



Three Hearts at an Empty Tomb

John 20:1-18

1. “They have taken the Lord” (verses 1-9).

2. “I have seen the Lord” (verses 11-18).

“The better you know a story, the harder it is to feel its drama.”

I was talking with a family this week who was explaining the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection to their young child. When talking about the death of Jesus, the child said, “But I don’t want Jesus to die!” She said this because she doesn't know the story very well. She feels the drama. She is just like Peter who, upon hearing Jesus say that he "must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matthew 16:21). Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matthew 16:22). Peter said this because he was in the midst of the drama and didn't know the end of the story.

But for us, it's different. At Rock Valley Bible Church, we are relentlessly going back to the cross of Christ, because it is there that we find our hope. Paul writes in Galatians 6:14, “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” The cross of Christ was so transformational in the life of Paul that that is where his boast was, in a crucified man who died for our sins. In believing that message, Paul’s life was transformed. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This transformation comes through believing in the death of Jesus for our sins. We can think so much about this that we fail to ever think, “But I don’t want Jesus to die.” We don’t think this way because we are so familiar with the story of the resurrection that the death of Jesus loses its drama.

As I said, “The better you know a story, the harder it is to feel its drama.”

This is especially true this morning. We call today “Resurrection morning,” because it is the morning that we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We have sung about the resurrection of Jesus! We have read about the resurrection of Jesus! We have prayed about the resurrection of Jesus. We have said, “Jesus is risen!” We have all responded, “He is risen indeed!” In our minds, the resurrection of Jesus is a sure thing. It is a done deal. It makes it difficult for us to feel the drama of the first disciples who discovered the empty tomb.

This morning, I want for us to try to feel the drama of the resurrection. I want to do so from the twentieth chapter of the gospel of John. This is particularly appropriate for us at Rock Valley Bible Church, as we have been working our way through the gospel of John for almost two years now. This is my 70th message on the gospel of John, and it has taken some work and some planning, but we have arrived at chapter 20 with perfect timing, as this chapter tells of the resurrection of Jesus, which is what we celebrate this morning.

The title of my message is “Three Hearts at an Empty Tomb.” As I read the text, listen for the three people in this narrative who encounter the empty tomb. Let’s read John 20:1-18:

John 20:1-18

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.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 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.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). 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.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

If you listened closely, you could discern the three who came to the empty tomb: Mary first, followed by Peter and John. Now, we don’t read the name “John,” but in this gospel account John always refers to himself in the third person, here as “the one whom Jesus loved.” We see this at the Last Supper (John 13:23), at the cross when Jesus speaks to his mother (John 19:26), at the empty tomb (John 20:2), recognizing the risen Jesus by the sea (John 21:7), following Jesus after the breakfast scene (John 21:20), and finally being identified as the one who testifies and wrote these things (John 21:24).

If you listened even more closely, you could discern there are actually more than these three in this scene. As Mary runs back from the empty tomb to tell Peter and John, she says, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” When you read the other gospel accounts, you will discover that there were at least three women at the tomb: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1). They had come early in the morning with spices, to finish the job that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had done on Friday, anointing the body with myrrh and aloes. But here, John focuses only on Mary Magdalene, who came to the tomb early on Sunday morning, only to find it empty.

1. “They have taken the Lord” (verses 1-9).

The wording of my first point comes from Mary’s words to Peter and John in verse 2. That is how Mary interpreted the empty tomb. The resurrection was not in her mind. When she did not see the body of Jesus, she assumed that someone had come and taken it away.

We see the discovery in verse 1.

John 20:1

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.

This was a surprise to Mary Magdalene. She had come with spices to anoint the body of Jesus, which she expected to find in the tomb. Instead, she found an empty tomb. At this point, John does not tell us that Mary even looked in the tomb, but Mark and Luke tell us that she did, and found it empty.

This is what prompts her to run to Peter and John.

John 20:2

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.”

Now, we don't know who the “they” are. I'm not sure that Mary knew, either. There was no incentive for either the Jews or the Romans to take away the body of Jesus. In fact, in Matthew's gospel, the Jewish leaders were concerned that the disciples would come and take away the body, thereby staging a fake resurrection (Matthew 27:64). They spoke to Pilate about it, who said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard (Matthew 27:65-66). Neither the Romans nor the Jews had a motive to take the body of Jesus.

So, whoever this “they” was, Mary said, “They have taken the Lord.” This news did not sit well with Peter and John.

John 20:3-4

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.

I love the vividness of John's account here. He has Peter and John in a dead sprint to the tomb! They knew that something was off, and they ran to investigate.

I also love the little dig that John writes against Peter. He says, “the other disciple outran Peter.” This is John saying, “I’m faster than Peter!” This would be the case if Brian and I were in a race to the tomb. He would definitely get there before I would, but I would be trying to keep up. He might easily say, “I’m faster than you, Steve.” But if you know anything about Brian and me, I would probably be the one who, though slower, would enter the tomb first, as Peter did.

So in verses 5-8, John describes what they found.

John 20:5-8

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.

Peter and John are like detectives arriving at the scene of a crime, looking for clues as to what exactly happened. The report from the detectives tells us that they saw two items lying there where the body of Jesus had been. First, there were the linen cloths that were lying there. Second, there was the face cloth that had been on Jesus’ head. The linen cloths seemed undisturbed. But the face cloth had been moved away from where the body was, and it had been folded up.

This shows that this was no crime scene. Grave robbers were common in the day. They would often come in the night to take away any valuables left near the body. They would not have taken the time to unwrap the body, which was covered with these cloths and with 75 pounds of perfume, and then left them undisturbed. Nor would they have taken the time to fold up the face cloth. If you know anything about a crime scene, it is often chaos: things pushed over, things moved, things broken, things toppled. But that was not the case here. All seemed to be left in order and in place. The only thing missing was the body of Jesus.

Chrysostom, an early church father, said that the cloths lying as they were was “a sign of the resurrection.”[\[1\]](#)

It seems as if John, having seen the evidence, believed in the resurrection at this moment. That is what we read in verse 8: “he saw and believed.” However, if you continue reading, it was not quite the resurrection that John believed. I believe it was the words of Mary that he believed. He believed that “they have taken the

Lord.” He saw that the body was gone, and he believed that the body was gone.

It is worth noting that throughout the gospel of John, this pattern of “seeing and believing” recurs. When Jesus called his first disciples, they asked, “Where are you staying?” and he said, “Come and see.” You see in order to believe. We will see this again next week with Thomas, who had to see before he would believe. Here, John saw and believed, though what exactly he believed was still incomplete. I say this because of verse 9.

John 20:9

For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

In seeing the grave cloths, John did not think first of the resurrection. He says that at that point, they did not understand that the Scriptures had said Jesus must rise from the dead. All of the evidence pointed to it, but it just did not quite compute yet.

It was only later that the disciples came to understand the Scriptures, that Jesus must have risen from the dead. Experientially, they saw there was no body, and they believed that. Then later, they fully understood that Jesus must have risen. This is helpful for us to remember as we speak with unbelievers and as we deal with our own hearts. Belief is often a process. Sometimes it takes time. You hear something, you begin to grasp it, and then at some point it climaxes into full conviction. Do not lose heart if faith comes slowly in someone you love.

This is a subtle but important point. It is not that the disciples manufactured some resurrection story to fit the Scriptures. Rather, the Scriptures later confirmed in their minds what their lived experience had taught them. The resurrection story was not some later fabrication to fit what the Scriptures said. These disciples experienced the resurrection, and later came to fully embrace everything that Scripture had prophesied about it.

They later understood Psalm 16, that the Father would not abandon the Son to decay. They later understood Isaiah 53:11, that the only way the suffering servant could “see his offspring” and “prolong his days” was if he were resurrected. They later understood Isaiah 25:8, that the way to swallow up death forever was to conquer it through the resurrection. They later understood the sign of Jonah: “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:

40).

They later understood that when Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), “he was speaking about the temple of his body” (John 2:21). Do you remember the scene? When Jesus cleansed the temple, the Jews demanded, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” They thought he was speaking about the building. But John tells us: “When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (John 2:22). They did not understand it at the time, but when they saw Jesus raised from the dead, it all clicked.

This is often how prophecy works: it is foreshadowing that is difficult to read in advance, but crystal clear in retrospect. After the resurrection, you look back and say, “Yes, of course.” This is a caution to all of us who would use prophetic passages to declare with certainty what will happen in the future. We should hold those interpretations humbly, knowing that it is often only after the fulfillment that the pieces fall into place.

The belief of John here is the beginning of his belief in the resurrection. We will see it come to fruition next week as we continue in the gospel of John, when Jesus actually appears to them and the disciples say to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord” (John 20:25).

Verse 10 closes this section.

John 20:10

Then the disciples went back to their homes.

My guess is that their trip home was different from their trip to the tomb. Verse 4 has them both running to the tomb, to investigate Mary’s words that “They have taken the Lord.” But now, my guess is that their pace was slower, that they walked back with heads down and minds racing. “What does all of this mean?”

I suspect they were a bit like the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus, who were sad about the death of Jesus and were “talking with each other about all these things that had happened” (Luke 24:14), just trying to figure it out. Why was the stone rolled away? Why were the grave cloths still in the tomb? Why was the face

cloth folded up? Where is the body of Jesus?

While the disciples were walking back home, apparently Mary had followed them and was at the tomb. But she did not go home right away. Rather, she lingered.

John 20:11

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

Again, “The better you know a story, the harder it is to feel its drama.” You need to catch the emotion here. She was sad at the death of Jesus. She was mourning his death, not realizing that he was not dead at all. As far as she knew, someone had come and taken away the body of Jesus. It was like a double whammy: not only was she bereft of a loved one, but there was no body to mourn over.

This is especially the pain of unsolved mysteries, when children go missing and are presumed dead. Parents mourn over the loss of their child, but their mourning is heightened in that there is no body to bury. This is Mary.

But then she experiences the resurrected Christ. This is what we see in verses 11-18, which is our second point.

2. “I have seen the Lord” (verses 11-18).

I take the wording of this point from verse 18, where Mary says to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” This summarizes what Mary experiences at the empty tomb. She has the privilege of seeing Jesus, risen from the dead, which she reports back to the disciples.

It all begins with Mary stooping to look into the tomb, just as John had done in verse 5. In those days, the entrance to a tomb was not large. The smaller the doorway, the smaller the stone needed to seal it. You had to crouch down to get inside, which is why both John and Mary are described as “stooping” to look in. This is like the detective returning to the scene, looking for more clues. Perhaps something would help her to understand this confusing turn of events. When she stooped to look in, she saw more than John or Peter ever saw.

John 20:11-12

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

I think here about the ark of the covenant. Do you remember the mercy seat that was placed in the tabernacle? It had upon it two cherubim facing each other with their wings outstretched. A similar scene would have been here, with one angel at the head and another at the foot. The symbolism is here for us to dwell upon. The mercy seat was where the high priest would enter into the holy of holies once a year, sprinkling the blood to atone for the sins of the people of Israel for that year. Think about that. Of all the priests in Israel, only one would ever see this holy place. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would take the blood of the sacrificial goat and enter that inner sanctuary alone. He would sprinkle the blood seven times upon the mercy seat between the cherubim. This was the blanket covering for all the sins Israel had committed that year. It had to be done again and again, year after year, because it could never ultimately take away sins. But here in the tomb where Jesus lay, that annual ritual has found its fulfillment. This is the place where sins are forgiven once for all. John is giving us a wink, saying: look here carefully. This is the new mercy seat. These angels here remind us of the body of Jesus, crucified for us to atone for our sins.

John 20:13

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.”

This is the story as Mary knows it: “They have taken away my Lord!” She does not know who “they” are. She does not know where the body of Jesus is. She is talking with these angels, seemingly unaware that they are angelic beings. They did not respond or say anything further. Instead, Jesus appears, asking the same question.

John 20:14-15

Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.”

Mary is almost like a broken record, repeating the same thing: “They have taken away my Lord. Where is he? If you have taken him, I will get him and take him away!” Remember that Jesus had 75 pounds of spices wrapped with him in that tomb. And here is this grieving woman saying, “I will take him away.” So overcome with devotion that she was willing to try. That is love. What love and

what devotion she has for Jesus!

It is because “she loves much who has been forgiven much.” Do you know the background of Mary Magdalene? She was a woman of the world. She had been possessed by seven demons, but was healed by Jesus (Luke 8:2). His care and compassion for her changed the direction of her life. When Jesus comes into your life, he will change you from being self-serving to being faithful to Jesus whatever the cost. Her pursuit of his body is only an indication of her great love for him.

Jesus has compassion on the greatest of sinners. I also can't help but think of the woman that Jesus met at the well. If you remember, that story was told in John, chapter 4. She had been married five times and was currently living with a man who was not her husband. She came to the well in the middle of the day, in the heat alone, because she was a social outcast. In those days, the women would gather at the well in the evening, a time of community and conversation. But this woman came at noon, by herself, avoided by the others, seen as immoral and wicked. She was the last person you would expect Jesus to choose. Yet she was the first one to whom Jesus revealed that he was the Messiah.

John 4:25-26

The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

The first one to whom Jesus revealed himself as the Messiah was such a woman, and the first one to whom Jesus revealed himself as alive, risen from the dead, is a similarly unlikely woman. Which means there is hope for us all. Wherever you have been, whatever you have done, the grace of Jesus is willing to forgive and embrace you.

John 20:16

Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

There was something about how Jesus said her name that caused her to recognize him. Perhaps he had a unique way of saying it, an affectionate inflection that he used with no one else. Maybe it was a code (not a secret code), but the kind of tone and tenderness that only someone who deeply knows you can convey. She

had heard him say her name before. And the moment he said it, the resurrection was not on her mind, but here was Jesus, alive. She did what only love and affection will do: she embraced him and held him tight.

John 20:17

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.’”

This is a mysterious statement, because later Jesus will let Thomas touch his wounds (John 20:27), and later still Jesus will eat breakfast with the disciples, showing that he had a physical body that could be touched and embraced. Perhaps this is because Jesus had yet to complete his ascension to the Father.

John 20:18

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

She went from “They have taken the Lord” to “I have seen the Lord.” That is the drama of this resurrection morning. May the Lord help us to feel it.

These things are "of first" importance in regards to the gospel. Consider Paul's words:

1 Corinthians 15:3-6

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. He appeared to Peter, then to the twelve, then to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive.

The gospel is about the death and resurrection of Jesus. But it is also about his appearances to the many people after his resurrection to show himself alive. We know that over a period of forty days, Jesus made these appearances to his disciples, teaching them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). Through this process, the disciples were convinced. Here in John's gospel, Mary was convinced when she saw the resurrected Jesus.

The resurrection is not a story they manufactured. It is what they saw. We will not see the risen Jesus as they did. But Peter wrote these words to those who also had not seen him:

1 Peter 1:8-9

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Do you have that joy? If the joy is not there, it may be because you have not yet fully believed and embraced the resurrection as you ought.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 5, 2026 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homily 85. Available at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240185.htm>.