

## Good News for the Dead

### John 20:1-18

Good News for the Distressed

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Easter Sunday - worship at 8:30, 10 and 11:30 a.m.

Let us take just a moment to offer ourselves to listen to the Word that God speaks to us on this resurrection day. Powerful, gracious and loving God, our Father, we are grateful for Jesus, the Christ, whom you have raised from the dead, and for the power of your Spirit, which moves among us today to raise us from our experiences of death, and to raise those who have died, to eternal life. Now speak that word of power, eternally, now —to us, in this time and place. Through Jesus Christ, the resurrected one. Amen.

As I turned on the radio this morning, the very first two news items I heard had to do with death and taxes. A woman visited the IRS auditor. She had just recently lost her husband. The auditor was expressing concern and compassion toward her. “I know this is a tough time for you,” he said. And she replied, “My husband has died and left me with a mess in our taxes. I hope you can bring me some hope.” “Well,” he said, “I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that there is a resurrection and you will see your husband again; and of the two problems you have, death is temporary.”

We do carry our distress, because life is full of taxing situations. There is good news here today for those of us who continue to live on this earth and those who have gone before us. We will look at life from both sides, for the gospel speaks to those who continue to live here in the stresses, and speaks to those who have gone on into a future life. You remember the song by Joni Mitchell, *Both Sides Now*? It is a song that talks about how she tried to live life in a certain sentimental and showy way, but it just didn't work. “It's just another show, you leave them laughing when you go; and if you care, don't let them know, don't give yourself away. I've looked at life from both sides now.” The choice of Joni Mitchell is between self-deception that life is really something you can't face; you can only face the delusion or the illusion. But don't dare admit that life is tough and that love is hard.

Today we look at the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the resurrection. We can look squarely in the face of Jesus and know that, even though life is tough, the resurrection, and the power of the resurrection, is real. In history, we would be drawn to believe that, for many authors, the resurrection is not something you can trust. It is romanticized; it is sentimentalized; it is a charade. Jesus was really a phantom when he rose from the dead; it's all about clouds and fogs and mysteries. But the gospel of John, of all the gospels, affirms this very clearly in almost gruesome detail: Jesus died and was resurrected in a full body, from the dead.

We are here today because we want to believe that. We are here today because many of us do believe that. It is good news for those who live and good news for those who have gone on. It is good news for the distressed, and for the dead. When we look at the resurrection from both sides—from the side of those who continue to live and from the side of those who have gone on—we see good news. Only God can resurrect someone from the dead. But that resurrection for eternity is not just a spiritual one... or a phantom one... or one of a body that is not all there. It is a full-bodied experience. Only God can resurrect. We cannot do it; we cannot make it happen. But when God does resurrect from the dead, it is not just a mystical and spiritual event— it is the full person coming back to life. It is no ghost or charade; it is a real body. We cannot do this resurrection without God.

There is a lot in our life today that tells us that we must live without God. I was driving into a parking garage in the city of Pasadena, California. The sign that met me in the parking garage was rather interesting: “Dwarf your troubles and magnify your blessings.” There was no message about God, no message about needing help from someone else—you do it. You dwarf your troubles, and you magnify your blessings, as if we can live without God. The resurrection is a clear statement that we cannot live

without God. We cannot live in eternity without God, and we cannot live in this world without God. Ken Blanchard says the temptation to live without God is summarized in the word “ego” or E.G.O.: edging God out. Today, in our secular society, we do not like to believe that there is a God in the midst of everything that is happening. We can do it on our own, thank you very much.

On the other hand, when we admit, finally, that we need God to resurrect us from the dead, we realize that there has been a temptation in the history of understanding the gospel, that this gospel is not really fully believable. After all, there are those who believe that Jesus was not really raised from the dead, and they call themselves Christians. There were those who believed that the body that Jesus had was not really a physical body; it was one that was mystical and ghost-like, a belief system often referred to as gnosticism. This has come back to stare us in the face in the recent publication that has been televised by the National Geographic Society about the gospel of Judas. Well, we must pay attention to this gospel of Judas, because it is an ancient text; but when we look at this gospel, we see that Judas, according to this gospel, was Jesus’ only true disciple and only to Judas did Jesus give secret knowledge. And Jesus was more interested in angels and gods of many kinds than he was in the power of the resurrection. Well, do not believe that gospel; it is not a true gospel. It is not a gospel that gives us a full-bodied resurrection. It is not a gospel that we can get our hands on... that we can grasp... that we can touch... that we can feel. The resurrection is a real person, in a real body, on a real Sunday morning: its called Easter.

Mary Magdalene was there. Mary is an example of a person who has been touched by the life of Jesus. She had seven demons in her life at one point in time. Demons are those that come into us that control us and do not allow us to do the right thing. Jesus cast out all seven of those demons; so Mary was attached to Jesus from that time on. Mary Magdalene is proof that a person can have an old life full of the wrong things, and Jesus can come along and turn that life and fill it with the right things. Jesus cast the evil and sin out of Mary Magdalene. So she followed Jesus all the way to the death. She is there in the middle of the darkness, in the middle of the night, wanting desperately for something to happen. “Jesus...Jesus...I’m not sure why I am here, but I hope that something can happen that says that this is not all there is. And we join Mary at that grave, that tomb, in hope that Jesus can change not only this side of life, but the other side of life, as well.

There is something implied in the character of Mary Magdalene that is important for us to see from the perspective of eternity: and that is, that Jesus had the opportunity to judge Mary Magdalene, to pass judgment against her, and to declare her unfit for the kingdom of heaven. But he refused to do that. The apostle Paul puts it this way: “There is no condemnation in Jesus Christ.” Jesus refuses to condemn anyone, even though they have evil and sin in their lives. No— Jesus would rather take the responsibility of removing that from them, and preserving them for heaven and eternity. Jesus is the Lord of eternity, the Lamb that was slain, the judge. There is only one judge in eternity: it is Jesus, the Christ.

Sometimes we, who follow Jesus Christ, are tempted to become the judge and the jury. How often I have heard Christians say, “Well, I know that so-and-so is going to heaven, and I know that so-and-so is going to hell.” And I am asking the question, “How do you know that, for sure? Are you the judge and the jury? Are you Jesus, the judge?” There is a certain arrogance of some of, as Christians, to say that, not only is Jesus the only way, but we are the only judge. Eternity focuses on the reality that Jesus Christ is the judge; and only Jesus is the one who will decide who goes to heaven, or not.

Jesus is the way, and Jesus is the judge. Mary knew that; and that Jesus is fair, and gracious, and does not condemn even people who have seven demons in their life. Jesus is here today to judge you in such a way that he would rather lay down his life for you than have you be sacrificed. That is an eternal commitment on the part of Jesus, the resurrected Christ.

Mary also points out to us that there is a reality of pain and grief that we face in life. Twice the woman is asked, “Why are you weeping?” as if it is not very apparent. You are at the grave of one of your closest friends—your closest relative—and you are weeping; and an angel comes by and asks, “Why are you crying?” Oh, come on. You know the pain of the loss of death. Even Jesus himself wept when he saw Mary and the others weeping at Lazarus’ death. Jesus understood to the depth of his being, on this side of life, that pain and loss is deeply and profoundly a sense of the absence of the person.

Resurrection happens in the midst of the pain, in the midst of the weeping. Resurrection happens even before the pain is released. This recently became very real to me at my mother-in-law's memorial service. I was speaking of the text, in John, of Lazarus being raised from the dead by Jesus, when Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." But before Lazarus is raised from the dead, while Jesus is still there with the weeping people and Mary, who was weeping bitterly, scripture tells us that Jesus wept. It was at that point that I could no longer control my emotions. Realizing that my daughters and my wife were sitting there, completely lost in their grief for the loss of their grandmother and mother, I saw their grief, and I wept.

There is a reality of the pain that Jesus comes in the midst of, and is resurrected before the pain is gone. There are many questions we have, and those questions are asked here at the tomb. Doubts are valid... the mysteries are true... and the questions are good. If you have questions and doubts, and a sense of mystery today, that things are unanswered, today is that day at the tomb where you can ask those questions. Only God can reveal what is ultimately true about death and resurrection. Eternity asks the questions of the woman at the tomb. The angels ask her, "Why are you weeping? What are you looking for?" Eternity beckons to us today from the other side of the grave and says, "What are your questions? Where is your pain? Why are you here today? Only eternity and the resurrection can answer those questions.

Every Friday, over a number of months, I met with a woman who was dying of brain cancer. It was she who introduced me to Tuesdays with Morrie; I called these conversations, "Fridays with Freedom." We talked about heaven; she had many questions because she knew that she would not be alive much longer. She wanted to talk about God and heaven. She often gazed out into the backyard as if she were staring into eternity. The last time I saw her, she was sitting at the table and looking at the sunset as if expecting the sunrise to come. She had a hunger for eternity. She wanted to talk about life to come, and God, and what was going to happen at the resurrection. We spent a lot of time discussing these issues together.

If you have questions today, the resurrected Christ is where you will find the answers. C. S. Lewis, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, describes a man who moves from hell into heaven on a sightseeing trip guided by an angel. That man asks many questions of his angelic guide about heaven. C. S. Lewis understood that heaven is the place where questions are answered; the resurrection is the place where life makes sense. But Mary wasn't just left there alone with her questions. Jesus met her face-to-face. This is the heart of the resurrection. Jesus wants to meet you today, face-to-face. Jesus wants to show you completely, to the depth of your being, that his resurrection power is powerful for you. Not only that, but Jesus tells Mary that she has a mission: go and tell my brothers that you have seen me. If you believe that Jesus is the Christ and is resurrected from the dead, it is time to talk about it. It is time to share it with your family, with your spouse, and with your friends. If you are still wrestling with it, then ask the questions, and wrestle with the mysteries. But let us not be silent on this day, about Jesus and the resurrection. It is in the conversation Jesus has with Mary that she discovers the power of Jesus' resurrected presence.

Celsus, a second century Greek critic, heard this story of Mary and Jesus, and he said,

Well, but who said this? Notice who talked about the resurrection—an hysterical woman, and perhaps some ones who had been deluded by the same sorcery, who either dreamt in a certain state of mind or, in wishful thinking, had hallucinations due to some mistaken notion, and wrote it off.

We have heard that critique over and over again in history. But if you believed that, you wouldn't be here. You're like Mary. You're willing to get up early in the morning; and you're willing to come and celebrate the resurrection, because deep in your being, you know that there must be one. And if you don't know that, you have a deep hunger that it might be true.

Not too long ago, I talked with a woman who was dying of cancer. She didn't have long to live. The tests had shown that the cancer had taken over her body. Many people were praying for her. As they prayed for her, she went back to the doctor; and the doctor discovered that the cancer was gone. What happened in her life, she said, was "Jesus came to me. Jesus spoke to me personally. I have a word from Jesus. I know Jesus is resurrected; I know Jesus is alive; I know Jesus has healed me." And you say, 'Well that's never happened to me. I know many people who have died.' It is a mystery that not all are healed or brought back, but there are some who are. Lazarus was. Jesus was. And why? So that they might be able to tell the

rest of us that there is good news, and we can participate in the resurrection. Earl Palmer has noted that the gospel of St. John is the most intimate gospel in the New Testament. It is not a kind of intimacy like the Da Vinci code would portray, between Jesus and Mary. It is the kind of intimacy of the deepest and closest friends who share the deepest and most personal spiritual reality.

It is important that we see today the resurrection power in Jesus Christ. It is not objective; it is not distant; it is not just fact; it is person and presence. The resurrected Christ is here. Jesus was born; living, healing and feeding, exorcising, confronting; rejected, attacked, abused—but he still turned around and cared for people. He loved them, and he laid down his life for them. Dallas Willard tells the story of a woman he knew who refused to talk about life beyond with her children. She was afraid; she didn't want them to be disappointed if it didn't work out, if it weren't true. Willard's comment was, "You know, that's too bad, because if there is no life after death, they wouldn't know the difference. But if there is life after death, how ill-prepared they would be to meet their Maker."

Today, we look at both sides—the power of the resurrection, the opportunity to share in that experience on this side of the grave. There is a conversation that needs to take place. There is an intimacy that needs to happen. There is a Lord who is present here who is powerfully resurrected, and that God, in Jesus Christ, wants a relationship with you, deeply, personally, intimately. The resurrection means that you are called by name. God knows your name, and has a personal relationship with you, and desires one in return. The resurrection is personal. It is for you. It is for your children and your grandchildren. It is for your friends. It is time to talk about it. Do not let this day go by without a serious conversation about your life in Jesus Christ, and the power of the resurrection.

If you come to the end of your life and you've invested in a life of following Jesus, the best part of your life is yet to come. If you have lived your life without Jesus Christ, and you do not know if there is a resurrection, then you wonder about whether you are having the best part of your life right now. It is time to talk about it.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of your resurrection, may you speak to us today. We want to look at life from both sides: from the pain that we live in today, and the glory of what you promised for tomorrow. May you cross over and speak to us clearly, through the power of your Spirit. May you reveal yourself today, that we, too, may share in the glory of your resurrection. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.