

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Gifts of Jesus

(Studies in John's Gospel, leading to Easter)

Too Good to be True

(John 20)

#4

Introduction: A good end...

In one of Philip Yancey's earlier books (Disappointment with God), he included a chapter titled, "Too Good To Be True."

In that chapter he points out that we humans long for good endings to our stories and to our lives. Yancey says that this hunger for a good ending was placed in us by God.¹

As evidence, he cites the seventeen Old Testament prophets, who are sometimes best known for their gloom and doom predictions of locust plagues, droughts, and enemy sieges. Yancey points out that every one of the prophets got around to a word of hope.

So, the Bible says that the world's story is not *tragedy*. By tragedy, I mean a story - whether sad or happy - that has a tragic end.

The world's story is, technically, a *comedy*.

Not in the sense of funny, but in the sense that humanity's story, despite many sad parts, ends well. The story ends better than we could have dreamed. It's a too good to be true story.

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, the master of the fairy tale and author of the Hobbit books, explains that the attraction of the fairy tale is not that the story is a happy one, but that it has a happy ending.

This morning, the story we'll hear is a story littered with tragedy and sadness. But it is a story with a too-good-to-be-true ending that is truly true.

Friday's sadnesses... (John 19:31-42)

We'll start by remembering late Friday afternoon in Jerusalem.

Jesus was crucified. He died as the Lamb of God for your sins and for mine.

Consider the tragedies to this point. Judas betrayed Him, Peter denied Him, fellow Jews and Romans condemned Him, and His Father abandoned Him. We listen as He cries out, "***It is finished!***" and watch as He dies.

John next walks us through the events following His death.²

Establishing the fact of the death of Jesus

The Romans generally left the bodies of crucifixion victims on the cross for a very long time (sometimes for weeks after the victim had died) as a very effective warning to other would-be criminals.

But the Jews didn't want anyone to be hanging on the cross when the Sabbath began at sundown. To have done so would have made them guilty of defilement.³

So, the Roman soldiers set out to break the legs of the men. This may sound cruel, but breaking the legs was a merciful way to speed up the dying process, so that they could be removed from their crosses.

When they came to Jesus, though, they noted that he was already dead, and so did not break His legs. (vv. 32-33)⁴

² Jesus' Friday death coincided precisely with the time of day when the Jews would have been killing the sacrificial lambs for Passover. Perfect timing.

³ See Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13. They didn't have a plan for a decent burial, just a way to avoid their ceremonial defilement. Shameful.

To verify that Jesus was dead, a soldier approached Jesus and **[34] pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water⁵ came out.**

This signified that He was really and truly dead.⁶

Ending the story (?) with Jesus' burial...

[38] Now after these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, requested of Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body.

So, Joseph donated his own unused tomb for Jesus' burial.

Then Nicodemus, the man who came to Jesus at night (John, chapter 3), a member of the Sanhedrin, the one Jesus referred to as **"THE teacher of Israel"**, provided the expensive embalming spices necessary for proper preparation.⁷

With the Sabbath almost upon them, they carried His body to the tomb and used the spices for some hasty embalming to preserve the body until after the Sabbath when they could come back and do a more thorough job.

As we move past Friday and past Saturday into the earliest hours of Sunday morning, sadness reigns. Jesus is dead.

⁴ This fulfilled the Old Testament mandate that the lamb slain for the Jewish Passover was not to have any broken bones.

⁵ The "water" was pericardial fluid.

⁶ More is going on than a simple verification of Jesus' death. The prophet Zechariah wrote about the Messiah hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus: **[12:20] "THEY SHALL LOOK ON HIM WHOM THEY PIERCED."**

⁷ As of chapter 3 it wasn't at all clear if Nicodemus believed in Jesus. Here, in chapter 19, it appears that God had indeed been at work in Nicodemus' heart. He works in different people's hearts at differing speeds.

But one of His female followers, Mary Magdalene,⁸ appeared on the scene, ready to honor Jesus' memory by finishing up the embalming that had started on Friday.⁹

Fear and Doubt Turn to Faith at the Tomb (John 20:1-18)

What Peter and John DIDN'T See at the Tomb (vv. 1-10)

Mary's stunning report from her time at the tomb (vv. 1-2)

[1] Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already removed from the tomb.¹⁰

It must have been early on that morning, 6:30 or earlier since it was still dark - and we don't know if they had yet switched to DST.

And, if we ask, *"Why did Mary go to the tomb early on that Sunday morning?"* it is at least clear that she wasn't looking for anything out of the ordinary. But "out of the ordinary" was exactly what she found when she arrived.

As she approached the garden tomb area, she saw that the stone had been "lifted up" out of its tracks. And, when she saw the stone removed, she came to a quick conclusion: Grave robbers have stolen Jesus' body.

[2] And so she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved,¹¹ and said to them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we do not know where they have put Him."

Now, imagine how Peter was feeling on this Sunday morning.

⁸ Jesus had cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene. (Mark 16; Luke 8)

⁹ The other gospels mention several women coming to the tomb. John's account doesn't contradict that. He just emphasizes the presence of Mary Magdalene.

¹⁰ We don't know exactly when Jesus was resurrected, only that it was at some point during the Saturday night / early Sunday timeframe.

¹¹ John can only think of himself as the disciple Jesus loved.

After his failure in denying Jesus three times, think all-consuming guilt, paralyzing remorse, and depression. Remember, too, that John and the other apostles had all fled into the dark when Jesus was arrested.

But, as soon as they heard what Mary had to say, both of them were off and running to the tomb.

John and Peter inspected the tomb (vv. 3-8)

John, who is writing, tells us that he got to the tomb first, stooped down, looked inside, and **[5]...saw the linen wrappings lying there; however he did not go in.**

A few moments later, Simon Peter came up behind him, finishing second.

And Peter didn't look in. He **[6] entered the tomb; and he looked at the linen wrappings lying there, [7] and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but folded up in a place by itself.**

What Peter saw was a neat and orderly scene, not at all the kind of scene one might expect if grave robbers had been there.

Everything was arranged in an organized fashion. It was all laid out purposefully. And it was not as if Jesus' body had become animated, and then He unwrapped Himself from the yards and yards of wrappings. It seems instead that the wrappings of linen had simply been evacuated!¹²

John came inside quickly, and we read that **[8] he saw and believed.**

Believed what? Believed that Jesus was resurrected. Isn't that interesting....

¹² It is hard to square the facts of Jesus' burial with the famous Shroud of Turin, which some say was Jesus' burial shroud. The Shroud is a body length linen sheet, which covered the head. John tells us that Jesus' burial head piece was separate.

So, prior to Easter Sunday morning, Peter and John were NOT believing in a resurrection. They only believed in the resurrection when they found an empty tomb.

As many times as the Lord had told them, His words about His resurrection had never convinced them.

They didn't manufacture a resurrection story to square with the Old Testament, or with Jesus' teaching.

Rather, they came to understand the Old Testament and Jesus' teaching only because they had seen some evidence (an empty tomb) that validated a resurrection.

You'll see that none of the people we meet today were expecting resurrection. The empty tomb took them all by surprise.

These two disciples went to their homes (v. 10)

[10] So the disciples went away again to their own homes.¹³

But, with the men gone, the cemetery still isn't empty. Mary was there, alone, again, left with her grief over Jesus' death, coupled with the tragedy of a missing body.

What Mary DID See at the Tomb (vv. 11-18)

Mary inspected the tomb (vv. 11-12)

[11a] But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping...

The Greek word used here describes someone who is wailing. Mary was in the grip of an inconsolable grief.

And she couldn't stand not knowing what the conditions were inside the tomb. So, she poked her head into the tomb, to see what the two men had seen that had sent them scurrying off.

¹³ Mary, Jesus' mother, was now living with the Apostle John. John no doubt told her - making her among the first to know - that her Son was alive. John 19:26-27.

[12]...and she beheld two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying.

Peter and John had not seen angels. But they were present when Mary looked in. And the angels were the first to break the silence.

Mary talked with angels (v. 13)

[13a] And they said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

The angels’ only function in this narrative was to ask this one question. Knowing all that they knew, these angels simply couldn’t understand her weeping. They understood that this was the most inappropriate moment in history for weeping.

The angels knew that all was well with the universe - Jesus was alive! - but Mary didn’t know that. She thought she had good reason to weep and went on to explain to them why she was so upset.

[13b] She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they put Him.”¹⁴

While she was answering this question, Mary’s attention shifted from looking inside the tomb at the angels, to activity outside of the tomb.

Mary talked with - and then recognized! - Jesus (vv. 14-17)

[14] When she had said this, she turned around, and saw Jesus standing there, and yet she did not know that it was Jesus.

He was the same Jesus, but there was something different enough about Him that she didn’t recognize Him.¹⁵

¹⁴ As she described the scene at the tomb, we note that Mary has referred to the ever-present “they” in her haste. And, in this context, we don’t know if this “they” refers to the enemies of Jesus, or to workers who might have just moved the body without permission? Whatever, she is definitely not considering resurrection.

¹⁵ In other post-resurrection appearances, Jesus was not recognizable, even to those who had been closest to Him. See Luke 24, where He spoke with two who knew Him well, but didn’t recognize Him in His resurrection body.

So, Jesus initiated a conversation with Mary and asked her the same question that the angels had asked, **[15] “Woman, why are you weeping?”** And then, **“Whom are you seeking?”**

Jesus’ first question says worlds about His sensitivity and His concern for her emotional well-being. But His second question, **“Whom are you seeking?”** shows His ability to get right to the crux of a matter.

He wanted to hear from Mary’s own mouth the very personal reason she had come to the tomb.

When Mary answered, it is clear that NOTHING is clear to her.

[15b] Thinking that He was the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will take Him away.”

Mary asked **Jesus** where He had put **Jesus!**

Jesus knew that Mary had come to the tomb out of devotion to Him and that she was near the end of her emotional rope.

So, He put an end to her torment and revealed Himself to her quickly. He simply said her name: **“Mary!”** - and that was all it took.

[16] She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher).¹⁶

When the Good Shepherd called her name, she knew exactly who He was. And He proceeded to give Mary a great commission.

Mary received a first, great commission (vv. 17-18)

[17] Jesus said to her, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brothers, and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and My God and your

¹⁶ Doesn’t that remind you of John, chapter 10 where Jesus identified Himself as the Good Shepherd and said that His sheep hear His voice. (vv. 3, 27)

God.” [18] Mary Magdalene came and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,’ and that He had said these things to her.”¹⁷

So, Mary Magdalene was the first to see Jesus’ presence - while Peter and John were the first to see His absence.

They were each surprised by the resurrection. And what each one of them saw - or didn’t see - turned their doubt to faith.

Now, we come to a second scene which also involved them - along with *almost* all the other disciples.

John takes us to the end of that day where they had gathered in a separate room in Jerusalem.

The emotional state of the disciples was far from triumphant on this first Easter night.

Fear and Doubt Turn to Faith in a Closed-Door Room (vv. 19-29)

Jesus Brought Conviction to *Most* of the Disciples (vv. 19-23)

Identifying “beauty marks” bring joy! (vv. 19-20)

[19] When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews¹⁸, Jesus came and stood in their midst¹⁹

And what is filling their hearts as He stands before them? After their behavior on Friday, when they all fled from Him (and one denied Him), they might have been dreading a railing rebuke, something like -

¹⁷ Here (unlike in the Synoptic Gospels), we are not told that the men did not believe Mary’s report.

¹⁸ The Jews had already threatened them with excommunication from the synagogue. Having put their Leader to death, they would not have hesitated to try the same thing to His followers.

¹⁹ We are not told how He came to be where they were. Most commentators assume that He just appeared. John wants us to know that the resurrected Jesus is not limited by things like closed or locked doors.

“You cowards! How could you have let Me down like you did!? In the hour of My greatest suffering, You all just ran away. Peter, you denied Me! James, Andrew, Nathanael - why did you scatter when they came for Me?”

I would not have blamed Jesus for blasting them. Instead, though, Jesus said, **“Peace be to you.”** Rather than scolding or insulting, He blessed.

Then, rolling back his sleeves to show the nail holes in His wrists, and pulling open His robe to display the hole made by the spear, He gave them proof that He was really the same Jesus who had died on Friday.

It was still Him and He still loved them - and, in the comfort of knowing that Jesus was still for them **“they rejoiced!”**

Isn’t it fascinating that the resurrected Jesus still bears His scars? God did not do away with the scars. Evidently, God considers them beauty marks.

I think that they’ll still be there when we see Him in glory, eternal reminders of how much He loved us.

While He was with His men on this evening, He imparted gifts to them which would be of inestimable worth as they lived for Him.

Gifts of the risen Jesus (vv. 21-23)

[21] So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be to you; just as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”

[22] And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.”

He gave them the gifts of peace, a transcendent commission, the first fruits of the gift of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and Gospel-based spiritual authority.²¹

And after Jesus gave these gifts, He left. We don't know whether by the normal way of opening the door or not. But we can only imagine the electricity in the air as the disciples began to discuss what they had just experienced together!

Then John tells us (v. 24) that the Apostle Thomas, who had not been there with them in the room when Jesus was there, returned.

Of course, the others were all telling Thomas about what had just happened and were all saying to him, "***We have seen the Lord!***"²²

Jesus Brought Conviction to Thomas (vv. 24-29)

Thomas - unwilling to believe (vv. 24-25)

They were all completely pumped. And they wanted Thomas to share their excitement.

Thomas didn't join in, at all. His skepticism was absolute.

[25] "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

²⁰ This was a temporary gifting for their current need, until the more permanent gift of the Spirit came on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2).

²¹ See Acts 10:43, where Peter revealed how he understood what Jesus meant. It is by the proclamation of the gospel (not by a hierarchical authority of the apostles) that announcement of the remission or retention of sins is made.

²² What we read in the following paragraph is of critical importance for an understanding of the way the first Christians came to know that the resurrection had taken place. It is not that there was a gradual acceptance of the idea by the church as more and more appearances were manufactured. It was instantaneous, due to revelation.

Now, because of his response here, Thomas has inherited the ages-long nickname, "*Doubting Thomas*." And it is true that Thomas was more skeptical than he should have been.

But would you have believed the report from the apostles? I wonder if I would not have acted just as Thomas did.

Thomas was just being a good pragmatist. Seeing is believing. What his friends were telling him was just "*too good to be true*."

Still, we need to hear, again, the words from Thomas' own mouth: "***I will not believe***." He willed, he chose, to not believe.

We listen to Thomas, and we hear his pain. We understand that Friday's crucifixion crushed him. He suffered the biggest disappointment of his life when he watched the soldiers lead Jesus away from the garden on Thursday night.

Now, his friends are asking him to hope again, to believe that after everything that's happened, Jesus is alive, which, of course, would open up the possibility for an even greater disappointment.

The obvious reason for saying, "***I will not believe***" is that he was protecting himself against further disappointment.

I'm not saying that Thomas should have been gullible. Neither should we just believe anything anybody says.

But,
when ten good friends with whom he had walked for three years, have now exchanged desperate sadness for unfettered joy, and announced to him with one voice that they have seen Jesus, alive, a Man who had repeatedly stunned them all by His many miracles -

...maybe Thomas should have given their claim some serious thought. Maybe he should have given them some credit.

But no. He would not believe. Mercifully, Jesus didn't leave Thomas in unbelief for long.

Thomas - convinced, believing! (vv. 26-29)

[26] Eight days later His disciples were again inside, and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be to you."

Jesus' appearance was pretty much exactly what it had been on that first Easter evening.

Jesus had their undivided attention of all of them, but He spoke directly to Thomas: ***[27] "Place here your finger, and see My hands; and take your hand, and put it into My side; and be not continue in disbelief, but be a believer."***

Perfect. He invited Thomas to carry out his threat and spoke right to Thomas' will - ***"Do not continue in disbelief."***

"Thomas, it is all real. I'm here now. Let the wonder of it all wash over you. Don't let your fear of disappointment keep you from believing."

With an alive-again Jesus standing right in front of him, Thomas did the only reasonable thing. He worshipped!

[28] Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"²³

To which Jesus replied, ***[29a] "Because you have seen Me, have you believed?"***

So, yes, Jesus called Thomas out for believing only after seeing.

But consider that everyone we've met in John's Gospel today who believed in Jesus' resurrection, only believed AFTER seeing.

- Peter and John saw what was missing in the tomb and believed.
- Mary saw the Lord and believed.
- Eight other disciples saw the Lord and believed on Easter Sunday.

²³ To this point, nobody had called Jesus "God." But Thomas made the easy logical step from *"He is risen!"* to *"He is God!"*

- A week later Thomas saw and believed.

They all saw - and then believed. Now listen to this.

[29b] "...Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

Right there, Jesus spoke what is the crux of the matter for people like us. This is the point. Believe in Jesus.

We live two thousand years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We did not see Him dead and buried. We have not seen Him raised to life

But we do have the eyewitness testimony of John, who wrote just so that people like you and me, who have not seen, will believe.

Writing with us in mind, John explains that He hasn't included everything he could have included about Jesus in this book.

[30] So then, many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book...

There are miracles that Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that don't find their way into John. Jesus told dozens of parables. John doesn't record any parables. The sermon on the Mount is missing from John's Gospel. There are no exorcisms.

And it wasn't that John didn't think those events and teachings were unimportant. John was simply *selective* in what he has recorded to drive home his main point. Every author does that.²⁴

John omitted much. But He has chosen the material for this Gospel to accomplish a purpose. Here's John's purpose statement:

²⁴ When an author is writing a biography about a dead hero, he records everything he can about that person. But an author only tells enough of a living person to introduce his readers to him. John is selective with his material about Jesus - precisely because Jesus is alive.

[31] but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus in the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name.

John wrote so that anyone who reads will see a trustworthy Jesus and will respond by believing in Jesus for life - eternal life.

Everything we've seen today invites us to NOT be like Thomas - - ***"I will not believe!"*** - but to see Jesus for who He really is and believe in Him.

The Jesus story is a story laced with sadness and tragedy. It is not a completely happy story.

But it is God's story, so it is a story with the happiest of all endings, wonderful beyond our wildest dreams.

What happened two thousand years ago was the best news the world has ever heard. Jesus is alive! It's better than could have been expected, delightful, too good to be true - and altogether true.

It is true and so trustworthy that we can stake our eternal destiny on it. It is so true that we can take the message to everyone we know!

HE IS RISEN!

HE IS RISEN, INDEED!