

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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HE IS RISEN HE IS RISEN, INDEED!

Easter Sunday - Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Equipped BY Jesus to Live FOR Jesus

(Studies in the Upper Room Discourse; John 13-17)

Meets - and EXCEEDS! - All Expectations Study #6

(John 20)

Introduction: Stinging evaluations...

I was first made aware of the British Military's "officer fitness reports" back in the 80's. After reading them, I've never been able to forget them.

These reports were the evaluations given by senior officers of younger officers. They were scathing and hilarious. Here is a sampling.

- This officer's men would follow him anywhere, but only out of curiosity.
- This young lady has delusions of adequacy.
- Since my last report he has reached rock bottom. He is still digging.
- She sets low personal standards and then consistently fails to achieve them.
- He has the wisdom of youth, and the energy of old age.
- This man is depriving a village somewhere of an idiot.
- Works well when under constant supervision and cornered like a rat in a trap.

I hope you've never received an evaluation like any of these.

What all of us would far rather hear is, "*Very dependable. Good worker. Fine attitude. Great bang for the buck for the organization.*" Or even, "*Meets and exceeds all expectations.*"

We can all relax, because on this Easter Sunday morning, there will be no performance evaluations.

But if we were to evaluate Jesus' disciples early on that first Easter Sunday, they would have had cause for concern. And if we were to measure their expectations, we would find them low, low, low.

You and I have spent the last few weeks in John's Gospel. We've listened as Jesus prepared His followers for life after He was gone.

We'll let John keep guiding forward in the story, starting late on the Friday afternoon of Jesus' death.

Friday's sadnesses... (John 19:16-30)

Jesus died by Roman crucifixion. He died as the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.

The last hours of His life were filled with tragedy. Judas betrayed Him. Peter denied Him. Fellow Jews and Romans condemned Him. His Father abandoned Him.

Then, He cried out, "***It is finished!***" He died, and John tells us about the events following His death.¹

The fact of the death of Jesus (19:31-37)

Typically, the Romans left the crucified bodies of victims on the cross for a long time after they died - often for weeks. It was a warning to other would-be criminals: Don't mess with Rome!

But Jesus died on the afternoon before the Sabbath began. And the Jews didn't want anyone to still be on the cross at the start of

¹ Jesus' Friday death coincided precisely with the time of day when the Jews would have been killing the sacrificial lambs for Passover. Perfect timing.

Sabbath, which was sundown. That would have been contrary to the Mosaic Law.²

So, the Roman soldiers set out to break the legs of the three men on crosses on that Friday afternoon.

That may sound cruel, but breaking the legs mercifully sped up the dying process.

So, they broke the legs of the criminals to Jesus' right and left. But when they came to Jesus, they saw that He was already dead, and so did not break His legs. (vv. 32-33)³

To confirm that He was dead, though, a soldier **[34] pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water⁴ came out.** - signifying that He was really and truly dead.⁵

Jesus [short] time in a tomb (19:38-42)

[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.

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, whom Jesus referred to as **"THE teacher of Israel"**, provided the expensive embalming spices necessary for proper preparation.⁶

² See Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13. They didn't have a plan for a decent burial, just a way to avoid their petty ceremonial defilement. Shameful.

³ This fulfilled the Old Testament mandate that the lamb slain for the Jewish Passover was not to have any broken bones.

⁴ The "water" was pericardial fluid.

⁵ 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."**

⁶ As of chapter 3 it wasn't at all clear if Nicodemus believed in Jesus. Here, in chapter 19, it appears that he certainly did.

Then, 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.

Moving from Friday to Saturday and then into the earliest hours of Sunday morning, sadness reigned. Jesus was dead.

John takes us to the tomb before sunrise on Sunday.

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 (vv. 1-2)

[1] Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene⁷ came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already removed from the tomb.⁸

It must have been early on that morning, 6:45 or earlier since it was still dark - and we don't know if they had yet switched to Daylight Saving Time.

Mary had no doubt gone to the tomb to honor Jesus' memory by finishing up the embalming work that had been started on Friday.⁹

She wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary. But out of the ordinary was exactly what she got.

As she approached the garden tomb area, she saw that the stone had been (literally) "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!

⁷ Jesus had cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene. (Mark 16; Luke 8)

⁸ We don't know exactly when Jesus was resurrected, only that it was at some point during the Saturday night / early Sunday timeframe.

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.

[2] So she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved,¹⁰ and said to them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we do not know where they have put Him."

Put yourself in Peter's sandals. After his failure in denying Jesus three times, he would have been consumed with all-consuming guilt and remorse.

And Peter wasn't alone in having failed Jesus. John and the others 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 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.***

Peter came in second in this race to the tomb. Peter didn't just 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 an orderly scene, not at all the kind of scene he would have expected if grave robbers had been there. It was all organized.

And it was not as if Jesus' body had been 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.

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

Believed what? He believed that Jesus had been resurrected - which is so interesting.

That means that prior to that Sunday morning, Peter and John had not been expecting a resurrection and that they only believed in the resurrection when they found an empty tomb.

As many times as Jesus had told them that He would be raised from the dead, they hadn't understood, much less believed. They didn't manufacture a resurrection story to square with Jesus' teaching.

No, they NOW understood Jesus' teaching only because they saw the evidence - an empty tomb! - that justified belief in a resurrection. The empty tomb took them completely by surprise.

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

[10] So the disciples went away again to their own homes.¹¹

With the men gone, thought, the cemetery wasn't empty. Mary Magalene was still there, alone, 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.

However, 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.

¹⁰ It seems that John can only think of himself as the disciple Jesus loved.

¹¹ 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 saw 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 didn't see angels. Mary did. The angels broke what must have been an awkward silence.

Mary talked with angels (v. 13)

[13a]...“Woman, why are you weeping?”

Knowing what they knew, they couldn't understand Mary's weeping. The angels' sole function here was to ask this one question.¹²

They knew that this was the most inappropriate moment in history for weeping. Jesus was alive! All was well with the universe!

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.”¹³

After she finished speaking, her attention shifted from looking at the angels, to some 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, in some way, she was kept from recognizing Him.¹⁴

¹² Other Gospels gave the angel(s) more words. Here (in John) the angels' first words were not, “*Don't be afraid!*” as was often the case with the appearance of angels. (See Luke 1:13; 1:30; 2:10)

¹³ 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? The point is that she was clearly not considering resurrection.

So, Jesus spoke. He asked her the same question the angels had asked, **[15] “Woman, why are you weeping?”** And then He added, “**Whom are you seeking?**”

That first question speaks to His sensitivity and to His concern for Mary's emotional well-being. His second question, “**Whom are you seeking?**” showed His ability to go 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 becomes clear that NOTHING was 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 put Him, and I will take Him away.”

Catch this: 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. He simply said her name: “**Mary!**” That was all it took.

[16] She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher).¹⁵

When the Good Shepherd called her name, she knew exactly who He was. And then, Jesus gave Mary a “great commission.”
Mary received a first, great commission (vv. 17-18)

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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)

[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 God.’” [18] Mary Magdalene came and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,’ and that He had said these things to her.”¹⁶

So, Peter and John were the first to see Jesus’ absence at the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene was the first to see His presence.

All three of them were surprised. Not one of them expected a resurrection. And what each one of them saw - or didn’t see - turned their doubt to faith. Let’s remember that.

Next, John takes us to a second scene which involved *almost* all the other disciples. This scene took place at the end of that very long day. The group had all gathered in a separate room in Jerusalem.

And despite the events that had occurred, 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)

Jesus’ “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 Jews¹⁷, Jesus came and stood in their midst¹⁸

And what were they thinking...

¹⁶ Here (unlike in the Synoptic Gospels), we are not told that the men did not believe Mary’s report.

¹⁷ The Jews had already threatened them with excommunication from the synagogue. Having put their Leader to death, they would not have hesitated to try to do the same to His followers.

¹⁸ 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.

After their behavior on Thursday night in the Garden, when they all fled from Him (and one denied Him), they might have been expecting a tongue-lashing: *“You cowards! You really let Me down. you all ran away. Peter, you denied Me! James, Andrew, Nathanael - why did you scatter when they came for Me?”*

None of us would have blamed Jesus if He had scolded them. But He didn’t do that. Instead, Jesus said, **[19] “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 proved to them that He was the One who had died on Friday.¹⁹

It was still Him and He still loved them - and, in the comfort of knowing that Jesus was still for them **“they rejoiced!”** (v. 20)

On that evening in that room, He gave invaluable gifts to them.

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

¹⁹ I find it powerful that the resurrected Jesus still bore His scars. God must have considered them beauty marks and left the scars in place. I suspect that they’ll still be there when we see Him in glory, eternal reminders of how much He loved us.

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.

And after Jesus gave these gifts, He left. We don't know whether by the normal way of opening a door or by some other means. But He's gone.

And we can only imagine the electricity in the air as the disciples began to discuss what they had just experienced.

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

They were all telling Thomas about what had just happened and were all saying to him, **[25] "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. But 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."

Because of his response here, we have known Thomas for two thousand years as "*Doubting Thomas*." And, yes, Thomas was probably more skeptical than he should have been.

But would you have believed the report? I wonder if I would have done just what Thomas did.

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

Still, we need to listen carefully to what Thomas said: "***I will not believe***." He willed, he chose, to not believe.

You can hear the pain in those words.

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.

No. Thomas should not have been gullible. Nor should we just believe anything anybody says. (unless it's on the Internet...)

But...

...when ten good friends with whom he had walked for three years;
 ...have replaced desperate sadness with unfettered joy.
 ...have announced to him that they have seen Jesus, alive.
 ...a Man who had repeatedly stunned them all by His many miracles - well, maybe Thomas should have given credence to their claim.

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."

This appearance was pretty much the same as it had been on that first Easter evening.

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.

Jesus had their undivided attention, but He spoke directly to Thomas: **[27] “Place your finger here, 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. Then He 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 now believed?”**

So, yes, Jesus did call 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 then believed.
- Eight other disciples saw the Lord and believed on Easter Sunday.
- 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 to what is necessary for people like us. Believe in Jesus.

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

We live two thousand years after the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

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

Conclusion: The point of this too-good-to-be-true...and TRUE story!

Writing with us in mind, John explains that He hasn’t included everything he could have included about Jesus in his 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. John includes no exorcisms.

Jesus told dozens of parables. John doesn’t record any parables. The Sermon on the Mount is missing from John’s Gospel.

And it wasn’t that John didn’t know about those events or that he didn’t think they were important.

John was simply *selective* in what he recorded to drive home his main point. Every author does that.²⁴

John omitted much. But He chose the material he did 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 be persuaded to believe in Jesus for 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 we could have hoped, 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!

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