

Mary Magdalene's and Thomas' Testimony About Christ

John 20:1-31

The Gospel of John Sermon Series

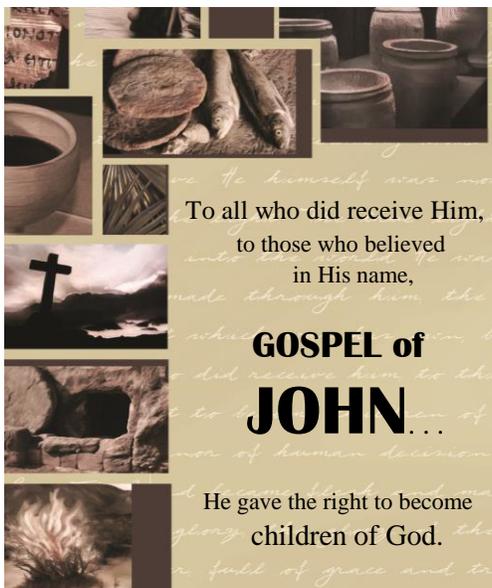
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

April 20, 2014 (Easter Sunday)

TEXT: John 20:1-31

There is a palpable sense of joy in the sanctuary this morning as we celebrate the resurrection, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. This is the true meaning of Easter, and it is relevant for



everyone here and relevant for everyone who is not here, as well. This certainty arises from a whole series of testimonies about Jesus that we have been following together for months. This morning, we look at two testimonies which are, in fact, really four. We look at Mary Magdalene's testimony and Thomas' testimony, and each of these testimonies launches a wave of missionary activity that comes all the way to us this morning.

In John 20:1, John tells us:

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.”

There are three time references which stand like garlands at the entrance of this stage. They decorate the entrance to Jesus' tomb. This very day, a whole new time begins. On the week's first day, the morning's first dawning, the crown of this glorious weekend, we have the beginning of the first day of the first year of the risen Lord's reign. Although Mary does not yet really know this fact of facts, and it is still dark, she makes her way faithfully right to the center of history. Every Sunday since, people have come on this morning and made their way to this same empty tomb, at its nearest place of celebration, and that is why we are here this morning. Mary came and she saw the stone rolled away from the tomb, a stone weighing one and a half or two tons, about fifteen hundred kilograms. It usually takes ten men to roll this stone aside. She sees the tomb opened and bursts out in agony as she rushes to Jesus' disciples and tells them in John 20:2:

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!”

Jesus had been crucified in shame, but Nicodemus had buried Jesus with the highest of honors, collecting an immense wealth of spices, about 75 pounds, to at least bury Jesus with honor. Mary theorizes that Jesus' enemies had removed His body and imagines that now Jesus has been disgraced, even in His death.

Jesus' disciples run towards the tomb. We learn an interesting detail in John 20:3-4:

“So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple [John] outran Peter and reached the tomb first.”

We see that John the evangelist is fast, and as they run toward the tomb, John reaches the tomb first, ahead of Peter. We read in John 20:5:

“He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.”

When they arrive at this location, John just looks inside the tomb and sees strips of linen, but he does not dare to enter the tomb itself. He was hesitant, perhaps not wanting to become defiled. Peter arrives, the same man that we grew to love together last year. He just barges into the tomb, and he sees the strips of linen there. He sees the burial cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head, and he notices a detail that only an eyewitness would include, that the cloth that was wrapped around Jesus' head was carefully folded up. What a peculiar thing to notice. That is not the action of the thief; that is not the action of someone intending to dishonor Jesus. No, it was carefully folded. The other disciple, John, comes in, sees the linen strips, sees the folded grave cloth, and we learn in John 20:8:

“Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.”

John believes. He did not fully grasp, as did none of the disciples, that Jesus had to rise from the dead, but he goes back to his home, and Mary is left at the tomb, weeping. As she weeps, she bends over and looks inside the tomb, and to her astonishment, she sees two angels sitting in the place where Jesus' body had been laid. Jesus was crucified between two criminals, and now, at the place where Jesus' body had been laid, there are two angels seated. The angels address her, and we read in John 20:13:

“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.’”

At this moment, she turns around and sees Jesus, and yet she doesn't know it. She doesn't realize who it is, and then Jesus addresses her and says in John 20:15:

“‘[Dear] woman,’ He said, ‘why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?’”

Isn't that the right question? It is not: **“What** are you looking for?” But, the question for all of us this morning is this: **“Who** is it you are looking for?” She replies in John 20:15, imagining that He

is just a man taking care of this tomb, this garden plot:

“Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him.”

Mary was seeking to honor Him, even in His death. She cannot tolerate this disgrace. Then Jesus turns, and in John 20:16a, we read the shortest of His sermons:

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’”

Jesus speaks only one word, “Mary.” She turns towards Him, the veil is removed, and she recognizes the risen Jesus, and we read in John 20:16b:

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

Dale Bruner calls this moment *“The Turn.”* He writes:

“In the one or two seconds this turn took, I imagine the world shifting ever so slightly on its axis and at about this turn’s one second midpoint trajectory, history, too, moved almost imperceptibly from B.C. to A.D. A second before this turn there is a woman in the deepest human despair in the agonizing presence of unconquerable death; a second after the beginning of this turn there is a woman in the deepest possible human elation in the presence of the death-conquering central figure of history. The rush that must have come over this woman in her two second turn is unimaginable. She is the first person, ever, to experience the personal presence of the Risen Lord. When she turned to him at this moment, human history took a turn to a responsible hope for the vincibility of death and, so, to the conquest of meaninglessness.”

This is a turn to be remembered: Jesus sees her; she sees Him. All of reality shifts to hope, and Mary does what any of us would have done in that moment, she throws her arms around Jesus. Can you imagine the moment she throws her arms around Jesus in an embrace of love and affection? Her Lord has been raised, restored to her in fellowship! Jesus has to peel her off of Him for a minute. Sometimes we are so in love with Jesus, that we just want to hold onto Him, and we imagine that all of Jesus' activity is just for us, don't we? Sometimes we fashion the Christian life as though it's just Jesus and me.

Well, Jesus has much to tell us. We read Jesus' response to Mary in John 20:17a:

“Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me.’”

The Greek imperative is a present imperative. It doesn't mean “Don't touch Me.” Jesus is not a phantom or apparition. His embrace is real. He will invite Thomas to touch His wounds. Jesus' physical resurrection is real, but He has to peel Mary off to say: “I've got something more to tell you.” The “more” that He has to tell her is found in John 20:17b:

“Go instead to My brothers and tell them I am returning to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.”

Mary becomes the first missionary: “Go and tell My brothers.” What a gracious word that is. All of those disciples that abandoned Him and said that they didn't even know Him, Jesus calls His brothers: “Go and tell My brothers I am ascending.”

We read in John 20:18 that Mary goes with her testimony:

“Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’”

We see a great reversal in Scripture at this moment. Gregory the Great called this to my attention. He said about 1400 years ago:

“So the sin of humanity is buried in the very place where sin came forth. Whereas in Paradise, the woman gave the man the deadly fruit now a woman from the sepulcher announced life to men; a woman now delivers the message of Him who raises us from the dead, as a woman had earlier delivered the words of the serpent who slew us.”

All is overturned, and Mary goes, bearing testimony. In the first century, it is unusual for a woman to give testimony in court. Why does John include Mary Magdalene as the first witness to Jesus' resurrection? Probably, simply because she was the one who saw Him first.

Jesus comes to His disciples and stands in their midst and proclaims peace: this cosmic peace that the warfare is over; that the war between you and God has ended; that the hostility that our sin and unrighteous provoked in the sight of God is ended. There is peace; death has been defeated. Jesus stands in their midst, and it's quite an understatement, isn't it, in John 21:20 when it says:

“The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”

How do you put that much joy in one word? There's **joy**; and then there's **overjoy**. That's like joy just leaking out and making the person next to you covered with joy. Overjoyed, that's when you have so much joy that your internal joy capacitor just blows and there's a fizzling sound. People say you're overjoyed, and they look around and all of a sudden they are overjoyed. Then here is Jesus doing what He does often. It's one of those frightening turns of phrase. Jesus says in John 20:21a:

“Peace be with you!”

Again we rejoice, but then He goes on to say in John 20:21b:

“As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.”

That's where those overjoyed fizzles start to quiet down, and you look around and say, “What!”

Jesus says: "You continue the mission of God in the world," and immediately we do a quick internal self-assessment, and we come up radically short. We do not possess the resources, and yet Jesus immediately breathes on us the Holy Spirit. Just like in Acts, Jesus breathes on us the Spirit so that we would be His witnesses. You and I then are bearers of the Good News that sin, death, and hell have been defeated at the cross. You and I are empowered by this risen Jesus to go unto the uttermost limits of the earth with the message of forgiveness of sins. We are the only ones on the planet with this news. No one else can proclaim the forgiveness of sins, that the wrath of Almighty God has been satisfied and fully atoned for on the cross of Christ.

William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, says:

"There is need at times to check our sense of the dignity of our status as Christians, so it is impossible to exaggerate the greatness of our calling. It is to continue in the world that divine Mission of which the inauguration was the sending of the Son by the Father to be the Redeemer of the world. We are members of the Body of Christ, through whom He would accomplish His purpose."

The mission of the church, the evangelistic mission of the church, continues and reaches our shores this morning following this testimony of Mary: "I have seen the Lord." Every day, 174,000 turn to this same Jesus and believe.

There is another testimony in John 20, and it's Thomas' testimony. Thomas, called Didymus, which in Greek means *twin*, is one of the 12. Thomas was not there when Jesus spoke *peace* concerning his death-defeating death on the cross. I love how John Owen describes the cross. He says:

"It was the death of death in the death of Christ."

That has a nice ring to, doesn't it? Thomas was not there. He missed out on a week of eschatological peace, so it's understandable that he was still a little uneasy. Jesus, though, comes again and honors the request Thomas made in John 20:25:

"Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it."

Jesus comes again and appears to His disciples a second time. This time Thomas is there, and Jesus welcomes him in John 20:27:

"Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe."

Jesus summons Thomas to be not unbelieving. Jesus' scars are still there though He is raised from the dead, conquered hell. The scars are still there answering forever the problem of evil

and suffering: real scars, real assurance, real evil, real conquest, real sin, and real forgiveness. Edward Shillito wrote a poem called *Jesus of the Scars* in which he writes:

“If we have never sought, we seek Thee now
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim thy grace.

If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.”

Jesus shows Thomas the reality of His sin-conquering death, and Thomas’ doubt, his unbelief, is overwhelmed by the reality of Jesus’ person. He confesses, as we read in John 20:28:

“My Lord and my God!”

Nothing higher can be said of Jesus. His confession is the loftiest view of Jesus in the Gospels: *“My Lord and my God!”* We come back to the very beginning. French commentator Frédéric Louis Godet writes:

“The last becomes in a moment the first, and the faith of the apostles attains at length, in the person of Thomas, to the whole height of the divine reality formulated in the first words of the prologue. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* John 1:1

Thomas's confession is nothing less than a confession that Jesus is God, and Jesus receives this testimony. It is true. Thomas’ confession becomes his one-line testimony, and Thomas launches mission. Thomas’ own lifetime would take him into distant lands. Thomas went as one of the disciples to India to proclaim Christ, and he founded churches there. Thomas eventually was killed after decades of missionary service. He was killed by a piercing of four blows from a lance. Isn't it ironic, or maybe just sovereign of God, for the man who needed to touch the wounds of Jesus, that he himself would be pierced in the same way? Yet, Thomas, as did all of the

disciples, finished his ministry with the confession: "He is risen. He is risen, indeed!"

The Gospel of John ends with this testimony supreme, that Jesus has risen from the dead. No one else has. John then turns the voices this Gospel to address you and me. He turns the camera, if you will, towards us and asks the question of us: "What about you?" John says in John 20:30-31:

"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name."

What about you this morning? The Gospel is for all people. Aaron Copland's piece, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, that you heard at the very beginning of the service this morning, celebrates that the Good News is for everyone, not just educated people, not just people from one ethnicity. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for all peoples, every man, every woman, every child. This Gospel heralds the announcement that sin has been paid for, that hell has been defeated, and that the gates of Paradise have been thrust open by a Savior whose scars can still be seen. This is the Good News of Easter. Hallelujah! Amen!

Lord Jesus Christ, we stand in Your presence, exalted Son, beloved Savior. We worship You, Lord. We worship You together. We praise You, Lord Jesus, that this is good news for all peoples, that the fanfare for the common man may be claimed for Christ. Lord, we sing that 700-year-old song, *Jesus Christ is Risen Today, Hallelujah!* and we worship, Lord, in full confession that You are both our Lord and our God. For God so loved this world that He sent forth His one and only Son. We worship You, Lord, and we praise You for the glorious Good News of Easter morning. Amen.