

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

April 5, 2026

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Trustworthy

The Road from [apparent] Defeat to Victory!

(John 19:23--20:31)

Study #11

Introduction: The trajectory is the thing...

HE IS RISEN!

In a couple of weeks, I'll be in Sweden visiting Jonathan and Trista Miller, their kids, and the Bible school that Jonathan leads. So, these days, I'm thinking about all things Swedish.

But my opening story doesn't have anything to do with Ikea furniture. It's about a book that was turned into, first, a Swedish movie and then into an American movie starring Tom Hanks.

Some years ago, I read the book that started the whole thing. It was a hard book about a hard man who lived in Sweden.

This man's life had been marked by some great losses. As the book opens, he is a sad, lonely, hopeless elderly man.

The book was well enough written that it kept me interested through 80% of the book.

I would have said, at that point, that A Man Called Ove (pronounced "oo-veh" or "oo-vah") was a really good book.

But the turn that the book made at that 80% point left me weeping and made it what I call a great book.

The hard book about a hard man had a spectacular, redemptive ending - and that trajectory of loss and pain to a redemptive ending made all the difference.¹

"*Riches-to-rags*" stories aren't anywhere near as much fun as "*rags-to-riches*" stories. The story of the rise and fall of the Roman Empire isn't as inspiring as Cinderella's fall and then rise.²

The trajectory is the thing - and upward is the best trajectory. And it is the upward trajectory we find in the Friday to Sunday story of Jesus that makes it the best story of all.

This morning, after a couple of weeks of walking through the hard stories of that chapter of Jesus' life that was about betrayal, denial, beatings, and crucifixion and death, we now come to the chapter after what everyone thought was His final chapter.

The Apostle John has been our guide through the story of Jesus, and we'll let John continue with his story-telling. He picks up the story late on the Friday afternoon of Jesus' death.

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

Judas had betrayed Him. Peter had denied Him. Fellow Jews and Romans had condemned Him. His Father abandoned Him.

Jesus died by Roman crucifixion as the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

¹ Similarly, the book Unbroken (I highly recommend this book!) tells the story of a man who survived the worst the world had to offer in World War II. The story took an unexpected turn to the best of all possible endings that I never saw coming.

² Volume 3 in Edward Gibbon's classic series, "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" is The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire.

The four soldiers who were charged with overseeing the crucifixion divided His clothing and then gambled for His valuable outer tunic. (John 19:23-24)

Corresponding to the four soldiers were four women at the cross who were all precious to Jesus: His mother, Mary; Mary's sister; Mary, the wife of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene. (v. 25)³

While on the cross, Jesus spoke to His mother and to the Apostle John. He transferred the responsibility for the care of His mother from Himself to John.⁴

Then, He said, "***It is finished!***" - and died.⁵

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

To confirm that He was really and truly dead,⁶ a soldier **[34] pierced His side with a spear,⁷ and immediately blood and water** (pericardial fluid) ***came out.***

Joseph of Arimathea, who was a wealthy man and a member of the Sanhedrin (John describes him as, **[38] a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, for fear of the Jews**), requested and was given permission to take Jesus' body for burial in his own, unused tomb.⁸

Then Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had visited Jesus at night, donated spices to temporarily embalm Jesus' body before a more thorough job could be done after the Passover and the Sabbath.⁹

They placed the Lord's body in Joseph's tomb before sunset because the Mosaic Law required that those who were hung on a tree had to be taken down by then.

After doing this last thing for Jesus, Joseph and Nicodemus never expected to see Him again.

For these two, for the four women, for the whole group of Jesus' now-eleven apostles, and for the larger group of all of those who had put their hopes and dreams in Jesus, that story was over.

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

John takes us back to the tomb just before sunrise on the morning of the first day of the week.

Fear and Doubt Turn to Faith at an Unsealed 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 Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already removed from the tomb.

³ Jesus had cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene. (Mark 16; Luke 8)

⁴ Amazing. In the midst of the most intense pain, Jesus focused on others' needs.

⁵ The Roman soldiers had set out to break the legs of the three men on crosses late on Friday afternoon, as the breaking of the legs mercifully sped up death. They did break the legs of the criminals on either side of Jesus. But they didn't break Jesus' legs, as He was already dead (vv. 32-33), thus fulfilling the Old Testament law that no bone of the Passover lamb was to be broken, which Jesus was. Notable, as well, is that Jesus' death would have occurred at the time of day when the Jews were killing the sacrificial lambs for Passover. Perfect timing.

⁶ The Romans would leave the crucified bodies of victims on the cross for a long time after they died (even for weeks) as a warning to other would-be criminals.

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 required that Jesus' dead body be taken down before sunset on that Friday.

⁷ 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."** The manner of His death was a fulfillment of prophecy.

⁸ So, Matthew 27:60.

⁹ Nicodemus, the one 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. Earlier, it wasn't at all clear if Nicodemus believed in Jesus. Here, it appears that he and Joseph did.

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 gone to the tomb to honor Jesus' by finishing up the embalming work that Joseph and Nicodemus had started on Friday.¹⁰

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

As she approached the garden tomb area, she saw that the stone had been (literally) "**lifted up**" out of its tracks.

When she saw the stone removed, the grief she had been feeling doubled. Grave robbers have stolen her chance to honor Jesus.

[2] 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."

Status report? Mary was now doubly overcome with grief. And what about Peter? How was Peter doing at about this time?

After his recent failures on Thursday night - remember that Peter denied three times that he even knew who Jesus was! - I'm sure that Peter was consumed with guilt and remorse.

And it wasn't only Peter who had failed Jesus. John and all the others had fled into the dark when Jesus was arrested.

But, as soon as they heard Mary's report, both John and Peter were off and "**running**" (v. 4) to the tomb.

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

Evidently, John was the faster runner, so he got to the tomb first. John ***[5]...saw the linen wrappings lying there; however he did not go in.***

When Peter got to the tomb, he wasn't quite so standoffish.

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.

Peter saw an orderly scene, not what grave robbers would have left behind.

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 - he was persuaded - that what Jesus had told him would happen, had happened.¹²

That means that prior to that first Sunday morning, Peter and John had NOT been expecting a resurrection. They believed that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of God." but 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 had never believed that.

They now believe that because they have seen the evidence.

¹⁰ The other gospels mention several women coming to the tomb. John's account doesn't contradict that. He just focused on the presence of Mary Magdalene.

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

¹² As when He predicted the destruction and restoration of the "**temple**" (signifying His own body - John 2:18-22); as when He claimed to be the Good Shepherd who

would lay His life down and take it up again - John 10:17-18); as when He likened Himself to a grain of wheat that must die before producing much fruit, a metaphor for His death and resurrection (John 12:23-24). And there were numerous times in the Synoptic Gospels when Jesus explicitly predicted His resurrection.

An empty tomb took them completely by surprise and persuaded them that belief in a resurrection was justified.

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

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

The men have gone, but the cemetery wasn't empty. Mary Magdalene was still there, alone, left with the double grief over Jesus' death and now, His 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, sobbing. Mary was inconsolable.

But 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.

What Mary saw was something they had not seen.

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

Mary spoke with angels (v. 13)

The angels' only role in this scene is to ask this one question:

[13a]...“Woman, why are you weeping?”¹⁴

Knowing what they knew, they couldn't understand Mary's weeping. They knew that this was the one most glaringly inappropriate moment in history for weeping.

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.”¹⁵

Right after she said that her attention shifted from looking at the angels, to some activity outside of the tomb.

Mary spoke 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.

In some way, she was kept from recognizing Him.¹⁶

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 Mary say out loud the very personal reason why she had come to the tomb before daybreak on a Sunday morning.

By Mary's answer, it is clear that nothing was clear to her.

¹³ While on the cross, Jesus entrusted the care of Jesus' mother, Mary, to the Apostle John. I wonder if John told Mary - on that morning - that Jesus was alive.

¹⁴ The other Gospels gave the angel(s) more words.

¹⁵ As she described the scene at the tomb for the angels, Mary has referred to *they* in her haste. And, in this context, we don't know if this *they* refers to Jesus'

enemies, or to workers who might have just moved the body without permission? Regardless, Mary was clearly not imagining a resurrection.

¹⁶ In other post-resurrection appearances, Jesus was sometimes 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.

[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."

Yes. Mary asked Jesus where He had put Jesus.

And so, Jesus, knowing that Mary had come to the tomb out of devotion to Him and that she was near the end of her emotional rope, 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).¹⁷

When the Good Shepherd called her name, she knew exactly who He was. And then, Jesus gave Mary His first *"great commission."*

Mary spoke to the disciples about an alive-again Jesus (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 God.'"

And off she went!

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

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 completely surprised. None of them expected a too-good-to-be-true resurrection end to this story.

¹⁷ This calls to mind John, chapter 10, where Jesus identified Himself as the Good Shepherd and said that His sheep hear His voice. (vv. 3, 27)

¹⁸ Here (unlike in the Synoptic Gospels), we are not told that the men did not believe Mary's report.

And what each one of them saw - or didn't see - turned their doubt to faith. It persuaded them of Jesus' trustworthiness. Let's remember that.

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

And despite the stupendous events of that day, the emotional state of the disciples was far from triumphant on that 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)

[19a] 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 Jews,¹⁹ Jesus came and stood in their midst..."

So, aside from being stunned, what would they have been thinking and even expecting from Jesus?

After their behavior on Thursday night in the Garden, when they all fled from Him, they might have expected a tongue-lashing, as in, *"You big bunch of cowards. You really let Me down. You all ran away. And Peter, you denied Me!"*

None of us would have blamed Jesus if He had scolded them.

But He didn't do that. Instead, Jesus said, **[19b] "Peace be to you."** Rather than scolding or insulting or reproving or cursing, He blessed.

¹⁹ They had good reason to be afraid. The Jews had already threatened them with excommunication from the synagogue. Now, having put their Leader to death, they would not have hesitated to try to do the same to His followers.

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 Who they were having a hard time believing He was.²⁰

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, Jesus gave them gifts.

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

He gave them the gift of peace. **[21] So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be to you.”**

He gave them a transcendent commission. **[21]...“just as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”**

He gave them the first fruits of the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit. **[22]...He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”**²¹

He gave them spiritual authority. **[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.”**

And after Jesus gave these gifts, He left. We don’t know whether He opened the door to leave or just disappeared. But He’s gone. Again. But this time it was different.

This time the air was electric with excitement as the disciples began to process what they had just experienced.

While that processing was 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, entered the room.

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 all wanted Thomas to join in the excitement. But Thomas didn’t join in, at all. He was skeptical, and 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 that response, Thomas has been known by the nickname, “*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 / chose / decided, to not believe.

You can hear the pain in those words.

²⁰ I find it very moving that the resurrected Jesus still bore His scars. God evidently 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.

²¹ This was a temporary gifting for their current need, until the more permanent gift of the Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2).

²² What we read here is critical for understanding how the first Christians came to believe that the resurrection had taken place. It was not that there was a gradual acceptance of the idea by the church. It was instantaneous, due to revelation.

Like the others, Thomas had suffered the most painful disappointment of his life when he watched the soldiers lead Jesus away from the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday night.

Friday's crucifixion would have crushed him.

Now, his friends were asking him to hope again, to believe that after everything that's happened, Jesus is alive, which is fine, unless, He isn't really alive, which 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 Thomas had walked for three years...

...have turned from inconsolable sadness to unfettered joy.

...have announced to him that they have seen Jesus, alive.

...a Man who had repeatedly stunned them all by His many miracles...

...maybe, just maybe Thomas should have taken them at their word.

But no. He will 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."

His entry and greeting were pretty much the same as it had been on that first Easter evening.

But this time Jesus spoke directly to Thomas:

[27] "Place your finger here, and see My hands; and take your hand and put it into My side; and do 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 what you know to be true."

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

[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, believed only 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 who don't see the resurrected Jesus.

²³ To this point, nobody in John's Gospel had called Jesus "***God***" 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 in the absence of seeing, we do have the eyewitness testimony of John.

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

Writing with us in mind, John now tells us exactly why he wrote his book about the life and times of Jesus.

[John 20:30] 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.

It was that John didn't set out to write an *exhaustive* biography of Jesus. He wrote a *selective* biography, recording for us what he did to drive home his 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:

[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.

Jesus' story is a story laced with sadness and tragedy. It is not a nothing-but-happy story.

But it is God's story, so it is a story with the best and most redemptive of all possible endings.

What happened two thousand years ago was the best news the world has ever heard. Jesus is alive!

And Jesus is so completely trustworthy...
...that we can stake our eternal destiny on Him.
...that we can live for Him every day, here and now.
...that we can take His message to everyone we know!

**HE IS RISEN!
HE IS RISEN, INDEED!**

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 **was** and **is** alive.