Luke 24:36-49). Transformed yes, glorified yes . . . but still Jesus with a material body. He will not face death again. And his resurrection changes everything.

To reiterate, if Jesus was really and truly resurrected, then, yes, he is the long-awaited Messiah and truly the great "I am." If he was not resurrected, there is no reason to place any of our faith in him, for, as Paul puts it, we'd be more pitiable than any, for we'd have believed a lie. But it did happen. Jesus was resurrected by God. The cross was truly the place of victory not of defeat. Every person must confront this claim and all the attendant challenges and joys that comes with faith in Christ.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Easter is the first great answer to that prayer. Our celebration of Easter reminds us that we and this world are God's creations and that our future is grounded in this world. Easter is good news for us and the world precisely because it is about the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Our hope lies not in some spiritual escape into heaven, but the restoration and renewal of God's world, "a new heaven and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17; Rev 21:1). If we speak only of a "spiritual" resurrection, with Jesus' body left in the tomb or stolen away, Christianity becomes about nothing

⁴ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (146). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

⁵These are the abodes of the dead in these ancient cosmologies.

more than some private, other-worldly salvation. Instead, borrowing N.T. Wright's⁶ phrase, resurrection makes us a "kingdom on earth as it is in heaven" people.

A world put right

In the New Testament, Jesus' resurrection is neither the place of God's victory over sin and death nor the climax of the story. Rather, the victory is won by Jesus' faithfulness all the way to his death on the cross. Jesus' faithfulness even in death makes us "at-one" with God.

The resurrection then is the *proof* that this is so. The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus was who he claimed to be, not merely another failed would-be messiah who met a bad end. The resurrection is the vindication of Jesus and is the truth claim on which Christianity stands or falls.

N. T. Wright once put it this way. "Let's make no bones about it: if Easter isn't good news then there is no good news. But if it is – if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed – then Easter Day, and the Easter message, is the true sun which, when it rises, puts all other suns to shame." Alleluia! Alleluia!

So Shall We Be Resurrected!

Paul can hardly believe what he hears from the Corinthians. Deny Jesus' resurrection!? In response, he lists witnesses who can testify to the truth of the claim. There are nearly 500 and most are still living, Paul writes. And, he goes on, if Jesus wasn't bodily resurrected then Christianity is one big lie and the believers, all those who placed their faith in Jesus, are to be pitied. "If Christ has not been raised," Paul writes, "your faith is futile and you are still in your sins . . . if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

But there's more. If Jesus wasn't resurrected, then we won't be resurrected ourselves. Thankfully, however, as Paul writes, "the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries . . . Everybody dies in Adam; everybody comes alive in Christ. But we have to wait our turn: Christ is first, then those with him at his Coming" (from *The Message*). To translate it more literally, Jesus Christ is "the first fruits of the those who have died." Jesus is the first to be resurrected, then when he returns, the rest of us will be resurrected too! THE REST OF US??!!

Yes, simply put, the creedal affirmation, "the resurrection of the body," is not about Jesus' resurrection, which we affirm earlier in the creed, it is about our own bodies. As Jesus was raised so shall we all be raised! Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom. 8:11).

The Jews of Jesus' day believed that when the Last Days arrived, all the dead would be resurrected. Paul is agreeing with that. Jesus is the first and the rest of us will follow; there just happens to be 2,000 years, so far, between the first person to be resurrected, Jesus, and the rest of us. To use Paul's agricultural metaphor of Jesus as the "first fruits," God's harvest is underway, it just seems to be taking a long time, by our measure of time at least.

If this all seems just a bit too fantastical and even weird to you, consider our affirmation of Jesus' resurrection. That doesn't seem so fantastical only because we've gotten used to the idea. But once you've accepted as true the claim that Jesus was resurrected and walked out of the tomb after having died . . . well, then everything is on the table. Being a Christian actually takes a big imagination, a mind and heart that refuses to try and shrink God into a small box that seems "reasonable" to us.

⁶ N.T. Wright is a noted New Testament historian. This is from an article, "Why Easter Matters," in his book, *For All God's Worth*, Eerdmann's, 1997.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Isaiah*

We continue our study of Isaiah.

This class will not meet on April 25.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

This class will not meet on April 26.

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This class will not meet on Easter.

We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.