

He is Alive!

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John 20¹⁻¹⁸

In his book *My Quest for Beauty* the famous therapist Rollo May recalls stumbling across an all-night celebration of a Greek Orthodox Easter. At a point in the service the priest declares 'Christos Anesti' (Christ is Risen). Everyone present including Rollo May declared: 'He is risen indeed!' Rollo May writes:

'I was seized then by a moment of spiritual reality: what would it mean for our world if He had truly risen?'

The English evangelist J. John answers this question:

'If the resurrection of Jesus did happen, then the implications are breathtaking. Everything the Bible says about Jesus is true: God can be known as Father, forgiveness is possible, heaven is attainable and death is just a short sleep before eternal joy ... Whether or not the resurrection happened isn't just a fact of history; it is a fact that changes our future.' (The Life by J. John)

There are two key points here: firstly, the early church understood the resurrection as an unquestioned fact but it was always questioned by those who were outside the faith. Despite this everything in our faith turns on the reality of this assertion – that Jesus is risen from the dead. Jesus really is alive.

Secondly, once accepted as a fact it is something that doesn't remain history but rather changes our future: so we can really live. This is so important that we are spending not just today, but the next 40 days, exploring this theme, looking at how Jesus appeared to hundreds of His followers on at least eleven different occasions, and how those appearances changed the lives of all who met Him.

We want to invite you to join us over the next six or seven Sundays as we look at these life-changing encounters. Today, to start the whole series – we are going to be looking at John 20:1–18 and the first of the resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene. Our first key point is that:

1. Jesus really is alive!

There are two key facts that help us see that Jesus really is alive!

A. He is absent from the tomb

John describes in some detail, in a very authentic way, what actually happened on the first Easter.

- The first thing he does is he tells us the story of Mary Magdalene and how she became the first to witness the empty tomb (John 20:1b). In first century Jewish society, women were not considered reliable witnesses. If gospel writers were making the story up, they would never have had women as the first witnesses.
- Secondly, when they arrived, not only was the tomb empty, but the stone that had been closed over the tomb, had

been rolled away. Who moved it and where had it gone? (John 20:1c)

- Thirdly, we need to realise that Mary and the male disciples had no expectation of the resurrection (despite what Jesus had said to them). (John 20:2)
- Fourthly, when they go into the tomb, Peter, John and Mary all see grave clothes (John 20:5–6). Maybe robbers stole the body? If that is the case, they left the most important and valuable thing behind – the grave clothes.
- And then there was a final piece of evidence. The folded up head cloth (20:7). Jewish custom: If you had a meal with a friend and enjoyed it, you would take your napkin, crumple it up and leave it on the table as if to say 'I love this meal and I'm coming back'. If you didn't enjoy the meal you folded it up to say 'I didn't enjoy this and I have no intention of coming back'. Why is Jesus' head cloth folded up? One possible interpretation is that He didn't enjoy death and He has no plans of going back there, of going back into the tomb.

And on the basis of this evidence the apostle John 'saw and believed' (John 20:8).

But of course, the religious rulers of the time had thought of this and spread a theory that explained Jesus' absence from the tomb and this has tended to be raised time and again by those who wish to discredit the Bible. The story they advised the guards to tell however is hardly believable given that the guards were well armed

and would've feared for their life had they allowed themselves to be defeated. And there is another major problem with this. If the disciples had stolen the body then it means that virtually all of them died for a lie. Now there may be a few people who are willing to die for the truth but how many would really die for a lie? The very fact that the apostles preferred death to recanting their belief in a risen Christ show how fully they believed in Christ's resurrection.

Chuck Colson was a key member of the Watergate gang – a group of people whose crime eventually led to the impeachment of President Nixon. He became a Christian through this and wrote quite a few books. In one he says this about lying...

"I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."

So the first key truth is that Jesus is absent from the tomb and that very little else can explain this. The second is that:

B. He is present with His people

In John 20 we read that:

- He appears first to Mary Magdalene in the garden.
- Over the next 40 days Jesus appears to over 500 others, on eleven different occasions. The former Chief Justice, Lord Darling said:

“In its favour as living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true.”

So the question is, ‘So what? What implication does it have for our world today?’ Because Jesus really is alive and because death couldn’t hold Him, everyone who has an encounter with Him can really come alive too. Jesus really is alive and so therefore:

2. We can have FULNESS FOF LIFE!

The good news is that death, darkness and despair can be overcome in our lives because Jesus really is alive. But what precisely does it mean to have fullness of life. To be really alive means to be free from:

A. The power of darkness

The greatest evil we face today is not from a cold and faceless universe but from... each other – from humanity itself. How might we be free of our own propensity for evil? Mary sets out ‘early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark’ (John 20:1a). On one level John is just telling us about the time of day. On another, he is telling us that for Mary darkness seemed to be her only option for

survival since in the darkness she would not be seen visiting the grave of One who died as a criminal. Darkness was, as it were, her only option. Yet by the time she leaves the tomb, it was 'after sunrise' (Mark 16:2), and not only had a new day had dawned, but she had met the Risen Lord – His light had come again into her life. I'm reminded about promise of Jesus in John 8:12 where He says:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. (John 8:12)

The second promise is that because Jesus really is alive we can be free from:

B. Freedom from the fear of death

Throughout history men and women have unsuccessfully tried to overcome death. We can't ultimately arrest the ageing process. Whether we like it or not, we are all getting older...

In Jewish theology a great resurrection was predicted but with the first sighting of Jesus by Mary at the tomb finally they had proof that God's plan to defeat death was, in fact, real. But what does defeat mean in this context?

We are all still going to die. Is death truly defeated?

When a nation is defeated in war none of the soldiers who died in that war will ever return to life but what will happen is that the future is changed because the threat to the future that the aggressive nation posed is now no longer. So defeat of that nation really means the future is changed – not the past.

We have, unfortunately, a leg in the past, in that we inherit a sin nature which effects our bodily life and for which death is the ultimate end. But because of Christ's resurrection the end of that body does not mean the end of us. Death's power to change our future has been defeated and we will go on – in Christ. The amazing news of Easter is that Jesus' resurrection provides the ultimate promise that life has overcome death, and therefore death is not the end.

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this? (John 11:25–26)

What a twofold promise!

1. Firstly the promise that physical death is not a thing to be feared, because for Christians, physical death is not the end.
2. Secondly, even in this life we can start to enjoy real life, eternal life – love, joy, and peace on the inside. Forgiveness for our past and the hope for a future start now! These things all provide a taste of heaven.

Finally there is the promise of freedom from:

C. Freedom from despair

Despair affects all of us at some time. In the 2012/13 New Zealand Health Survey, one in six New Zealand adults (16%, or an estimated 582,000 adults) had been diagnosed with a common mental

disorder at some time in their lives (including depression, bipolar disorder and/or anxiety disorder).

The good news about Easter day and this encounter that Mary Magdalene had with Jesus is that Jesus understands this despair and understands the very human emotions which affects us all and, more than this, Jesus is willing to walk with us through these things. Jesus' love does not reject those who are in despair but draws closer to it.

Mary first mistakes Jesus for the gardener, but suddenly everything changes when Jesus calls her name. As soon as she hears her name; she recognises the same Jesus. The darkness went, the fear of death went, and the despair is pushed back.

Like Mary, Jesus knows your name, and wants, by His Spirit, to speak to you. When you hear Him calling you, everything changes – we are not alone. Mary is so thrilled to see Jesus that she clings on to Him. Yet Jesus responds:

Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned 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.' (John 20:17)

Here Jesus is declaring a wonderful change in the relationship that was not just for Mary but for all believers at all times. We don't have Jesus physically present with us right now for He is in bodily form at the right hand of the Father. What we do now have is His Holy Spirit present everywhere on the earth. And through Jesus we

now have an invitation to know His Father God, as our Father God!
And when you know the love of God the Father – everything
changes!