

Jesus Lives! The Victory's Won

I. For Today

II. Forever

*<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples went back to their homes, <sup>11</sup> but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb <sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. <sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> "Woman," he said, "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." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said, "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 returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> 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.*

So how did your Easter Sunday begin? Did it feel a little weird today? You didn't get up early. You didn't have to decide if you were going to hit the Easter brunch before or after you go to church. You aren't going to be getting together with members of your extended family. But maybe worst of all, you know that you are not going to be able to come here, to church on this Easter Sunday. You're not going to be able to gather with your fellow believers, dressed up in your Sunday best, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, with chairs set up in the back. And maybe what you'll miss the most is the music. You'll miss the hand bells ringing with Easter Joy and the whole congregation singing for all they're worth, with the organ and the trumpets and the timpani – all of that is what you realize you will not be enjoying on this Easter.

And maybe that has you just a little bit sad today. You are grieving over something that you had come to enjoy, but something that has now been, in effect, taken away from you. And you're thinking, "Why? Why does it have to be this way? This is not at all what I was expecting things to be like on Easter Sunday." And maybe that has you feeling a little sad, and alone, and maybe even afraid.

My friends, if any of those thoughts and emotions have crossed your heart and mind today, you are not the only one. I expect there are a lot of Christians feeling the same way on this rather strange Easter Sunday. But not just on this Easter morning, but also on that very first Easter morning. Do you think those women were whistling a joyful tune as they made their way to the cemetery before it was light? Do you think that Mary Magdalene was thinking, "This is a great day?" No, they were all sad. They all felt like they were missing something. They were all grieving.

But then what happened? They found that Jesus' tomb was empty! Jesus had defeated death and rose triumphant from the grave. That fact changed their lives. And it changes ours, too. Today we are celebrating Jesus' victory over the grave for us. We're celebrating one life, one death and one victorious empty tomb. Even in the midst of a global pandemic we can take comfort in the powerful words of the hymn we just sang, namely,

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On this Easter morning, we'll see how that fact impacts our lives:

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Now, I said before that it would not be unusual to be experiencing some mixed emotions on a day when we are kind of forcibly separated from the people we love, people we've enjoyed spending time with. For that reason, I don't think it's hard for us to put ourselves in the sandals of one Mary of Magdala. As we meet her here in John's gospel, she's already seen that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid two days before. She immediately assumed that someone had stolen Jesus' body and went running to tell the disciples, "*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!*" (John 20:2) That, of course, led Peter and John to go running to the tomb to investigate for themselves.

But now the disciples have gone home and Mary is all by herself, crying. John records the scene this way. *As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"* (John 20:11-13) In a minute, will see that Jesus asked the very same question of Mary. But for now, let's consider her response. Mary says to the angels, "*They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him.*" (John 20:13) I think this gives us a little insight into Mary's state of mind. Notice that Mary doesn't even acknowledge that there are two angels talking to her. It's like it doesn't even register that these two men dressed in white are angelic beings. Why? Because Mary is so wrapped up in her loss. She says, "*They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him.*" Isn't that so often the way it is? When we are hurting, it's all about "my loss, my pain, what's going to happen to me?" We become self-absorbed and we lose sight of the big picture, which in Mary's case, was one she really need to see.

But Mary is not yet ready to open her eyes to see that picture. John tells us, *At this, Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize it was Jesus* (John 20:14). Now, whether Mary did not recognize Jesus because she still was in this kind of mental fog, or because Jesus was the last person she expected to see alive, or because Jesus purposely kept her from immediately recognizing him (kind of like he did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus), the point is, Jesus said to Mary the same thing the angel said, namely, "*Woman, why are you crying?*" (John 20:15). Now, you think about that question a minute. On the one hand, the answer is obvious, isn't it? I mean, Mary firmly believes that not only is her good friend and Rabbi dead, but now his body is gone. She can't even give the man a decent burial. No wonder she's crying! From Mary's perspective, she has all kinds of reasons to be sad.

Tell me, isn't the same thing so often true for you and me as well? It's so easy for us to focus on what we've lost. We aren't going to be able to come to church on Easter. We aren't going to be able to gather with our family. We've lost our job. We can't go into work. Can't hang out with our friends. And when we focus on what we've lost, it's no wonder we're sad and weepy, just like Mary was. From Mary's perspective, she had all kinds of reasons to cry.

But from Jesus' perspective, from the perspective of the one who was standing right in front of her, Jesus' question takes on a whole new meaning. It's like, "*Woman, why are you crying?*" In fact, Jesus takes it a step further. He says, "*Who is it you are looking for?*" But Mary still can't see the truth—until Jesus calls her by name. "*Mary,*" he says. With that, Mary's eyes are opened. She suddenly realizes who it is that is standing right in front of her. "*Rabboni!*"

she cries out, a word which in Aramaic means “My teacher.” Jesus’ response to her? “*Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father.*” (John 20:17). Does that mean that when Mary first realized it was Jesus, she just grabbed onto him for all she was worth? Probably. And who would blame her? She probably was thinking, “Jesus, I already lost you once. I’m not going to lose you again.”

But what does Jesus mean by saying, “Do not hold onto me, for I have not yet returned to the Father?” He means a couple of things. First, he’s saying, in effect, “Mary, don’t worry. I’ll be around for a while yet. I have not yet ascended into heaven.” Which was certainly true. Jesus would spend the next forty days appearing to his disciples at various times and places. But Jesus was also alluding to an even more important reality. Now that Jesus had risen from the dead, he was no longer in his state of humiliation. He was in his state of exaltation. What does that mean? Well, during his state of humiliation, Jesus’ body was bound by space and time. That means that if Jesus was teaching in Nazareth, he was not teaching in Jerusalem at the same time. That means that there were times when Jesus was visibly with Mary, and there were times when he wasn’t. But after his resurrection, all that changed. In his state of exaltation, Jesus could pass right through the walls of the tomb. He could suddenly be walking with his disciples on the road to Emmaus and the next minute be standing among them in a locked room. In his state of exaltation, he could truly be anywhere and everywhere, all at once. That’s why, at the time of his ascension, Jesus could truthfully tell his disciples, “*Surely I will be with you always, till the very end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20).

Do you realize what that would have meant for Mary? To realize that no matter where she went, no matter what she did, no matter whether she could see Jesus with her eyes or not, still Jesus would be with her? Mary didn’t need to cling to his feet, because from now on, as her resurrected Lord, he would be with her all the time.

If you think about it, isn’t that exactly what Jesus’ victory over the grave means for our lives today as well? I mean, think about it. If Jesus’ body is still in the grave, if we could go to Jerusalem and visit the Tomb of Jesus with his bones still in it, what would those words, “I will be with you always” mean? What? “Jesus’ memory would live on in our minds?” No, Jesus is not like Buddha or Mohammed or Confucius, people whose tombs are still occupied. Jesus’ tomb is empty, because Jesus lives. And that means that wherever you are right now, no matter how many things you feel like are missing, no matter how separated you may feel from others, no matter how sad or anxious this pandemic we make you feel, there’s one thing of which you can be sure, Jesus is alive! He’s at your side 24/7. And that’s what gives you and me the courage to face whatever each day brings.

You might say that’s what Jesus’ victorious empty tomb means for our lives I. Today. But then again, let’s not forget what the Apostle Paul once wrote to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 19: *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.* In other words, if Jesus’ resurrection means that Jesus is alive and with us every day of our lives, but then at the end of our lives, we rot in the grave forever, or worse, we are abandoned by God in hell for eternity, then what good is Jesus’ resurrection? How good can we feel about the present if our future remains so bleak?

But that’s not reality, is it? Jesus has not won us just a temporary victory. He’s won us a permanent victory. Or to put it another way, Jesus victory over the grave impacts our lives, not only just I. For Today. Jesus’ victory impacts our lives, II. Forever

Now, someone might ask, “Wait a minute. What’s the connection between Jesus’s resurrection and my eternal life? Just because Jesus rose from the dead, does that mean that I’ll

automatically live forever? Shouldn't it just be like, 'Every man for himself? Everybody simply gets what they deserve?'" That sounds fair enough. But you realize, that would mean that we're all in a boatload of trouble. Because the Bible tells us that the only thing we've earned from God is hell. Scripture says, *The wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23). The soul who sins is the one who will die. (Ezekiel 18:20). Your iniquities have separated you from your God. (Isaiah 59:2).* All we've earned from a just and holy God by our sins, is eternal separation from God.

And yet, in an act of pure and undeserved love for us, what did God do? He sent us a perfect substitute, who lived a perfect life in our place and then offered up that perfect life on the cross of Calvary. There on the cross, Jesus endured the wrath of God. He, in effect, went to hell in your place and mine. And then when he had done everything God had asked of him, what did he say? "Tetelestai," that is, "It is finished!" In other words, Jesus announced, "The bill for the sins of the world has now been paid in full."

But, imagine how you would feel if after Jesus made that powerful statement, his body was laid in the tomb, and then nothing else happened. What if the apostles' creed ended with the words, "he was crucified, died and was buried." Period. End of story. Wouldn't you be left wondering, like "What's up? Did something go wrong? Did it not work?" Kind of like if you file your taxes electronically. You meticulously fill out all of the forms. You figure exactly what you owe, you link it to your bank account to withdraw the funds, you hit send and then, nothing. You get no confirmation. You're thinking, "Did they get my return? Do they know I paid my taxes? Or did I do something wrong? Am I going to get in trouble? Man, I don't know where I stand with the IRS now!

My friends, you realize, that's exactly how you would feel if you knew about Jesus' life and his death, but had no record of his resurrection. You would say, "Well, it certainly looks like he lived a perfect life. And he said he paid for the sins of the world. But how do I know that's true? How do I know that Jesus' payment was accepted by the man upstairs? Don't I get some kind of confirmation statement?"

Yes, you do. It's called Easter Sunday. One of the reasons that God raised Jesus Christ from the grave was so that you could know that Jesus' payment for your sin was accepted by God. What does Scripture say about Jesus? *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. (Romans 4:25).* In other words, Jesus went to the Cross because of our sin. He was raised to life because you and I have received the "all clear" from God. Or to put it another way, Easter Sunday is the equivalent of the IRS sending you a confirmation that your payment has been accepted. Your record is clear. You owe nothing. Or maybe better, Easter Sunday is like the IRS telling you that they just deposited someone else's payment in your bank account. And now it's yours to have and enjoy!

My friends, that's what Easter Sunday is. It's God's announcement that you get credit for everything Jesus has done, including his victory over the grave. Because Jesus defeated death, so will you. How did Jesus put it to his disciples? He said, "*Because I live, you also will live*" (John 14:19-20). Do you see how that fact, the fact that Jesus' resurrection has already guaranteed your victory over death in the end—do you see how that impacts your attitude about life between now and then? I'll tell you, it takes a lot of the pressure off.

Maybe some of you saw that last week Fox Sports rebroadcast the Super Bowl between the Packers and the Steelers. Now, if you happened to watch that, I'll bet you were a lot more relaxed than the first time you watched that game. Why? Because you knew how the game was going to end. Even though it got a little dicey for a while, even though things didn't look so good, you still knew that in the end, the Packers win the game! Isn't the same thing true for you and me

today? Sure, sometimes things look a little bleak in our lives. We may suffer some losses. We may even shed a tear or two like Mary did. But in the end, our Savior treats us just as he treated Mary. With his word, he opens our eyes to see past our tears and to see the real picture. To see Jesus, and the final score. Yes, Easter Sunday to see and rejoice in the glorious truth: Jesus Lives! The Victory's Won!" To God be the glory. Amen.