

Easter 2019: See the Risen King!

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[0 : 00] Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for this privilege to proclaim the resurrection of the Lord Jesus this morning. And so, Father, by your Holy Spirit, please, Lord, will you be opening the eyes of our heart, will you be working in us to be amazed at what you have done and to see the significance of the resurrection for our lives and for our entire world this morning.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Imagine that you're Pamela Nagy. On January 21st, 1987, she received a phone call from her husband, Gabriel, telling her that he'll be home for lunch. Nothing unusual. But he never arrived. And the following day, his burnout car was discovered on the side of the road. That's very strange because he always told his family where he would be. And so a massive manhunt for him began. But the only clue came about two weeks later, when he was discovered that he had withdrawn money from his bank account and bought some camping supplies.

After that, complete silence. No one knew where he was. No one had a clue as to where he could be. And as the years went by, the family eventually accepted that he was probably dead.

[1 : 28] But 23 years later, just two weeks before he was to be legally declared dead, a police officer found a health insurance record made in the name of Gabriel Nagy.

The officer dialed the contact number, visited and interviewed this person, and began showing him photographs. And the story began coming out.

This man was indeed Pamela's husband. Somehow or other, he had suffered a head injury, lost all his memories, and for the next 20 years began drifting around doing odd jobs before a pastor took him in, offered him a job as a caretaker, and got him health insurance.

But now, those photos were bringing back memories of who he was, of the life he once had.

The man who was considered dead by just about everyone was actually alive. Not surprisingly, this became headline news, and you can imagine how this changed everything for his wife and family.

[2 : 42] Their grief has turned to joy. Their lives have been turned right side up once again. Gabriel had come back from the dead, figuratively speaking, and he changed everything for this family.

Well, this morning, we've just heard part of John's gospel being read. In other words, we've just heard news, because gospel means good news.

And John is giving us headline news. Except this time, the headline news is even more amazing than Gabriel Nagy's story.

It's about a man who's literally come back from the dead, not just figuratively. And if that's true, that changes everything.

And not just for one family, but for everybody. If what John says is true, this is no longer just an interesting story we read about on CNN.

[3 : 48] It's more like making a new scientific discovery. Think of Galileo, discovering that the earth revolves around the sun, not the other way around.

Or Louis Pasteur, discovering that microorganisms cause disease. Those discoveries fundamentally change your understanding of how the universe works, doesn't it?

It reshapes our view of reality. And that's what John wants to do to us. John isn't just telling us a nice story.

He's making known a world-changing discovery. He's confronting us with a new view of reality. Jesus is risen.

And if Jesus is risen, that changes everything. And so in today's Bible passage, John wants us to see all that. He wants us to see, first of all, that Jesus is indeed risen.

[4 : 53] It's not a fairy tale. But more than that, he wants us to see that if Jesus is indeed risen, certain things must follow.

When Louis Pasteur discovered disease was caused by microorganisms, this changed the way doctors fundamentally work. They began washing their hands and sterilizing their equipment. And so if we discover that Jesus is indeed risen, then this will change the way our lives fundamentally work, right down to the details.

So let's jump into the story and see, first of all, that this is no fairy tale. The king has risen. It's the first day of the week.

It is still dark. And Mary Magdalene visits the tomb. She's one of Jesus' most devoted followers. I think she's the only person who's right there at the crucifixion, the burial, and now the gravesite of Jesus.

[5 : 58] Jesus has been laid in Joseph of Arimathea's new tomb, which would have been a semi-underground vault, with the entrance sealed off by a large stone.

But, verse 1, Mary saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. Well, that's a big surprise. There's no reason for the stone to be gone.

After all, these were not pebbles in your garden. Archaeologists estimate that the biggest tombstones of that time could have been hundreds of kilograms. And so she draws a perfectly reasonable conclusion.

Verse 2. She came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, that's John, and said, they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him. Perhaps some grave robbers, or Jesus' enemies, have moved the body. After all, what else could have happened? You see, we mustn't think of people during that time as being completely superstitious and more stupid than us.

[7 : 13] We might be in the 21st century, and Peter, John, and Mary in the first, but we all share the same starting assumptions.

They know just as well as we do. Dead men don't come alive again. And Jesus is definitely dead. If you were here on Good Friday, John left us with no doubt in the way he described Jesus on the cross, with his side pierced by a Roman spear.

As Christians, we hear the phrase, empty tomb, and we immediately think resurrection. Having been trained by many years of hearing this connection being made in our churches, and our religious traditions might make us forget what a strange conclusion that actually is to draw. Mary's reaction is much more normal. She sees an empty tomb, and she thinks quite rationally. She thinks a body has been moved, not that a dead man has risen.

[8 : 29] And so John isn't engaging here in myth-making, but history reporting. It reads that way, doesn't it?

Peter and John, as you would expect, immediately rush to investigate. In verse 4, John cheekily lets us know that he's been to the gym more than Peter. But regardless of who gets to the tomb first, the point is, both of them saw the same thing.

In verse 5, John looked in and saw the strips of linen lying there. And verse 6, Peter sees the same thing. According to Jewish custom, a corpse would have been wrapped tightly in this linen clothes from head to toe.

And that's exactly what Joseph and Nicodemus did to Jesus' body earlier on, if you were to read John's Gospel earlier. Again, a clear indication that Jesus is dead.

There's also a face cloth, one that is used to wrap around the head and cover the mouth, and it's lying neatly on its own on the side. So what do Peter and John now see?

[9 : 48] On Good Friday, they saw Jesus, bloody and stripped, hanging on the cross. But now, they see an open and empty tomb with no soldiers in sight.

They see strips of linen and a neatly folded face cloth. The evidence doesn't suggest grave robbers, since it would take some imagination to believe that they could overpower trained Roman soldiers and take their sweet time to unwrap all these grave clothes.

And perhaps most importantly, they don't see a body. That suggests that the enemies of Jesus were probably not at work here either. since it would be in their interest to show that this traitor, Jesus, is very much dead.

They would want a body to be paraded in public. Well, these are the historical facts. So what do you do with these facts?

Galileo, centuries ago, was looking through a telescope and made certain observations about the planet Venus that made him realise that the Earth revolved around the sun.

[11:08] Those observations push him to certain conclusions. And John, by his reporting of history, is also getting us to make certain observations to begin to help us as readers see and realise that maybe we need to begin to revise our opinion as to whether Jesus really is dead.

And that's where the rest of John 20 is heading towards, helping us to consider where Jesus is. So far, we've seen the evidence of the empty tomb, but John now gives us the evidence of eyewitness testimony.

In verses 11 onwards, we discover that Mary is still crying outside the tomb. She's so upset that she doesn't even think it's unusual when two angels appear to her.

Why are you crying? they ask her. They have taken my Lord away, she replies. Once again, she's reacting exactly how we would expect her to.

She still assumes that Jesus is dead, she assumes that the body has been taken away, and she's upset. But then, verse 14, Jesus himself appears.

[12:39] It's not a dramatic entrance. Mary even thinks he's the gardener. Again, it's a perfectly reasonable assumption, since who else would be at the tomb so early in the morning?

It's probably the gardener, certainly not the risen Jesus. But now, what Peter and John suspects is confirmed for us.

Jesus is alive. The eyewitness testimony of Mary begins to move us beyond reasonable doubt.

Jesus calls her name, and she realizes that it's Jesus before her.

She sees him with her own eyes. And there's been nothing so far to make us think that Mary is going crazy, or looking for wish fulfillment.

She has fully accepted that Jesus is dead. This has none of the signs of hallucination. She possesses the characteristics of a credible witness.

[13:51] And the eyewitness testimonies continue to power up. In verse 19, the disciples are together trying to keep a low profile as those who were considered followers of a convicted terrorist.

terrorists. But they to see the risen Lord. Now, the one person who wasn't with them, Thomas, takes a skeptical attitude.

Look at verse 24. Now, Thomas, also known as Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, we have seen the Lord.

But he said to them, unless I see the nail marks in his hand and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

Now, sometimes we might read this and shake our heads at Thomas and say, Thomas, Thomas, why do you doubt such a bad disciple?

[15:01] But actually, Thomas is making a reasonable request. All he's asking for is the same kind of proof that the other disciples receive.

And indeed, that's not necessarily a bad starting point. If we believe everything we heard without ever checking it out, we will be vulnerable to all kinds of fake news, wouldn't we?

Thomas is just engaging in fact checking. no, the important thing is what happens after Jesus has appeared to him. Verse 28, my Lord and my God, he cries.

Well, faced with the evidence of seeing the risen Jesus right before him, he accepts rather than rejects. Well, that's the important thing.

The king has risen. And so this morning, that's the question for us. Have we looked at the evidence?

[16:12] Jesus consistently claimed before he died that he would rise again. And that means he is confronting us with a choice. He is either a liar or he's the ultimate truth teller.

we can't just say that he's something in between. We can't just say that he is a great but flawed teacher and we can accept some things about him but reject other things he says.

No, no, no, it's all or nothing. If he's a liar, well, you can walk out of this hall right now and I should resign.

Why bother? But if he's telling the truth about something as big as life and death, well, that changes everything, doesn't it?

For in John's Gospel, Jesus consistently claims that the words he speaks are not his words alone, but the words of God the Father.

[17 : 21] So that means if he is telling the truth, his words carry authority. His resurrection then would be like an enthronement ceremony.

They reveal that he is truly the king that he says he is. And that's why Thomas cries, my Lord and my God.

And to go against him would be a serious matter. So if we look at the evidence, if you have never before, well, why not sign up for that Christianity Explored course and check it out for yourself.

Before you buy a house, I'm sure you do your research first. You check it out. You don't buy one just like that. How much more when it comes to the identity of God himself.

Should you check it out? Come and see. For John is not merely interested in establishing that the king is risen.

[18 : 31] He wants to go further than that. He invites us to see and believe. He invites us to see and believe.

So far, I know that I'm mostly preaching to the choir here, pun intended, because the majority of us in this hall will say that we already see and believe.

But it's important, isn't it, to know why we believe? Is it like it or not? Many non-Christians, when they hear the word believe, they associate it with blind faith.

When they hear that we believe, they take it to mean that we believe because we believe. It's totally subjective. So, good for you if you believe, but sorry, it doesn't work for me.

That might be even what one or two of us might be thinking this morning. And some of our songs don't help us. One song says, how do I know that he lives?

[19 : 40] Because he lives within my heart. In other words, it's based on what I feel. But that's not true. We know Jesus is risen, not primarily on the basis of certain feelings that we might or might not have, but because it is a perfectly reasonable conclusion to draw based on the facts of history and eyewitness testimony.

many. And that's how Peter and John responded. Well, come back with me to verse 8. Finally, the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also went inside.

He saw and believed. In other words, he looked at the empty tomb before him, he saw the grave clothes, and he began to realize that the facts were inclining him towards a certain position.

He believed, not on the basis of certain feelings, but on what he saw. Now, neither Peter nor John had full understanding yet.

Verse 9, they still did not understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. So at that point, they did not appreciate all that the resurrection meant, or how passages like Psalm 16 and Isaiah 53 were pointing forward to that day.

[21 : 10] But we can have a fuller understanding, and we should. You see, like I said, the majority of us here this morning accept that the king is risen.

But perhaps we don't understand yet what Jesus' resurrection actually means for us. We haven't fully grasped what it means to believe.

Now, how do we know when we are beginning to truly understand? It's not just when we verbally accept Jesus. It's when our lives change to reflect that new reality.

When the doctors accepted and believed that microorganisms cause disease, they changed the way they thought about sickness and the way they practiced medicine.

And so, if we really believe, if we truly understand, certain things change for us too. So let's just explore for the remainder of our time. What does it really mean to say that Jesus is risen?

[22 : 19] Well, firstly, it means that there is life beyond death. And what can be more practical than that?

The fact that Jesus died and rose again is not equivalent to knowing the fact that Vientiane is the capital of Laos, or that Tun Mahathir's birthday is July the 10th.

Those are facts with no obvious practical implications. But Jesus' resurrection is of immediate significance.

For all of us in this hall will one day die. So clearly, this truth is practical. I know there are some of us in this congregation facing cancer right now.

And so death is clearly not a theoretical issue for you. It's staring you in the face. Others of us might not have cancer, but our stage of life means that we're seeing our friends one by one pass on into the night.

[23 : 37] And so it feels like death is taunting you. It's causing tears to run down your face the way it did Mary's. it's causing you the way it did Mary to us.

Where is God? Where is Jesus? Well, John tells us where he isn't. The tomb is empty. And when he tells us that the linen and the face cloth are left behind, I think he's actually inviting us to make a comparison. You see, in John's Gospel, there is actually someone else who has come back from the dead.

That's Lazarus, the brother of Jesus' close friends, Mary and Martha, way back in chapter 11. He had fallen ill and died, but Jesus came and brought him back to life.

But when Lazarus came out of the tomb, well, John tells us this interesting fact. He was still wrapped in linen and cloth.

[24 : 53] And I think John is now inviting us to compare the two because he wants to show us that the nature of Jesus' resurrection as compared to Lazarus' resurrection is fundamentally different.

Lazarus did nothing to bring himself back from the dead. But Jesus has complete authority to do so. Furthermore, Lazarus' resurrection was temporary.

Those linen, that cloth still wrapped around him, pointed to the fact that one day, he would still die. he's beaten illness temporarily, but his resurrection doesn't beat death.

He's still enslaved to it. He's still wrapped up in the clothes of the grave. But Jesus is no longer clothed in the robes of death.

death. Mary asks, where is Jesus? And John tells us where Jesus is, standing right there in front of you in all his resurrection glory.

[26 : 16] The resurrection of Jesus tells us that death is inevitable. It's the penalty for sin. To rise again, he had to die first in our place.

there is no Easter without Good Friday. Death comes for everyone. You can delay it, but you all have to go through it one day, and so do I.

But the resurrection of Jesus tells us that death is not defeat for anyone who says that they are in Christ. death. If Jesus rose again and removed the trappings of the grave, then those who are united to him will also one day rise and be freed from the chains of death.

Can you imagine that? In some parts of our society, it's taboo to mention death, because to talk about it sounds like we're inviting death. But Christians don't need to have that fear, because Jesus is risen.

Do you believe that? In the face of cancer, do you believe that? It's appropriate that Mary meets with Jesus in a garden.

[27 : 42] It's as if Jesus is saying, welcome back to a world where it was just like Eden, when death had not yet ruled the world, and God can meet freely with men and women.

And that is a miracle greater than the one Lazarus experienced. When you choose to declare loyalty to the risen Jesus, depending on his death and resurrection for you, the end point of your life has changed forever.

It is right to lament and mourn and cry when we face death. And without the resurrection, that kind of pain and suffering would completely undo us.

But with the resurrection, we can say, this is not how it will all end. God could choose to grant you more years on this earth or praise him if he does so.

But God could choose to say, it's time to come home to the father and be with him in the garden city of the New Jerusalem. And that will not be defeat.

[29 : 04] Either way, your end point is the same. You will die, whether it's soon or whether it's many years from now. But you do not lose even if death takes you.

You win. Because you no longer have to struggle with your own self-centeredness, your own sinful tendencies, your divided desires, just like it was back in the garden.

I can't wait for that day. As the Apostle Paul recognized, for me to die is gain. Jesus is risen and that changes everything.

Secondly, it means that your best life is now on offer. Okay, we say there's life after death, but what about the life before death?

Well, come down with me to the episode where Jesus first meets with his disciples and notice what he says. And in verse 19, peace be with you, he says. And then again in verse 21, peace be with you.

[30 : 21] And then we look at verse 20 and we notice that there is rejoicing as well, the moment the disciples recognize who Jesus actually is. Now don't forget what state that they've been in.

They are fearful, they are sad, they are grief-stricken. they might not shed tears as freely as Mary, but I bet inside they felt the same way.

And they are wondering, well, what's going to happen to us now? Are we next in line to be executed? And think about the guilt that they are facing. We abandon Jesus at his time of need. But now Jesus comes, and what kind of life does he offer? Well, not harsh words, but peace, reconciliation, restored relationships, forgiveness, as verse 23 implies, the presence of God himself. He's offering them a life seen through a different lens. We might think of the message of the gospel and the resurrection as concern only with the afterlife, but that isn't true.

[31 : 41] For what Jesus offers these disciples of his, he offers to us now. Look at verses 21 to 23 and notice that Jesus is basically telling them that this message of peace, of forgiveness, of restored relationships for them is also a message for the world too.

He wants this message to go out. Jesus isn't promising your best life now in the sense of no hardship, no suffering, no problems.

That's a distortion of Christianity. But he is promising your best life now in that you know that there is no distance between you and God.

You don't have to worry that he will bring up some past wrong that you've done and say, well, I think I better keep my distance from you now. You've disappointed me once too often.

No, Jesus' resurrection restores relationship right now. Look back at verse 17 and notice what Jesus says to Mary.

[32 : 53] Go instead to my brothers and tell them I am ascending to my father and your father. Did you notice the language she's using?

He calls the disciples who abandoned him his brothers. And he tells Mary that God is now her father too.

Jesus' resurrection restores relationship right now. And so you don't have to worry that something you've done means that Jesus is done with you.

That he's decided enough is enough. I'm not going to bother with you anymore. No, the resurrection shows otherwise. And we don't have to wait for heaven to enjoy that relationship.

the Jesus who is risen is alive right now. He's still fully human right now even as he's fully God.

[33 : 58] And he's deadly serious about wanting us to know him. We know that because he didn't give Thomas a great big slap on the face for his request but appeared to him and said see my hands see my nail scars I'm deadly serious that I want you to know me as your Lord.

Do you believe? And that's what he asks us today. In verse 29 Jesus says that because Thomas saw he believed people who do not see and yet believe are blessed.

Why? Because it's not just about seeing in the physical sense. Mary saw Jesus before her and thought he was the gardener.

Well, she needed to hear Jesus' voice, recognize who he is, and follow him to respond rightly. And so it's the same for us.

In verses 30 to 31, we are told how we now hear Jesus' voice. It is through the words of the apostles, which is now recorded for us in the Bible we have in our hands.

[35 : 26] These words are written that we might believe Jesus is the Messiah and through him have life in his name.

Believing is not blind faith. Believing is considering the words of scripture and responding rightly when we recognize that those scriptures are actually God speaking to us about Jesus.

And when we recognize that and call out, my Lord and my God, like Thomas, we are blessed. Like Mary, our tears can turn to joy.

And like the disciples, our fear can turn to gladness. Because reality has been reshaped for us by the words of the Bible.

Jesus is risen and that changes everything. Thirdly, it means we have a mission.

[36 : 39] If Jesus is risen, he's the ultimate truth teller. And that means he's telling the truth when he says everything belongs to him. He's the Lord of everything.

That's exactly what Thomas realizes, isn't it? my Lord and my God. And so that means we also need to help people to see Jesus as Lord and God.

Did you notice what Jesus says to Mary once she recognizes him? Mary understandably wants to give him a great big hug, but Jesus says, verse 17, do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

go instead to my brothers and tell them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. Jesus is saying, I still need to do one more thing to really accomplish my mission. I need to go back to the Father, as I've been telling my disciples earlier in John 13 to 17. And you, Mary, you have a mission too.

[37 : 52] you need to go and tell your brothers about me. And then when we come down to verse 21, Jesus says the same thing to his disciples.

As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. The God who sends his Son now has the Son sending his church to go into the world, to tell them about how Jesus restores relationship with the Father and brings life to the fullness.

He's not sending them alone, he's equipping them with the Holy Spirit, as he promised. That's why he has to ascend to the Father. And as ambassadors for Jesus, they represent him.

And therefore, verse 23, if you forgive anyone's sin, that is, if you are able to successfully convey the good news of forgiveness to others, well, they will be forgiven.

But if that message is rejected, well, they do not receive forgiveness, for they are rejecting the King of this universe. And so to see and believe is to tell the world about the risen Jesus.

[39 : 17] No, this is not just communicating Christian values, like kindness and patience and so on. It's not just communicating Christian charity, like helping the poor and so on.

It's telling the world about the risen Jesus himself and how he has won for us forgiveness. And that can prove divisive, because not everyone likes the idea of a risen king telling them that they can't earn their own salvation and how they should live.

But if you believe in the resurrection, well, that means you believe Jesus has rights over you and that he has rights over others as well.

But remember, his authority over you is stamped with nail scarred hands. It's authority with your best interests in mind.

The theologian Victor Lee Austin talks about different kinds of authority. One of the authorities he describes is that of an orchestra conductor. An orchestra conductor, he says, exercises his authority so that the orchestra makes beautiful music and not just noise.

[40 : 44] And Jesus exercises his authority such that if the whole world were to follow him, it would make beautiful music, not noise.

He would conduct your life in such a way that taken as a whole, it would be the best life possible because it is life in his name.

Well, wouldn't you want that life too for your friends and family? So Jesus is risen and that changes everything.

So see and believe and make him the center of your life's mission. That in essence is what Christianity is all about.

So do you truly see and do you truly believe? Let me pray. bear in ris0 all a you have what are