

Chapter 42: The Resurrection of Jesus

John 20:1–18

From one perspective, John 19 ended on the darkest note possible. Jesus' own people did not love, adore, worship, and obey him; rather, they demanded his crucifixion and death. By the end of John 19, the most that Jesus' friends can do is to lay his corpse lovingly in a tomb. From another perspective, however, John gives us three sets of clues to let us know that things are not as bad as they may seem on the surface. First, when Jesus died, he did not give the impression that he had failed—in fact, he triumphantly declared, “It is finished” (John 19:30). Second, John tells us that Jesus fulfilled various prophecies, types, and shadows from the Old Testament Scriptures through his death. Third, after Jesus' death, he is no longer treated with shame, scorn, and contempt. Instead, Jesus receives a burial fit for a king, suggesting that not only is Jesus' estate of humiliation finished, but a new estate of exaltation is coming.

All of this brings us to the story of Jesus' resurrection. On the one hand, Jesus has finished his work to fulfill God's redemptive plan at his death on the cross (cf. John 19:28–37). On the other hand, Jesus has still more to do.¹ The difference, though, is that Jesus will never again descend back into his estate of humiliation, suffering, shame, and death. From this “first day of the week” (John 20:1) onward, the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ will consist entirely of his estate of exaltation, beginning with his resurrection. The twist, though, is that the joy of Jesus' resurrection represents so much more than simply receiving Jesus back into the land of the living, so that Jesus will not even allow Mary to cling to him at this point (John 20:17). In fact, the resurrection has cosmic implications, and here in John 20:1–18 we see the first facet of the significance of the resurrection: *Jesus rises from the dead to reconcile us to God.*

Chaos: Jesus' Grave is Robbed! (John 20:1–4)

It is no small thing that John opens this next chapter with the words “Now on the first day of the week...” (John 20:1)—that is, on the Sunday following the crucifixion. Indeed, John tells us explicitly in three places that Jesus appears to his disciples on the first day of the week, but he never tells us the day when a resurrection appearance happens on a different day. First, this is the day when Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11–18). Second, John tells us that it is “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week...” (John 20:19) that Jesus will meet with ten of his disciples (John 20:19–23). Third, the eleven disciples will gather themselves together again (this time including Thomas) “Eight days later...” (John 20:26) on the following Sunday to wait for Jesus to meet with them. John Willison observes that, “For, when Christ met with his disciples on any other day of the week, we are not told what day it was, whether the second, third, or fourth day of the week; but when he meets with them on the first day, the Holy Ghost names and records that, thereby ascribing something peculiar to it above the rest.”²

The biblical case for worshiping the resurrected Jesus on the first day of the week (that is, on Sunday) rather than on Saturday stems from the example that Jesus himself sets from the very beginning. Jesus perhaps met with his disciples on days *other* than Sunday, but the Scriptures go out of their way to tell us that the resurrected Jesus selected the first day of the week as the regular meeting day to gather with his people for their worship. We find this pattern not only in the Gospel of John, but also in the other Gospel writers (cf. Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1, 13–35). Willison plausibly adds that “many are of opinion that he thus continued to meet with them every first day of the week, till his ascension, ‘speaking to them the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.’ Acts i. 3.”³ After the resurrection of Jesus, the early church continued meeting together on the first day of the week for worshiping Jesus in word, prayer, and sacrament (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1–2). Finally, it is on the first day of the week (“the Lord’s Day”) that the glorified Jesus appears to the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos to give him the vision written down for us in the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:10). Worshiping on the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week (Sunday), is not a man-made tradition, but rather one of the first patterns for worship that our Lord instituted after his resurrection.

The Reliability of Differing Reports

Here, then, is John’s account of the events that took place on the first day of the week after Jesus’ crucifixion:

[1] Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. [2] So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” (John 20:1–2)

In these verses and elsewhere, we find slight differences between John’s account and the accounts of the other Gospel writers. For example, Matthew tells us that “the other Mary” also went to see the tomb (Matt. 28:1), Mark that “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome” came (Mark 16:1), and Luke that the “women who had come with him from Galilee” (Luke 23:55) were the ones to come back on Sunday morning (Luke 24:1). Is this a discrepancy between the various accounts of the Gospels? Not at all. By writing only of Mary Magdalene, John does not dispute the accounts of the other Gospel writers who tell us that more women were there as well. As we have seen throughout our study, John frequently skips reporting what the Synoptic Gospel writers have already done a fine job of recording for us, not because he believes that those accounts are unimportant, but because he focuses instead on providing a new vantage point for seeing Jesus that the other Gospels do not give us.

Moreover, John is largely unconcerned to show how his account fits together with the other accounts. This does not mean that he is making anything up, but only that the details of Jesus’ life—especially during the chaos of his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection—are far broader and more complex than we usually imagine. Think, for example, how many different stories you might get if people in your life tried to write a report about your most recent birthday. Your spouse, your parents, your children, your siblings, your neighbors, your co-workers, and your friends might

record vastly different stories, even if they were trying to describe the exact same event. Some of this has to do with different interactions (your family members do not see what happens at work, and your co-workers do not see what happens in your home), and another part has to do with differing values (your friends, your children, your parents, and your spouse might all have very different ideas of what is most important on your birthday). You can see the same kind of phenomenon when you read about the same event in a variety of different newspapers. Much of the information will be consistent, but different reporting outlets will include or exclude different eyewitnesses, different experts, or different pieces of background information.

In the same vein, John does not self-consciously pick up where Matthew, Mark, and Luke leave off, and neither does he go out of his way to demonstrate how his accounts connect with those Gospel accounts. Instead, John simply tells the stories as an eyewitness to Jesus. We do not have enough information to piece together the story “behind” the Gospel accounts that we have received, but this does not detract from the authenticity of the accounts in each Gospel. As D. A. Carson notes, “Only the assumptions scholars make about the nature of the descent of tradition, coupled with peculiarly modern and Western notion of precise reportage, could discern any difficulty in such variables....Some of the difficulties and tensions in the narrative turn on too little information....Must a narrator report each mechanical step?”⁴ These differences are not a cause for concern or doubt about the reliability of the reports, but rather a reason for us to rejoice. God has given us *four* different perspectives from which to see the life of Jesus—what extraordinary grace! Therefore, we shall not judge John’s account by the standards of the other Gospels (or *vice versa*), but study to determine what John wants us to know about the resurrection of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene’s First Report

Getting back to Mary Magdalene, John tells us that Mary arrives at the tomb very early in the morning, while it was still dark. Upon her arrival, she discovers that the stone was removed from the tomb (John 20:1). Without investigating further, she immediately runs back to Simon Peter and John (“the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved”) to tell them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (John 20:2). Grave-robbing was sufficiently common in those days that the Roman “Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54) eventually ordered capital punishment to be meted out to those convicted of destroying tombs, removing bodies or even displacing the sealing stones.”⁵ For Jews in particular, the theft and abuse of a dead body was considered an atrocity.⁶ Indeed, the Jewish religious leaders were worried that Jesus’ disciples would rob the grave in order to fake his resurrection (Matt. 27:62–66), and it may be that Mary believes that the Jews themselves have taken Jesus’ body away in order to abuse and desecrate it.⁷ John, however, tells us no more than that Mary believed that Jesus’ body has been stolen, and that she immediately reports this interpretation of the empty tomb to the disciples.

The Race to the Tomb

Mary’s report sends the disciples into chaos, so that Peter and John run as fast as they can to reach the tomb:

[3] So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. [4] Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the

tomb first. [5] And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. [6] Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, [7] and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. (John 20:3–7)

This unique story prompts us to ask a couple of questions about why John would include this material in his Gospel. First of all, why did Peter and John run to the tomb? The Evangelist makes it clear that neither Peter nor John yet believed until after they arrived (John 20:8–9), so they did not run to see the tomb from full understanding and faith in the resurrection of Jesus. And yet, it seems obvious that the seed of faith planted in their hearts is beginning to blossom, even if no fully formed fruit has yet emerged.⁸ The reaction of Peter and John seems like some combination of concern and curiosity, horror and hope, worry and wonder.

Second, why does John tell us how fast both he and Peter ran to the tomb? Some see in this as John's thinly veiled attempt to demonstrate his own superiority over Peter, since John arrives at the tomb first.⁹ Some Roman Catholics argue that John here clearly defers to the supremacy of Peter by allowing Peter to enter into the tomb first, even though John arrived at the tomb before Peter.¹⁰ On the whole, these suggestions try to prove too much from the text, assuming that Peter and John must constantly be working out the rivalry (animosity?) between each other. Certainly, the relationship between John and Peter is unique, as Ridderbos notes: "Something is repeated here that can be observed over and over in the relationship between the two men: the beloved disciple has a unique position alongside that of Peter, and in some respects he stays a step ahead of him, but without in any way diminishing Peter's special place among the disciples."¹¹ And yet, even if the two have their differences, it is unlikely that either Peter or John would see the loss of Jesus' body as an opportunity to one-up the other. Yes, the two are racing to the tomb, but they are not racing *against* each other—they are both simply trying to get to the scene as quickly as possible, and John happens to arrive first. Then, while the typically "deep, tender soul" of John hesitates contemplatively before entering the tomb, it is the characteristically "impetuous" Peter who rushes inside without any further thought.¹² These details do not establish any theological or ecclesiastical supremacy one way or another; they are simply the details of what really happened that John remembers and writes down as an eyewitness.¹³

Clarification: Jesus is Risen! (John 20:5–13)

Without entering the tomb, John is able to see the "linen cloths lying there" (John 20:5), and when Peter enters, the first thing he sees are also the "linen cloths lying there" (John 20:6). Then, in another place, Peter sees the facecloth of Jesus folded up neatly and set aside (John 20:7). Since both John and Peter are investigating Mary's claim that some people "have taken the Lord out of the tomb," the presence of these grave clothes gives them pause. The people who made the burial preparations for Jesus would have wound these linen trips tightly, many times over, around the corpse of Jesus—even in the haste of the approaching high Sabbath day (cf. John 19:42). No grave robber, then, would have taken the time to unwrap the corpse of Jesus and leave the linen cloths behind; they would have taken the body, linen cloths and all, and escaped as quickly as possible.¹⁴ As Peter and John investigate the scene, they quickly recognize that the grave bears no signs of being

ransacked, for both the linen cloths and the facecloth are left behind in a neat, orderly fashion.¹⁵ Only one conclusion remains: Jesus has been resurrected from the dead!¹⁶

The presence of the linen cloths and the facecloth do not merely demonstrate *that* Jesus is alive; additionally, they demonstrate *in what way* Jesus is alive. First, the fact that only clothing remains means that Jesus rose from the dead in his own body: “The empty tomb establishes that there was continuity between Jesus’ pre-death body and his post-resurrection body. However transformed the latter was (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:35ff.), its point of continuity with the pre-death Jesus did not lie exclusively at the level of Jesus’ *personality*; it lay also at the level of Jesus’ *body*.”¹⁷ When we talk about the resurrection of Jesus, we are not talking about a vague sense that Jesus “lives on in our hearts and minds,” the way that some well-meaning people speak about the deaths of their loved ones. This is not at all the case of Jesus—his body both *suffered* death on the cross and then *conquered* death at the resurrection.

Second, John draws a direct contrast here with the story of Lazarus’s resuscitation in John 11. When Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of his tomb, “The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go’” (John 11:44). Lazarus was alive, but he needed help to get the grave clothes off of him. This time around, no one needs to unbind Jesus from his linen cloths and his facecloth. Unlike Lazarus, Jesus does not stumble out of the grave, still bound in the trappings of death, being merely resuscitated for a time. Rather, he has cast aside his grave clothes forever, being raised up as a victor over death for all eternity.¹⁸

Seeing and Believing

After his initial hesitation, John finally enters the tomb of Jesus:

[8] Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; [9] for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. [10] Then the disciples went back to their homes. (John 20:8–10)

Here, John speaks in part only for himself, that “*he* saw and believed” (John 20:8), but then for both Peter and John together: “for as yet *they* did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (John 20:9). The disciples have read the Scriptures, and they have spent the last three years listening to Jesus expound the Scriptures. Nevertheless, they do not understand the thrust of the Scriptures—that Jesus *must* rise from the dead—until they enter the tomb and see the linen cloths and the facecloth discarded, but Jesus’ body gone.¹⁹ While the disciples in general did not understand the Scriptures, this is the turning point where they begin to understand, and the light bulb comes on for each person at a different moment. If Peter does not yet believe to the same degree that John does at this point (and most assume that he does not), he will by the end of the day when he sees the resurrected Jesus (John 20:19–23).²⁰

Once satisfied, the disciples return to their homes (John 20:10). From their return to their homes, we should not think that John intends to convey that the disciples lack faith or enthusiasm in the resurrection.²¹ It is better to recognize that they simply do not know what to do with the information. Furthermore, they really do not have a full understanding at the point of what has actually happened beyond knowing that Jesus has in some way risen from the dead—and Peter may

still not grasp even that much. The disciples need additional information and instruction from the Lord, so they return to their homes as they wait.

The Holiness of Jesus' Tomb

After informing the disciples that the body of Jesus is missing (John 20:2), Mary returns to the tomb, weeping:

[11] But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. [12] And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. [13] They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” (John 20:11–13)

In the midst of the joy of the resurrection, the angels ask Mary, “Woman, why are you weeping?” Although John (and perhaps Peter) now believe that Jesus has risen from the dead (John 20:8–9), Mary’s words to the angels are essentially the same as what she reported earlier to the disciples, revealing that her sorrow is unchanged: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (John 20:13). Mary is so consumed in her grief that the presence of angels and the question they pose to her does not seem to surprise her in the least.²²

The presence of the angels demonstrates that Jesus’ tomb is extraordinarily holy.²³ More than that, the *position* of the angels (one at the place where Jesus’ had laid his head, and the other at his feet) probably reflects the position of the cherubim at each end of the lid of the ark of the covenant (cf. Ex. 25:19).²⁴ If so, then John is suggesting that this tomb is somehow like the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant rested in the tabernacle. This is shocking, since death was so unclean that anyone who came into contact with a corpse, or anyone who even entered into a tent where someone has died, was considered unclean under the old covenant (Num. 19:11–19). The punishment for failing to cleanse himself after an unclean encounter with death was strict: “If the man who is unclean does not cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD” (Num. 19:20). Notice that the problem with being defiled by death is that an unclean person will defile the tabernacle (“the sanctuary of the LORD”). The suggestion that a tomb could qualify as the holy of holies was therefore unimaginable under the old covenant.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ tomb is a new tomb in which “no one had yet been laid” (John 19:41). Furthermore, not only does Jesus’ body avoid suffering any corruption (Acts 2:27; cf. Ps. 16:10), his body has undergone such a radical change through the resurrection that no uncleanness, decay, or death can touch him ever again. In fact, Jesus has *reversed* the curse of death through his resurrection body! Even the purified and consecrated Levitical priests dealt with some bodily decay as their bodies wasted away little by little, day by day (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16), but Jesus’ body now bursts with resurrection life. Because of the resurrection, Jesus’ tomb is far more ceremonially clean than Moses’s tabernacle or Solomon’s temple ever was.

Comfort: Jesus is Reconciling us to God! (John 20:14–18)

At this point, Jesus himself appears and takes over the conversation:

[14] Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. [15] Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” [16] Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). (John 20:14–16)

Turning around, Mary sees Jesus but does not recognize him (John 20:14)—just like the men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:16) and the disciples out fishing (John 21:4). Perhaps she is unable to see much of anything through her tears, or perhaps, as John Calvin suggests, she is unable to see Jesus because she does not yet look upon Jesus with the eyes of faith: “Mary has no view of this matter but what is earthly. She desires only to obtain the dead body of Christ, that she may keep it hidden in the sepulcher; but she leaves out the most important matter, the elevation of her mind to the divine power of his resurrection. We need not wonder, therefore, if such grovelling views place a veil before her eyes.”²⁵

This ongoing theme of failing to recognize Jesus after his resurrection raises a larger question: If Jesus has been resurrected in his original body (leaving only his grave clothes behind), why is it that so many people have a difficult time recognizing him after his resurrection? D. A. Carson writes this:

In this instance, it is possible that Mary was blinded by tears. Taken as a whole, however, the resurrection accounts provide a certain tension. On the one hand, Jesus’ resurrection body can be touched and handled (v. 27; Lk. 24:39), bears the marks of the wounds inflicted on Jesus’ pre-death body (Jn. 20:20, 25, 27), and not only cooks fish (21:9) but eats it (Lk. 24:41–43). On the other hand, Jesus’ resurrection body apparently rose through the grave-clothes (Jn. 20:6–8), appears in a locked room (vv. 19, 26), and is sometimes not (at least initially) recognized. The closest we are likely to come to an explanation is 1 Cor. 15:35ff.²⁶

The text that Carson points us to in 1 Corinthians 15 clarifies how perishable bodies before death relate to imperishable bodies after resurrection: “what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain” (1 Cor. 15:37). In other words, there is continuity between the body of Jesus before his death and after his resurrection, but there is also discontinuity. Thus, there is an organic connection between the body of Jesus that was planted in the tomb like a seed and between the resurrection body that later springs forth like wheat from that seed. The wheat grows out of the seed—indeed, the wheat *is* the seed—even though the wheat does not look all that much like the seed when it takes its final form. This is the body of Jesus, but it is his *resurrected* body.

“Whom are you seeking?”

Like the angels, Jesus asks Mary why she is weeping, but then he adds another question: “Whom are you seeking?” (John 20:15). This is the same question that Jesus asked his enemies in another

garden—the garden of Gethsemane—when they came to arrest him (John 18:4). There, Jesus revealed himself so powerfully to his enemies that they fell to the ground when Jesus declared, “I am” (John 18:6). At first, Mary thinks that Jesus is merely a gardener, but then Jesus identifies himself to her by speaking *her* name. Unlike Jesus’ enemies, Mary is overcome not with fear but with joy when she hears Jesus speak her name (John 20:16). The two times that Jesus reveals himself after asking, “Whom are you seeking?,” then, offer us a glimpse into the two responses to Jesus’ revelation of himself when he returns. Some will shrink back in fear and shame, while others who have awaited him by faith will be transformed in joy to be like him, seeing him as he really is (cf. 1 John 2:28–3:2).

The fact that Mary identifies Jesus not by sight, but by his voice, is important for two reasons. First, this demonstrates what Jesus meant when he said that “The sheep hear [shepherd’s] voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:3).²⁷ Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus’ precious sheep, hears the voice of her Good Shepherd as he calls her by name. Now that Jesus has ascended to heaven, he does not speak audibly to his people outside of his Scriptures. And yet, by the Holy Spirit, the sheep of Jesus hear the voice of Jesus speaking directly to them from the Scriptures. The way our Good Shepherd calls us by name may be very different than this unique, unrepeatable experience of Mary Magdalene on the morning of Jesus’ resurrection, but hearing Jesus speak to us through the Scriptures is no less real.

Second, this demonstrates to us that Jesus continues to build his kingdom by his word: “Jesus, who hitherto has used chiefly his Word in working upon the hearts of his disciples, now that he has entered his state of exaltation still uses the Word. He is still the Master-Teacher. We are not to expect a new medium for the building of his kingdom.”²⁸ Therefore, Mary’s response calling Jesus “‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher)” (John 20:16) gives us an example to follow. We look to the Lord Jesus Christ not as though we expect his visible manifestation, but instead allowing him to rule over us by teaching us his doctrine by his word. Whenever we read, preach, sing, pray, or expound the word of Jesus in the Scriptures, the Good Shepherd continues to call his sheep to himself and to rule over us as our King.

“Do not cling to me”

Accordingly, Jesus does not want Mary Magdalene to get used to his physical appearance, for he will only remain with his people for a short time before he must ascend to his Father in heaven:

[17] Jesus said to her, “Do not cling 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, to my God and your God.’” [18] Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her. (John 20:17–18)

To some degree, Jesus insists on having his people touch him (cf. Matt. 28:9; John 20:27), since Jesus must demonstrate the reality of his bodily resurrection from the dead.²⁹ In this case, however, the verb Jesus uses does not mean “to touch lightly” nor “to feel over,” but “to cling to, to grasp tightly.”³⁰ Verifying that this is really Jesus in the flesh is one thing; clinging to Jesus in an attempt to keep him with us on the earth forever is another. Jesus cannot remain in this world, for he must ascend to the Father, since “his state of resurrection would not be full and complete, until he should sit down in heaven at the right hand of the Father.”³¹ In the context of the Gospel of John, Jesus’

ascension “is the conclusion of his ‘hour’ whereby the salvation of the kingdom of God is wrought.”³² At his ascension, Jesus enters into the fullness of his estate of exaltation as he presents the completed work of his estate of humiliation to his Father.

Instead, Jesus sends Mary to “my brothers” with a message from Jesus: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God,” a message that Mary delivers to the disciples (John 20:17–18). By “brothers,” Jesus does not mean his biological brothers (other sons born to Mary; cf. John 7:3–5), but his disciples. The disciples have become Jesus’ “brothers” by adoption to the Father now that Jesus has fulfilled his redemptive work.³³ Notice that Jesus draws a slight (but important) distinction between his own relationship to the Father and the relationship that his disciples will enjoy with the Father. William Hendriksen writes:

[Jesus] does not say, “I am ascending to *our* Father.” *His* sonship differs from *theirs*; hence, he says, “to *my* Father and to your Father.”...*He* is Son by nature; *they* are sons by adoption. Hence, also “and to *my* God and *your* God.” Nevertheless, *the closeness* of fellowship is also stressed: the same God who is the Father of Jesus is also the Father of the disciples.³⁴

Through Jesus, the disciples have been adopted by the Father. Jesus’ relationship to the Father is unique, but the disciples nevertheless enjoy the benefits of sonship through their faith in Jesus. This is why the ascension is critical—having Jesus’ physical presence is wonderful, but Jesus must ascend to the Father in order to bring about something much better: adoption into the family of God. This is why Jesus refuses to allow Mary cling to him in this condition. There is something far better that he—and we!—must receive through his ascension.

Mary Magdalene’s Second Report

Therefore, Mary Magdalene goes to tell the disciples that she has seen the Lord and to deliver them the message that Jesus has given her (John 20:18). This is astonishing, since the ancient world did not value the testimony of women, so that their testimony had very little weight in the court of law.³⁵ He will appear to his disciples a bit later on this same day (cf. John 20:19ff), but for now, Jesus sends someone weak and despised to proclaim the good news of his resurrection to his disciples. In some ways, this is still the way that the gospel of Jesus Christ spreads through the world: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor. 1:27–29). Mary is the first to receive the privilege that all of us now share: bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Jesus’ disciples and followers react with such chaos at first when they could not find Jesus’ body? What prevented them from recognizing God’s hand in the resurrection of Jesus? Where do you struggle to see God at work in your own life? How do you react when you judge your circumstances outwardly, according to the flesh, rather than by faith?

2. Why do you think John tells us about the grave clothes that Peter and John find in Jesus' tomb? How do these grave clothes contrast with the grave clothes that still bound Lazarus when he came out of his tomb (John 11:44)? What does that tell us about the nature of Jesus' resurrection? What does that contrast tell us about our own hope for resurrection?

3. What is significant about holy angels gathering in the tomb of Jesus? How does their presence signify a radical departure from the standards of cleanness and purity in relation to death from the old covenant? What does this detail tell us about the nature of Jesus' resurrection? What does that contrast tell us about our own hope for resurrection?

4. What is Mary Magdalene's reaction to hearing the voice of Jesus? Why does Jesus tell Mary not to cling to him? Why does Jesus insist that he must ascend to his Father? What is significant about the way that Jesus says that *his* Father is our Father, and that *his* God is our God (John 20:17)? Why is it better for Jesus to be at the right hand of his Father than with you right now in the midst of your loneliness, suffering, struggles, and confusion?

Notes

1. "The dramatic 'It is finished' (19:30) did not mean that *everything* connected with the 'lifting up' of the Son was finished, but only that Jesus' suffering was finished, his obedience perfect and the will of the Father accomplished up to the decisive juncture of Jesus' death. After all, events that took place *after* Jesus had died are also said to fulfil Scripture (19:36, 37). Of nothing is this truer than of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (20:9), even though the first witnesses did not understand this at the time. For John, nothing could be more disastrous than to consider the cross in isolation from the resurrection, for nothing is more certain in his mind than that the cross is the route Jesus took to return to his Father (14:28–31; 20:17), that the ultimate glorification of the Son with the Father is accomplished through the paradoxical glorification on the cross (12:23–28)." (Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 631.)

2. John Willison, *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctification of the Lord's Day* (Albany: J. Boardman, 1820), 61–62.

3. Willison, *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctification of the Lord's Day*, 61.

4. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 632–33.

5. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 636.

6. "That kind of loss would be a concern to anyone at any time, but among Jews of the near Orient at that time, abuse or outrage of the dead was a shocking thing (cf. the Philistines' exposure of the bodies of Saul and his sons, and the bravery of the men of Jabesh-Gilead in recovering them and giving them a proper burial, 1 Sam 31:9–13)." (Beasley-Murray, *John*, 374.)

7. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1338.

8. "Some seed of faith, therefore, remained in their hearts, but quenched for a time, so that they were not aware of having what they had. Thus the Spirit of God often works in the elect in a secret manner. In short, we must believe that there was some concealed root, from which we see fruit produced. Though this feeling of piety, which they possessed, was confused, and was accompanied by much superstition, still I give to it — though inaccurately — the name of *faith*, because it was only by the doctrine of the Gospel that it was produced, and it had no tendency but towards Christ. From this seed there at length sprang a true and sincere faith, which, leaving the sepulcher, ascended to the heavenly glory of Christ." (Calvin, *Commentary on the*

Gospel According to John, vol. II, 250. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.i.html>>)

9. Cited in Beasley-Murray, *John*, 373–74.
10. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1343–44.
11. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 632.
12. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1341.
13. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 633.
14. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1342.
15. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 450.
16. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1182.
17. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 638.
18. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 848.
19. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 252. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.i.html>>
20. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 638–39.
21. Contra Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1344–45.
22. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John*, 636.
23. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1188.
24. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1351.
25. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 257. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.ii.html>>
26. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 641.
27. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 257–58. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iii.html>>
28. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1359.
29. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 258–59. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iii.html>>
30. Lenski, *The Interpretation of John's Gospel*, 1360.
31. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 259. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iii.html>>
32. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 378.
33. Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 262. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.x.iii.html>>
34. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, 456.
35. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 1192.