

April 5, 2026
"The People of the Resurrection"
John 20:1-31
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...

There is a particular kind of confusion that comes when life does not work out the way we were sure it would. It's not just disappointment, it's the collapse of a framework. The categories and boxes that you tried to neatly put the events your life into and the lens you used to interpret your world are no longer the reality. The assumptions you leaned on no longer stand. And in that moment, when life is crashing down around you, you are not just asking, "What happened?" You are asking, "What is even true anymore?" Has that ever happened to anyone? Well, these are the types of questions that were being asked by the first people that encounter the resurrection in John 20.

The disciples, like the crowds we talked about last week during Palm Sunday, had certain expectations. Jesus was the Messiah and, therefore, that meant he would reign as king. He would overthrow the Roman oppressors and he would restore Israel. Of course, their expectation of glory did not include a suffering and their vision of victory did not include crucifixion. Their understanding of God's plan did not have a category for a dead Messiah. And when Jesus died, it wasn't just that they lost their leader, they lost their lens through which they viewed reality.

And many of us know that feeling. We had expectations about how we thought God would work. We assumed obedience, or doing the right things, would lead to a life of ease, blessings and immediate answers. We built a framework that made sense, until it didn't. And what John 20 reveals to us is that the resurrection is not just about God fixing a bad situation. It is God redefining reality itself.

This morning, we are going to look at John 20 in its entirety as we consider the various reactions of the first people to encounter the resurrection and hopefully discover hope in the message of the resurrection. You can remain seated today as we go through the chapter a few verses at a time and we make our way through this eye witness account of John the apostle. We'll start in vs. 1. [Read vs. 1-10]

John is very intentional when he tells us that Mary comes "while it was still dark." This is not incidental, it is theological. Darkness, throughout John's Gospel, represents spiritual misunderstanding, blindness and separation from God. And even though Jesus has already risen from the dead, Mary is still operating in the dark. The other gospels mention the other women who were also there, but John focuses on Mary Magdalene.

And this is the first tension of the resurrection narrative. And this is the same point that was made during the Sunrise service for those who were able to be there this morning that God can complete his greatest work while his people are still unaware of it. Mary sees the stone rolled away and immediately interprets it through the lens that someone must have taken the body of Jesus. And this is a logical conclusion given her assumptions.

The women had made their way to the tomb that morning with spices to complete the burial process expecting to find the body where it was laid to rest. And, since dead

bodies don't just rise from the dead, therefore, if the tomb is empty, something must be wrong. Her problem is not that she lacks intelligence, it is that her expectations are too small.

In her perplexity, vs. 2 tells us that Mary leaves and gets Peter and John who then run to the tomb. John, remember he is the author of this narrative, arrives first but hesitates to go in right way, possibly out of disbelief or afraid of what he would find. But, Peter enters immediately. And what do they find? They find the linen cloths, the burial clothes, Jesus was wrapped in lying there with the face cloth folded separately. What they find is not chaos, but completion.

You see, in the ancient world, grave robbing was a real threat especially among the rich who would often bury their loved ones with valuable family heirlooms. And where was Jesus buried? In the tomb of a man named Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin who followed Jesus and who had an expensive tomb available for Jesus to be buried in fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah 53:9, "...they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death..."

Now, typically, grave robbers did not unwrap bodies but they took them as they were. But here, according to John's eye witness account, the grave clothes are left behind with the head covering "folded and placed by itself." This suggests the body was not stolen, as robbers would not take time to leave the tomb in order. In any event, the body that once occupied the grave clothes is no longer there. And yet, even standing in the midst of the evidence, the text tells us they did not yet understand and Peter and John go back to the place they were staying, marveling, yes, but confused for they did not yet understand.

This exposes something deeply human in all of us. And that is that evidence alone does not produce faith. We often assume that if we had more proof, we would believe more deeply. But the disciples had the empty tomb and still struggled. Why? Because their minds could not yet comprehend the resurrection.

Which raises a piercing question for us. How often is God working in ways we cannot recognize because we are interpreting his actions through the wrong expectations? Sometimes, God's greatest work in your life will often not look like addition but a lot like subtraction. It may look like loss, it may sound like silence and it may even feel like absence. But the empty tomb reminds us, what looks like loss, silence or even absence may actually be the evidence of God's working in our lives.

Let's read on. [Read vs. 11-18] As the story of the day of Jesus' resurrection unfolds, we find out that Mary Magdalene returns and remains at the tomb. Peter and John have left. The other gospel writers, again, tell us that the other women left to tell the disciples. But Mary remains.

This is significant. She's grieving, and there in her grief, she lingers. And it is in her lingering that the understanding eventually comes. She looks into the tomb and sees angels but even this does not change her thinking. Why? Because grief has a way of narrowing our vision. When the heart is overwhelmed, even the obvious works of God can be overlooked.

We see this more fully when she turns in vs. 14 and sees Jesus, but she does not recognize him. This is one of the most profound moments in the resurrection narratives. Mary did not recognize Jesus most likely due to her intense grief, the early morning

darkness and a lack of expectation for a resurrection. Distraught and expecting to find a body her vision was clouded by tears.

And verse 15 tells us that she assumes he is the gardener. And in kind of an ironic and beautiful way, she is not entirely wrong. For in the beginning, God created Adam and Eve and placed them in a garden, the Garden of Eden. And through their sin, that garden became a place of loss and the curse of sin poisoned God's perfect world and mankind was cast out of the presence of God. What was once an intimate, and close, relationship with God had now been destroyed and separated by man's rebellion with no hope, within ourselves of regaining that relationship. Meaning, with no way of regaining a right standing with God by ourselves, then the curse would have to be broken for us.

Now, in another garden, the risen Christ stands as the true gardener, the one who said, "I am the vine and my father is the gardener. Whoever abides in me will bear much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:1;4-5). He is the one who has taken the curse upon himself when he went to the cross. He is the one who has come to restore what was broken, to cultivate a new creation and to bring life out of death. Praise his name!

But Mary does not yet see this truth. That is until He speaks her name, "Mary." This moment is not just emotional, it is deeply theological. It echoes the language of divine calling throughout Scripture. God calls those in scripture by name because he knows them intimately. And in that instant, everything changes.

The fog lifts. The grief breaks. The darkness starts to give way. Because, and don't miss this, the resurrection is not fully understood until it is personally experienced. You see, if we are not "in Christ," which means if you have not put your faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross on your behalf and that God raised him from the dead, the scriptures tell us that we are spiritually blinded to the things of God. "For the word of the cross, [the resurrection and the Gospel it itself] is foolishness to those who are perishing." (1 Cor. 1:18) Oh, but when he calls you by name and you respond in true faith, the last half of that same verse becomes true, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" and we can join with the great hymn writer, John Newton, in his famous hymn "Amazing Grace," "I once was blind but now I see!"

Now, at this point, Mary fully recognizes Jesus and responds, "Rabboni!" which means teacher in Aramaic. But Jesus immediately redirects her, "Do not cling to me." It's important for us to notice that this is not rejection. You see, Mary wants to hold onto what was familiar, but Jesus is introducing something new.

Mary's desire is to restore the fellowship that death had broken. She had lost him once, and she was going to make sure she didn't lose him again. She wanted to keep Jesus with her always. And we can understand her thinking. However, it was not Jesus' plan to stay in this world always, and his resurrection was not to be seen as his promised return. That is why he tells Mary of the ascension. His plan was to ascend to the Father and then send the Holy Spirit. Fellowship with Jesus would continue, but it would be a spiritual communion, not a physical presence.

Well, then he sends her, just like the other women were sent out by the angels to tell the others. This is extraordinary. In a culture where a woman's testimony was often not legally recognized, Jesus entrusts the first proclamation of the resurrection to Mary and the other women who went with her that morning. This is the upside-down nature of the

kingdom. Those who are overlooked by society are often chosen by God as primary witnesses of his glory. For you see, you cannot truly encounter the risen Christ and remain unchanged or silent. The resurrection turns mourners into messengers.

The scene then shifts from the garden tomb to later that evening in a closed room in the next few verses [Read vs. 19-23]. The disciples are most likely back in the upper room where they had shared the Last Supper with Jesus just a few days before. But this time they are hiding behind locked doors, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. Fear has gripped them. Most likely, they are afraid that, as followers of Jesus, they possibly could face the same fate as him by the same hostile crowds and not knowing what to do after his tomb was found empty that morning.

And then, suddenly, Jesus appears before them. For the truth is that no barrier can keep out the resurrected Christ. It doesn't matter if its locked doors, sealed tombs or hardened hearts, none of them can resist the presence of the risen Christ.

And notice his first words are not correction, but peace. "Peace be with you," he says. This is staggering when you consider their recent failures. These are the men who abandoned him. Peter denied him. They all scattered in his moment of need. If anyone deserved rebuke, it was them. But the resurrection means that grace has the final word over failure.

He then shows them his wounds and this is a crucial point. The resurrection body of Jesus still bears the marks of crucifixion. Why? Because redemption does not erase history, it transforms it. Your wounds, your past, your failures, when surrendered to Christ, do not disqualify you from his kingdom. They become testimonies of his grace.

Then, Jesus does something interesting. He breathes on them. And this is new creation language. Just as God breathed the breath of life into Adam at creation, Jesus breathes spiritual life into his disciples. You see, the resurrection is not just about Jesus coming back to life, it is about him breathing new life into those who will follow after him. And that includes you and me.

And then comes the sending. "As the Father has sent me," Jesus said, "even so I am sending you." This is the mission of the church. We are not simply recipients of the resurrection, our mission is to proclaim it. Our mission is go out into a fearful, broken, world as agents of peace and reconciliation armed with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And what is this Gospel? The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 15:3-5, "...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day." And again in Romans 10:9, "...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." This is our mission, brothers and sisters, to proclaim to the world that the tomb is empty, Jesus is alive and that salvation is found in him alone.

Now, we learn something interesting in the next few verses and that is that the disciple Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. [Read vs. 24-29] Thomas is often given the nickname, "doubting Thomas." But what we see here is not cynical unbelief, it is wounded hesitation. Thomas had given up everything to follow Jesus, and the cross had shattered him. And now, he is cautious about hope. He says, "Unless I see... I will not believe."

And here is what's remarkable about these verses. Jesus does not shame Thomas, he meets him. Eight days later, Jesus appears again, and this time he addresses Thomas directly. He invites him to touch the wounds. This tells us something vitally important. Jesus is not afraid of honest doubt. He is willing to meet us in it.

And after Thomas experiences the resurrected Christ for himself he responds with one of the most Christological confessions in the whole New Testament, "My Lord and my God!" This is not just belief in the resurrection of Jesus but it is recognition of his deity. Thomas recognizes Jesus as God incarnate, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And notice Jesus doesn't rebuke Thomas, but accepts his worship and responds by saying, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

That includes us. We live on the other side of this testimony. We have not seen Jesus physically but we are invited to believe in him fully. And here is the challenge, "Will you demand proof on your terms," like we see here with Thomas, or "will you trust in the revelation God has already given to us in his word?"

John closes his narrative with a statement of purpose. [Read vs. 30-31] "These [things] are written so that you may believe..." You see, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not neutral. It is not merely informative. It is invitational and it calls for a response. Notice the progression here, belief leads to life. Not just intellectual head knowledge, but a relational trust in Jesus that leads to eternal life.

And this life is not delayed until eternity when Jesus comes again, its important that we realize that this resurrection life begins in the here and now, at the moment of salvation. The resurrection life is a present reality. It reshapes how we see suffering, fear, purpose and our identity in Christ.

So, the question is, "Where are you in this story?" John 20 is not just about what happened on this day nearly 2000 years ago, it is about what is happening now. Every person we read about in this chapter begins in a different place and Jesus meets each one right where they are. Mary in her grief. The disciples in their fear. Thomas in his doubt. He meets each one of them in their deepest need and brings each of them into the reality of his resurrection.

The same is true for us. Some of you are standing at the tomb overwhelmed by grief and loss. Some of you are behind locked doors, paralyzed by fear. Some of you are wrestling with doubt, unsure what to even believe.

But the resurrection declares this, that Jesus is alive and meets you exactly where you are...but he does not leave you there. He calls your name. He speaks peace over your fear. He invites your questions and your doubts. And he is calling you out of the grief, out of the fear and out of your doubt and offers you life everlasting.

So, the question is not whether the tomb is empty. Many an atheist have tried to disprove the resurrection or Christ, and praise his name that many have come to know Christ as a result of their efforts. The question is not whether Christ is risen or not. The question is, "Will you step into the life he is offering?" Because the resurrection of Jesus is not just an event to celebrate, it is a reality to enter into.

Brothers and sisters, the stone has been rolled away. Sin, death and the grave have all been defeated. And the risen Christ is still calling people by name. And today, you must ask yourself, is He is calling yours. Let's pray.

Benediction: May the risen Christ go with you. May he fill you with his peace. And may he send you out in the power of his resurrection. Go in hope, in joy and in the new life secured for you through the life, death and glorious resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.