

## **The Difference Between Seeing and Seeing**

John 20:1-10

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*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. 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." So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.*

- John 20:1-10, ESV

### **Seeing is Believing?**

Gabe Raiber has been learning some really cool card tricks, and he's now adding card sleight of hand skills to his impressive Rubik's Cube solving abilities. I love watching "magic tricks" performed by illusionists, because they fool your mind and challenge the old saying that "Seeing is believing." I also love watching illusionists explain their tricks, so you can see how it is done. Kathryn and I enjoy watching *Brain Games*, which does this kind of thing a lot. They blow your mind with some illusion or trick, and then they explain how they were able to fool you, helping you understand better how your brain works.

So, what about this idea that "Seeing is Believing"? A very common Christian response to this is that, in reality, especially as it regards spiritual things, "Believing is Seeing." And that's true enough. I've said it myself before. When we come to faith, we come to see with the eyes of faith how things really are, below surface appearances.

But it's also true to say that we do need to see clearly in order to believe, but when it comes to these kinds of issues of faith and sight, not all seeing is created equal. Sometimes, there's a big difference between seeing and seeing. And we can see that difference displayed in the lives of Peter and John in today's passage. As we look at this together, perhaps we can ask the Lord to enable us to see in the way we need to see so that we can believe as we need to believe and live as we need to live, walking by faith and not by sight, focusing on the unseen, eternal realities which are really real and not be so distracted by the visible, temporary things which are passing and are ultimately unreal.

### **A. The Empty Tomb and the Sheer Facticity of the Resurrection**

Our passage this morning begins with a grieving disciple in the darkness of early morning encountering an empty tomb. While John focuses our attention on Mary Magdalene, we know from the other Gospels that Mary was not alone. A company of women went to the tomb early that morning, the morning after the Sabbath, on the first day of the week. Mary Magdalene is singled out here by John for two reasons:

- I. She was the one who ran back to tell Peter and John about what the women had discovered.

2. Mary Magdelene will be singled out by Jesus later on this important morning for a special encounter as the first person to see the risen Lord, which we'll look at next week.

Mary's language when she comes and reports to Peter and John makes it clear that she was not alone: "*we do not know where they have laid Him.*"

John's vivid language in this passage confronts us with several stark realities:

1. The tomb was open and empty.
2. The disciples were confused.
3. None of the disciples initially thought that an empty tomb meant Jesus had risen from the dead.
4. Everyone assumed someone came and stole Jesus' body.

These disciples were initially hurt worse by the sight of the empty tomb. They were already grieving the death of their Lord and Master, and they were already dealing with deep disappointment at their dashed hopes and real fear that they might be next. Now, an empty tomb signaled to them that someone had come in the night and stolen Jesus' body, robbing them of the opportunity to at least pay proper homage to their rabbi, to more thoroughly and thoughtfully anoint His body for burial and to be able to come and visit His tomb and remember this remarkable man whom they had loved to much.

Whoever had stolen the body must have been powerful. Perhaps this is why these women sent for Peter and John. The large, heavy stone blocking the entrance had been removed. So, whoever took the body had to be able to remove the stone and the body.

The reality of the facts – dark early morning, removed stone, empty tomb, confused disciples – reminds us that we are dealing with real, historical facts here. Jesus' resurrection was not a hopeful wish of the apostles or an inward spiritual realization that He was still with them in their hearts or a group hallucination or some ineffable mystical experience in the hearts and minds of the disciples. The stone had been removed. The tomb was empty, The body was gone. The disciples were shocked and confused.

In his commentary on this passage, D.A. Carson talks about the fact that, for the disciples, the only thing that allowed them to preach the Gospel of the kingdom of Jesus with such confidence was "the sheer facticity of the resurrection." Only the reality of the resurrection could transform the disciples from disappointed and afraid to fearlessly proclaiming the kingdom of Jesus and calling people to believe in Him.

## **B. Making Sense of the Different Resurrection Accounts**

Yet critics will respond that the different Gospels have such different accounts of the resurrection that it's impossible to reconcile them, and so they must be false. Here we are faced with a real dilemma when engaging with skeptics of Christianity: If the resurrection accounts were identical, they would say that's evidence of a conspiracy, that the Gospel writers colluded to make their versions align perfectly. Yet if the accounts are not identical but differ from each other, the critics will say they are contradictory and therefore unreliable. So, for the skeptic, the excuses of conspiracy or contradiction keep them from considering the clear reality of the resurrection.

What we need to realize about the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection is that none of them is intended to be a comprehensive account. Each of the Gospels accents some different aspect of the resurrection. Still, we can read them and piece together a reasonable account of what happened on that first Lord's Day, the day of resurrection.

J. Warner Wallace is a retired L.A. cold-case homicide detective. He examined the Gospel accounts as a skeptic and someone who had years of experience dealing with eye-witness testimony. What he found was exactly what he had come to expect from honest, reliable witnesses: The accounts of various witnesses differ significantly as they recall different details and emphasize different things. Yet he concluded that the best explanation for the facts present at the heart of these eye-witness accounts was that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. So, he wrote *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* to explain how he came to that conclusion.

Once we can see that the four accounts of resurrection are not hopelessly contradictory but reliably tell of the same event of the resurrection from different perspectives, we can then go back to each one and hear what that Gospel writer is saying and why.

John's resurrection perspective is the most personal. He focuses us on key individuals: Mary Magdalene, himself, Thomas, and Peter. Each of these is a personal account, and so other things, which had already been written in other Gospels, were left out, to allow us to focus on these people and their personal experiences.

### **C. Understanding Peter and John**

The first story John focuses on is his own coming to faith in the resurrection, although he does so in a very humble way, as is characteristic of his Gospel. John never names himself in his Gospel, for his Gospel is not about himself but about Jesus. So, he is simply "the disciples who Jesus loved," his whole identity wrapped up in Jesus' love for him.

Let's hear this account again:

*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. 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." So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.*

#### **I. Peter: A Profile in Boldness**

Peter and John are responding as men in a crisis situation. They quickly hurry out and even begin running toward the tomb. John is faster, perhaps because he is younger, and he reaches the tomb first. But while John merely stoops to look into the tomb from the outside, Peter is bold and rushes into the tomb. This is so perfectly in keeping with Peter's character. He is the bold one, the one who acts and speaks first and then thinks later.

Yet the church needs bold leaders. Peter's boldness made him the first to profess faith in Jesus out loud, saying what the others were afraid to say, at Caesarea Philippi, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." This same boldness made Peter the first one to enter Jesus' tomb, even though several others had been there before him. Later, his boldness would make him the one to stand up and preach the Gospel at Pentecost, giving the first brilliant sermon of the Christian Era. And then his boldness would take him to the house of Cornelius the Centurion to proclaim Christ and see the first Gentiles come to saving faith and come into the church.

## 2. John: An Unexpected Faith

But boldness is not the same thing as wisdom or insight. And while Peter is the first one to enter the tomb and to see "*the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself,*" it is John who is the first to truly see and to believe.

The title of this message is "The Difference Between Seeing and Seeing." But John actually uses three different words of seeing in this passage, each one more intense than the one before.

1. In verse 1, when Mary Magdalene sees the stone removed from the tomb and in verse 5 when John reaches the tomb first and stoops down and sees the linen cloth, here John uses the word Greek word *Blepo*, which basically means to look at, take notice of.
2. When Peter enters the tomb and sees the Jesus' grave clothes, John uses a form of the word *theomai*, which is a more intentional looking at. It can mean to consider.
3. Then, when John enters the tomb and he sees, John uses the word *eiden*, a form of the verb *horao*, which literally means to stare at but has the idea of having deep insight into the truth of a situation.

This third word, *horao*, is used of Herod in Matthew 2:16, when he realizes that the wise men were not returning to Jerusalem: "*Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious.*" He understood the situation.

Perhaps even more importantly, this is the word Jesus uses in His conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:3, when Jesus says, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*"

So, where are you in your seeing of the resurrection of Jesus this morning? Are you at the glancing stage, where you're aware that Christians believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but you're not sure what it has to do with you? Your attention is focused elsewhere. The resurrection of Jesus and His Gospel gets just a passing glance from you. Is that you? Or are you considering the resurrection and the claims of the Gospel? Have you entered into a serious consideration of the Gospel, of the claims of Jesus' resurrection, but you're just not sure you really see it for yourself yet? The empty tomb is there. The grave clothes are there. But you're just not convinced. You don't quite get it. Or are you, like John, seeing and believing? Do you get the reality that death has been overcome, the grave is empty, the bonds of death have been broken by the Lord Jesus Christ, and He is the Lord of All?

The stone wasn't removed from the tomb to allow Jesus to get out. Later on this day, He will enter into the locked upper room where the disciples will be gathered. He doesn't need anyone to open doors or remove

stones for Him. The stone was removed to let Peter and John enter, to allow them to see, so Peter could consider, and John could really see and believe.

Mary Magdalene was the first one to see the risen Jesus with her eyes, but John was the first one to see the truth of the resurrection and believe, even before he saw Jesus with his own eyes. In this way, John is a model for us. One day, each one of us will see the risen Jesus with our own eyes. I can guarantee you that you will see Jesus one day. Yet not everyone who sees Him on That Day will see Him in the same way. Some will see Him as their long-awaited Savior and some will see Him as the holy and dreaded Judge. What will make the difference? Those who see Him now with eyes of faith and believe, like John in the tomb that morning, are those whose sight of Him then will be a blessing of joy beyond words. When faith becomes sight, or when seeing by faith becomes seeing with our eyes, what a glorious day of rejoicing that will be!

This kind of seeing is a gift from God.

1 Corinthians 2:14 says, *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”*

And then, 2 Corinthians 4:3-5 says, *“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”*

But thankfully, this kind of spiritual blindness and ignorance is not the end of the story. 2 Corinthians 4 goes on to say, in verses 6-7:

*For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*

### **Have You Seen and Believed?**

If you're sitting here this morning, and you just don't get it, you just don't see why the resurrection of Jesus is true, or, if it is, why that matters to your life, you need to know the truth: You are being blinded by the god of this world, the great deceiver, the father of lies, who hates you and wants to keep you from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. Cry out to God for the spiritual sight you need. Be like blind Bartimaeus, who heard that Jesus was passing by and who shouted out, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!”

And if you have come to see the truth, if you know the risen Jesus as your Lord and you rejoice in His salvation, know that this is not something you did for yourself. It was God who shone His light into your heart. Be humbled by His grace, rejoice, and give all glory to Him. Remember that you carry the treasure of the Gospel in a jar of clay, a cardboard box, to show that the surpassing greatness of your salvation doesn't come from you but from God, who alone is surpassing all in excellence.

John doesn't tell us his story so we'll think that he's better than Peter. He's giving glory to God for his salvation. By the grace of God, John was able to see and believe. Have you seen? Do you believe?