

Holy Week

*³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”
(John 12:31–32 ESV)*

He Saw And Believed

Easter Sunday

April 5th, 2015

John 20:1-10

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles to John 20:1-10. That’s on page 906 in your pew Bibles. Hear now from God’s Holy, inspired and inerrant Word:

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.” 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. 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 20:1–10 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

All throughout John’s Gospel there has been a noticeable emphasis on seeing and believing. We think for example of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus where Jesus says:

³ “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3 ESV)

That story reaches its climax in what is probably the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16 which says:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have

eternal life (John 3:16 ESV)

When we read that story, as indeed when we read John's Gospel as a whole we understand that for John SEEING IS BELIEVING. Not everyone who looks, SEES, just like not everyone who LISTENS HEARS, but for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see there is a magnificent blessing. There is an eternal kingdom and there is everlasting life.

Now in this passage that we have read this morning, John takes us to his own crisis of faith. He tells us of the time when he and Peter, along with Mary SAW AND HE BELIEVED. That is the theme of his Gospel as a whole and it is certainly the theme of this climactic passage and we'll take it as our theme for the message this morning. We'll talk about what we should see, what it means in this story for John to believe, where we go after that for further understanding and what those of us reading this story 2000 years later should do in response.

Let's begin with the issue of seeing. What does John share that he wants us to SEE?

Seeing

John tells us at the end of this chapter that he has carefully recorded these events so that we can see and judge things for ourselves. He wants us to consider carefully the evidence that he is putting here before our eyes. There are whole books written on the evidences for the resurrection – I would recommend to your consideration the short and very readable book, The Case For Easter by Lee Strobel which lays that evidence out in an exhaustive and very convincing manner – but for our purposes this morning I just want to direct your eyes to three things in particular. First of all I'd like you to see:

1. The multiple witnesses to the event

We're told in these 10 verses that 3 people went to the tomb and found it empty. Mary, Peter and John. Those 3 people stand behind the testimony that we are reading this morning. That number is very significant, as Bible readers will know. The Scriptures say:

“A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

(Deuteronomy 19:15 ESV)

According to the Scriptures if 2 or 3 members of the covenant community swear to the truth of a matter, it is to be accepted as fact. The principle of multiple witnesses is repeated in the New Testament. Jesus says it in Matthew 18 and Paul says it in 1 Timothy 5. Old Testament and New, the Bible teaches that within the covenant community truth is established upon the testimony of multiple witnesses.

Now we should say a few things about the nature of these witnesses. The first thing we would probably want to notice is that one of them is a woman. That cannot be an accident. In Judaism the testimony of a woman was inadmissible in court. And yet, in the Providence of God it is arranged for Mary to be among the 3. Right from the beginning of Christianity this is a point of discontinuity with Judaism. With respect to our salvation, with respect to our intimacy with God through Christ, with respect to our common mandate to make disciples and to share the Gospel – there is no longer Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, male or female. Now, as we read through the rest of the New Testament we discover that being saved by God in Christ does not OBLITERATE OUR GENDER – there are still ways in which we are uniquely male and female as indeed we were before the fall, BUT it must be noted that with respect to revelation, with respect to intimate disclosure, with respect to witness and testimony – there is no male and female. There are only those who have seen and believed.

We should also notice that these witnesses were consistent in their testimony despite massive pressure to recant. Peter and John were both arrested, they were both flogged and told by the Jewish Sanhedrin to stop preaching this resurrected Jesus and they both refused. The Romans likewise pressured these two Apostles to recant and they both refused. Peter was crucified upside down refusing to deny the Lord. Tertullian, an early church writer and apologist tells us that the Apostle John was tortured by being dipped in boiling oil, but he like Peter, would not recant his testimony. Their witness was legal, according to the Scriptures, it was consistent and it was unchanging even under torture. You need to see that and you need to reckon with it. People don't normally die and endure torture for a lie.

Secondly, John wants us to be careful to see:

2. The linen cloths

He makes special mention of that in verses 5-6:

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 (John 20:5-6 ESV)

They both saw the linen cloths, John says. Obviously he thinks that's important. Why does he think that? What conclusion does he expect us to draw from that? Well, we know that grave robbing was a fairly significant concern in the Roman Empire. It was a big enough concern that the Emperor Claudius instituted capital punishment for the crime in hopes it would serve as a deterrent. The Jewish authorities also levied significant penalties on anyone who was caught robbing a grave. From that we can conclude two things: people obviously did rob graves and they did it at great risk to their own lives and that makes the appearance of Jesus' tomb very unusual. Grave robbers did not steal bodies – they stole valuables. Meaning, if the tomb had been robbed, the body would still be there and the linen cloths would be gone. Linen was valuable, not to mention the spices that could have been salvaged from the cloth. If it had been a robbery, the body would have been left and the linens would have been taken. That is not what these witnesses saw. They saw linens and no body. That means this wasn't a robbery it was a resurrection.

Thirdly, John is careful to mention:

3. The folded face cloth

He mentions that separately:

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 20:7 ESV)

That seems to indicate two things. First of all, once again it seems to speak against the idea of a robbery. You would expect robbers to take valuable things and you would not expect robbers to fold things. Robbers snatch, grab and run, they don't stay and do laundry.

The second thing we are probably supposed to see here is the contrast between this cloth and the cloths that had been on Lazarus. When Lazarus came forth from the grave in John chapter 11 we are told:

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 ESV)

Unbind him. They had to unwrap his head because Lazarus was raised with a regular, though revived human body. Jesus was not. He was raised with a resurrected body. You understand that Lazarus died again fairly shortly thereafter, Jesus did not. Jesus exists in an un-aging, incorruptible, immortal, fully glorified body. That body had unusual properties like for example, the ability to pass through walls. John mentions that capacity in verse 19 of this chapter, so it seems that the point of this folded head piece – rather than an unwrapped pile of cloth – is that Jesus did not simply wake up and unwrap himself, rather, he passed alive, through his grave clothes¹. From this we infer that glorified bodies are characterized by continuity and discontinuity with our pre-glorified bodies. Meaning that in the new heaven and the new earth we will recognize each other but we will all be much better looking. That’s not the point John is making but its worth pointing out none the less. The point that John is making here is that the folded face cloth indicates that Jesus passed through the grave wrappings alive. He took his time, he folded things neatly and he left the tomb ALIVE.

That is what John saw when he entered the tomb and seeing he believed. John offers his own belief as a guide and an encouragement to our own so let’s talk for a moment this morning about the nature of John’s belief.

Believing

First of all we should notice that it is a belief:

1. Based on facts

¹ Lazarus came from the tomb wearing his grave-clothes, the additional burial cloth still wrapped around his head. Jesus’ resurrection body apparently passed through his grave-clothes, spices and all, in much the same way that he later appeared in a locked room (vv. 19, 26). D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 637.

John saw the empty tomb and he believed that Jesus rose again. We need to be very careful how we talk about Christian faith. Sometimes we talk about it as though it has nothing to do with fact. Faith is bigger than fact, I'm not denying that, but it is not detached from fact. Christian doctrine – the content of our faith – is explicitly historical, meaning it refers back to things we believe actually happened. We don't believe that the stories in the Bible are theological myths – that they tell stories that don't mean to be taken as FACTUAL but only mean to communicate IDEAS and CONCEPTS for us to believe. That is not Christian faith. We believe that Jesus ACTUALLY rose from the dead. He did not “rise in their hearts in a metaphysical kind of way” – no he rose from the dead in an actual physical way. He ate actual fish, he broke actual bread. These things actually happened. The facts of our faith really matter.

Let me put my cards on the table. If you could PROVE TO ME beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was no historical Adam, that there was no historical Exodus, that there was no historical Jesus and no historical empty tomb then I would deny Christ and cease calling myself a Christian. But I believe those things ACTUALLY HAPPENED. I believe there was a historical Adam, I believe there was an actual fall, I believe there was an original Exodus led by a historical Moses, through a very hot desert and into a promised land. I believe there was man named Jesus, full of grace and truth. I believe he was born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. I believe he lived a perfect life and died a sacrificial death on a cross outside Jerusalem. I believe he was buried and descended to the dead. And I believe that he rose again on the third day. I believe those things not as CONCEPTS but as HISTORICAL FACTS. I believe they ACTUALLY HAPPENED. My faith sees further than the facts, but my faith is not disinterested in facts and it can never be detached from facts. John saw the empty tomb and he believed. His faith was based on facts.

Secondly, we should also note that his belief was:

2. Prior to full understanding

John says that in verses 8-9:

⁸ he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. (John 20:8-9 ESV)

So John saw the fact of the empty tomb, the fact of the cloth and the head piece folded and seeing those facts he believed. He believed and yet he did not fully understand the Scriptures that explained why he must rise from the dead. His faith came before understanding.

That, by the way, is the consistent testimony of the Gospel writers. In Luke's Gospel after Jesus has appeared in their midst and offered his hands and sides as convincing proof of his actual resurrection – at which point even doubting Thomas believed – AFTER that Luke records these words:

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:45–47 ESV)

It was after they saw and believed that Jesus SUBSEQUENTLY opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. I don't know if you've ever thought of the sequence of these things in that way. I had the advantage of having a Systematic Theology textbook in seminary that had as its title: “Faith Seeking Understanding”. That strange title helped me think through this consistent teaching of the Bible. According to the Bible we believe BEFORE we understand. That is why we call it faith. Not because our belief is detached from FACTS – John saw the empty tomb and believed – but his faith was actually prior to his understanding. Christianity is never something you figure out so as to believe. Faith is not an equation that you solve. Faith is believing in something that really happened, the significance of which you only understand, by the grace of God, on the other side. After they saw and believed Jesus OPENED THEIR MINDS to understand the Scriptures.

Theologians refer to this as the noetic effect of the fall – we could talk about this for hours, we could read Romans 1, 2 Corinthians 3 or a host of other passages, but here is all I want to say about that this morning. You can only see so far into Scripture and into reality as a non-believer. The cracked lens of your own sinful heart obscures and hides from you the things you were you meant to see and understand. That is why Jesus said in John 3:3 that you have to be born again TO SEE the kingdom of God.

But when you see and believe the veil is removed and now you can see, further, clearer and by

the grace of God and with the help of the Holy Spirit you immediately and little by little begin to understand. That is what we mean when we talk about faith seeking understanding. Its complicated, I grant you, but John shares that part of the story nonetheless. He says that he saw and believed and that later he was helped to understand.

Understanding

When you compare John's account with Luke's account of these same events we gain some detail as to what it was exactly that John and others came to understand. After Jesus appeared to the disciples and presented his body for inspection, which John records later in this chapter, Luke adds the following details:

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44–45 ESV)

Jesus says that the whole Old Testament – the law, the prophets and the Psalms – are all about him and then he opens their minds to understand. Now, obviously, the idea that the entire Old Testament is about Jesus is not SELF EVIDENT to all people who read it. If it were, then we would not still have 13 million Jewish people in the world that don't love Jesus. It is possible, it has always been possible for very smart people to read the Old Testament and not see Jesus. Now as born again people you and I struggle to understand that don't we? How could you read Isaiah 53:5-6 and not see Jesus?

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5–6 ESV)

How could you read Zechariah 12:10 and not believe in Jesus?

¹⁰ "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. (Zechariah 12:10 ESV)

That's in the Old Testament! How could you read that and not see Jesus? The Apostle Paul says that a veil lies over their eyes and that only in Christ is the veil removed. You don't actually

understand the Bible until you see and believe in Jesus. But when you see and when you believe and when you are filled with and taught by the Holy Spirit then all of the sudden and little by little you come to understand. You understand that God is holy and God is love. He cannot abide with sin and he cannot embrace sinners. But he is not done with us. He promises to come to us in the flesh, as the Seed of the Woman. He promises to come through the Jewish people, through the line of David; through a line of stubborn sinners who despite their failings, wrestle with the Living God. He comes in the flesh to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He keeps the whole law for his people. He earns the promise of eternal life for his people. And he suffers the punishment our sins deserve; He becomes our propitiation. But because he was God and not only man, and because death had no claim upon him, having lived a perfect life, he descended to the dead but he did not remain there. Death could not hold him and the grave could not keep him. Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes. He arose victorious from the dark domain and he lives FOREVER with his saints to reign. He arose. He arose. Hallelujah, Christ arose.

That is the song of the church on Easter morning and that is the story of the Bible; Old Testament and New. You can only sing it and you can only see it after you have believed.

Responding

Well, we are not left to wonder how John wants us to respond to this story. He tells us at the conclusion of the chapter. He says:

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31 ESV)

John has shared this testimony for a very specific reason. He wants you to believe, that by believing you may have life in his name. Now you might wonder if that's entirely fair or reasonable. After all John got to look inside the empty tomb. He saw the grave cloths lying there. Later he saw Jesus in the flesh. He saw the nail marks on his hands. He watched Jesus pass through walls and eat bread and fish. He saw things that we will never see in this life. John is not ignorant of the distance that lies between the experience of the Apostles and our experience today. He records an exchange that Jesus had with Thomas on that day when he presented his

body for their inspection.

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:27–29 ESV)

The experience of the original Apostles was DIFFERENT than our experience today. They saw. They put their hands in his wounds and they believed. We can't do that. And yet we can believe because of what they saw and later said and wrote. I don't remember who said it, but an old saint said once that the difference between us and them is that now, we see with our ears. That's what the Apostle Paul said too. He said that now:

faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17 ESV)

Peter understood this tension too. He said to his people:

⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8–9 ESV)

It is different for us, but it is not that different. Hearing we see, seeing we believe and believing we begin to understand. If it is a little harder for us to see with our ears, then there is the promise of a sweeter reward for doing so.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29 ESV)

To be blessed means to be accepted before God. It means to be out from under the curse. It means to be back under the favour of God forever. It means that we've come home through the cross and via the empty tomb. This is the testimony of the Apostles and of Mary, this is the Gospel that we have heard and believed and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.