

The Garden Tomb

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[0 : 00] We're looking at the passage we just read this morning. And here we learn about the place of the resurrection and then the gardener of the resurrection and then finally doubting Thomas.

So let's look at that together. First, the place of the resurrection. In verse eight, Peter and John, after being told by Mary Magdalene that Jesus's body was not in the tomb anymore, they come to the garden where he had been buried.

And it says they see and they believed. And Mary is left there. And the story really focuses on her because she stands there after Peter and John believe when they see the tomb empty.

And it says that she stands there uncontrollably, uncontrollably weeping. It's a Greek word for a kind of a deep gut cry, just a big cry. And so she's there and she's crying.

And this is the focus because Jesus had removed seven demons from Mary in Luke chapter eight. And she stood there.

[1 : 05] She was one of the very last people that watched Jesus be crucified. She was there till the very end. And here in verse 13, all of a sudden, we're left with her weeping, crying.

And she tells us why. She says at the beginning of the passage and then right in the middle of the passage, she says they've taken away the Lord. And she even says it to Jesus himself. She says, have you taken the body of the Lord?

And if so, tell me where it is and I'll go get it and I'll bring it back. And that means that Mary thinks that Jesus' body has been stolen by grave robbers.

And you see, she's crying in this passage because she doesn't believe that he's risen from the dead. She thinks his body has disappeared because of theft.

Now, Mary is a very modern person in this passage. She's like us 21st century people. She says, you know, I'm not sure that I can believe a man could physically rise from the dead.

[2 : 06] And Mary had been with Jesus, this whole gospel career, his whole gospel career. She had been an object of his rescue and she says here, I'm not sure that I can believe this.

And she's left crying because she thinks that it's more likely that his body was stolen. Now, in the time of the first century, when this was written, when this happened, grave robbery was a big issue.

And the next decade after this in the 40s, the emperor of Rome, Claudius, is going to dictate that to rob a grave is a capital offense. You'll be killed for it because it was such a prevalent issue.

People would go in and take steel bodies and they would take all the goods that were often buried with the body. And this is exactly what Mary thinks is happening. It's something that she was used to. It's something that was in the culture that she knew about.

Now, look, Mary, whether it's the first century or the 21st century, we face the same issue. And that's that it's difficult for us as human beings to believe that a man walked out of the grave on the third day, that he rose from the dead.

[3 : 10] And this became such a thing in the 19th century and the 20th century that even the Christian church at times started to say things like, we don't really have to believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. Instead, we can talk about a resurrection that's more spiritual than physical.

And so one theologian writes this, that the resurrection is something here and now, it's entering into a new dimension of existence. It's being set free from the past and from guilt and from all cares and being made open to one's fellow man.

He said, so the resurrection, we don't need to say that it's physical in the first century, but that it's spiritual. That what we're talking about here, what Christianity is ultimately about is being resurrected from the inside.

You have an existential crisis and then all of a sudden God lifts you out of it. And you can say, I was dead, but now I'm alive. I was struggling psychologically, but now I've been brought out of that.

I've been set free. I've been risen from the dead. And this is the modern program to de-supernaturalize Christianity. But look, we can talk about modernity, but it's all the way back in the first century that Mary stood before the man that she had listened to.

[4 : 18] You know, when she sat there, when he said, the son of man must die and on the third day he'll take his life up again. But she stands there weeping because she says, there's no way it could really happen.

There's no way that this could be the truth that a man came out of the grave on the third day. Now, in the midst of that context, the main point of this passage is really clear. And it's in verse 10.

And it's the way John summarizes this whole event. He says, verse nine, for as yet they did not understand the scriptures that he must rise from the dead.

Now, in this moment, what John is saying is that once they thought about what had happened here that day, they went back, they hid for a while, the apostles did, and they thought about it. They realized the entire Old Testament is ultimately about this moment.

You see, when it says they did not yet understand the scriptures, what scriptures are they thinking about? They're thinking about John's talking about the Old Testament. And so we sang Psalm 16 at the beginning of our service today.

[5 : 21] And it says that, Lord, you won't let my body see decay. You won't let me stay under the shadow of death. And you can come to a place like Ezekiel 37 where it says, Lord, can these dry bones, these dead bones in the middle of the Valley of Death, could they live again?

And all of a sudden, when you read John 20, you look back like John did later on and realized the entire Old Testament has always been about one thing, and that's the getting to this very moment where Mary and Peter and John walk into a garden and find an empty tomb, a man who had died, but his body is there no longer.

And so the question before us is, what is Christianity? What is the essential character and nature of the Christian message? And Paul comes in 1 Corinthians 15, and he says to us this, he says, if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you're still in your sins. Now look, the modern response is that of Mary to say that we can still have something like Christianity and not have to believe in the supernatural, not have to believe in the moment that Jesus Christ's body walked out of the grave, that he's really alive.

And what the Bible comes in John 20 and says to you, 21st century person, is that if Jesus Christ did not walk out of the grave physically, then we don't have anything but a mere religion.

[6 : 48] That Christianity is nothing but something for sociologists to study. It's something that, if you're a Christian today and if Jesus didn't walk out of the grave, it's nothing but a culture.

You're just merely a product of the culture that you grew up in. But hear me today that the Bible says something much bigger. Christianity has always said something much bigger, and here's the claim that in the middle of history, Jesus Christ really did walk out of the grave physically, that his body cannot be found in the middle of Israel, that you won't find his body there.

That's the ultimate claim of Christianity, and that means that Christianity cannot be reduced to a feeling. Ultimately, the Christian faith is not a feeling.

It's not even something that goes on inside of you. It's not about emotions. Ultimately, it's not about anything going on in our hearts. Ultimately, what's Christianity? And the apostle Paul said it, in 1 Corinthians 15 at the beginning, he said it's this, Christ died, Christ was buried, and Christ rose again on the third day.

And he appeared to Cephas, Peter, and the 12. You see, essential Christianity, what it really is, is an announcement. It's a history.

[8 : 04] It's what he did in the middle of history. It's not about how we feel, it's about what he did. It's a pronouncement of God over you that he's coming to bring life back from the dead, and that he really did it in the first century.

That's the essential message of Christianity. Now look, secondly, then, what does it mean? And the second thing to see here, then, is the gardener of the resurrection.

All right, Mary misunderstands what's taking place in front of her eyes. And that participates in a whole theme across the book of John. If you read through the book of John carefully, one of the things you'll see is that everybody Jesus encounters often misunderstands him in some way.

And so at the beginning of John, for example, John says to Nicodemus, if you want to be saved, you've got to be born again. And Nicodemus says, how am I supposed to enter my mother's womb and be birthed for a second time?

He thinks Jesus is talking about a physical birth. And that theme of misunderstanding goes throughout the whole of the book of John, but then it climaxes right here in this moment where you're supposed to laugh, I think, even, when it says that Mary supposed Jesus was the gardener. [9 : 17] So he's standing right in front of her face, and she says it's just the gardener. It's the man who's come to clip the grass and make sure the flowers are pruned. This is who's standing in front of her.

It's a misunderstanding. It's the constant motif throughout the book of John. Now, the way that this gets expressed here in the passage is through three questions that get asked of Mary.

And the first is that the angels come to her, and they say to her, woman, why are you weeping?

Now, when you read that question in the light of the whole of the book of John, you start to realize something.

You know, Jesus comes, then the gardener comes to her and says it two more times. Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you seeking? Or who are you looking for? And there's something building here.

Woman, who are you seeking? Woman, who are you seeking? Woman, who are you looking for?

And you see, it's three questions, but it's one question. And it's one question that's building and building and building, and that's actually because that question is doing the same thing as the motif of misunderstanding.

[10 : 21] You look back across the book of John and you see all these moments actually where Jesus had asked the same question of different people. Who are you seeking? Who are you seeking?

Who are you seeking? Who are you seeking? What are you looking for? So back in John chapter one, Jesus first encounter with two of the apostles, Peter and Andrew, the very first word that he says to them is, what are you seeking?

What are you looking for? And then you get all the way to chapter 18 where they're in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before his death. And the Roman soldiers come to arrest Jesus.

And Jesus asks them one question, whom are you seeking? And immediately they fall down on their faces because he says that he's the I am.

You see, over and over again, who are you seeking? What are you looking for? Now, when Jesus asked Mary this question, she accuses Jesus of being the one who stole the body.

[11 : 20] She says, you the gardener, did you take his body out and put it away somewhere? And if you did, then tell me where it is. I'll happily go get it. His body must be honored.

He must be put back in the place that we buried him. And you see, it's saying three times, it's climactic. It's saying Mary cannot see reality even when it's standing right in front of her face.

In other words, it's the climax of the question that Jesus has been asking the entire time throughout the book, who is it that you're really looking for? And you see what John's doing?

He's asking you the question. He's trying to say to every single person here today, what are you looking for? Who is it that you're seeking? Because whether you're a Christian or not today, maybe you've come to a place where you've been chasing after little happinesses all throughout your life. You want your circumstances to be better. You want to feel like you have purpose every day when you wake up. You want your routine to get better. You start the new year every year and say, this is gonna be the year that I work out.

[12 : 27] This is gonna be the year that I get my schedule together. This is gonna be the year that I've finally put enough money away to be secure and safe, to have the wealth that I want to have. And all throughout our lives, we're looking for little salvations over and over again, little bits of purpose.

And Jesus comes in the book of John over and over again and says, what is it that you're looking for? What are you seeking? What do you want from life? And what kind of salvation do you really want to have?

Now look, here's the answer to the question. Mary has no idea. You know, who are you seeking? What kind of a salvation are you looking for in your life?

And the answer that Jesus gives over and over and over again to everybody encounters is, you don't know what to look for. You don't know what you need. You don't know who you are. You don't know what you need.

You don't know what kind of a God there really is. You don't know the type of thing you're looking for. You know, two things. One, Mary teaches us that first, our expectations are way too small.

[13 : 29] You know, Jesus comes to her and says, what kind of a Messiah did you expect? You saw me exercise seven demons. You experienced this from your body. You've walked with me all along the way and experienced the miracles that I performed.

And now you're standing here and you don't know what to be looking for. What kind of a Messiah did you think you would have? What kind of a God did you expect? If you really believed in me, in other words, we long for a holiday at the sea, but we settle for mud pies, as Lewis told us.

Our expectations, in other words, he's saying, are way too small that actually you were made for a salvation that you could have never expected. You were made for resurrection, is what Jesus is saying.

And when we first approach this reality, we can't see it. Mary couldn't see it, we can't see it, but there's a second thing here too. And it's simply this, if Mary can't see it, if Mary can't believe it, if Mary doesn't know her own need, then that certainly got to be the case for me.

Now, if it's Mary Magdalene, then boy, I know that I can't see, I can't understand, that my expectations are too small, that I can't see everything. John Calvin, I love the way he put it.

[14 : 46] He talked about the fact that from the time of our birth, the natural human being lives in a state he called of unreality. He talked about living a life of illusion.

We're actually, we think that we're objective, we think that we see the world the way it really is, but our selfishness, our self-deception, our being bent in on ourselves, as Augustine put it, makes us see the world through glasses.

And those glasses are colored with the lenses of deception, of illusion, of an unreality, as he put it. He says, we don't know what the world really is, we don't know where it came from, and we don't know what we need.

That's what he was saying. Now, Christianity calls this sin. It says that our sinful disposition blinds us from who we really are and the God we really need and that we really seek after.

And here it is, Francis Spufford commenting on Calvin, a 20th century writer, he says it like this, he talks about having an awareness of your own broken soul.

[15 : 45] And he says this, what we're talking about here, what Calvin's talking about is not just our tendency to lurch and to stumble and to mess things up by accident.

No, it's our active inclination to break stuff. Stuff here meaning promises, relationships. He says, you're a being whose wants make no sense, whose desires don't harmonize, whose deepest desires are ordered against each other.

The Bible teaches over and over again that our hopes are too small, we don't know the salvation that we need, and it's all because we have self-interest, and these are the glasses that we're wearing.

We can't see the truth of what's standing right in front of a sin distorts our view of reality. And so the modern person says exactly what Mary said. You know, the modern person says, I want, if God would come down and show up physically, then I could really believe.

And what John 20 comes and says to you is maybe not, because God really did come show up physically in front of Mary and she still couldn't see.

[16 : 56] She still couldn't see reality. And in other words, on the one hand, there's a historical takeaway here. Here's the historical takeaway, then I'll give you the personal takeaway. The historical takeaway is this, Mary proves, Mary proves that in the first century, a Jewish person, and everybody else for that matter, did not expect a man to die and rise from the dead again.

Now that's very important. The scholars will point this out that this isn't some fulfillment of a long mythological fable that the Jews have been telling for centuries. Not at all. This appears nowhere in Jewish thought.

You see, the idea of a man dying and rising from the dead physically right in front of their eyes, this is not what they were looking for. And that lends some real credibility that the only way this is the account is if it really happened.

It wouldn't have been made up. It was not part of the worldview at the time. Nobody thought of something like this. It couldn't have been thought of. It was completely unexpected. Mary proves that she's standing there and she can't expect it.

She can't see because this is not what she thought was gonna happen as much as he had said it already to her. But look, here's the personal takeaway. The personal takeaway is this. When you ask the question, if you're willing today to ask the question of yourself, who am I seeking?

[18:16] What am I looking for in life? What kind of salvation do I want from my personal problems? What am I really hoping for? What kind of a God do I want to exist if you're willing to ask these questions?

You've got to say something like this. If Mary can't understand her need, I can't either. If Christianity's true and she walked with Jesus the whole way and she couldn't see the truth standing right in front of her face, we've got to be willing to say, man, my sin has distorted my picture of reality.

I can't see things as they really are. I need help. In other words, it's the idea that we need help from the outside and here's how you get it. Well, did you notice what happens here?

Jesus, in John chapter one, it says of him that he is the creator of the world like God the Father, that he's one with God the Father, and that he actually made the world.

And at the end of that sentence, at the beginning, I should say, it calls him the word. So one of the very first things we learn about Jesus in the book of John is he is the quote, the word.

[19:22] He spoke the word. He spoke creation. He is the word by which creation was spoken. We learn in Colossians, it's by his powerful word that the world is held together at all moments.

Think back again to John 18, Garden of Gethsemane, whenever the soldiers come and they say, where's Jesus? And he says, who are you seeking? Jesus of Nazareth. And he says, I am.

Quoting the Old Testament name for the Lord God. And these Roman soldiers who care nothing about him bow down on their faces before him. You know, what's happening in that moment?

They hear him speak and they have to listen. They have to obey. He brings reality right into their hearts and their midst. Go back to the Old Testament for a second.

Jacob and Esau. You remember when Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, if you know that Old Testament story. And Isaac is there, the Father, and Jacob comes in and he tricks his father, Isaac, to giving the right of the firstborn to him.

[20:28] And Esau comes in later and says, no, no, no, that wasn't me. That was Jacob. Now give me the right of the firstborn. Just say it. You can just say, no, you're the firstborn son. You get the inheritance.

You get the blessing and it'll be done. And what does Isaac say? He says, I cannot because I've already spoken. You see, all across the Bible, words have performative power.

They have a performative power in a way that modern people like us don't quite see all the time.

That words can really do things. They can change things. But if it's God that speaks a word to you, he can bring you from darkness to light.

He can take the glasses off your head and where you were living in unreality and all of a sudden you see reality. And in John chapter 20, you know, Mary was very probably there in John chapter 10 when Jesus said, my sheep hear my voice and when I call their name, they come to me.

And here, Mary is blinded. She doesn't have faith. And what does he do? He does nothing but say her name. He says, Mary.

[21:45] And all of a sudden, she leaves the world of illusion and steps into the world of light. The glasses come off. She's not blind anymore. She sees him. He's not just the gardener.

He's Jesus Christ, the resurrected Son of God. And it says here that she gives him a beer hug. And look, that means that what you need today, what every single person, if you say today, look, even if you're a Christian, you say sometimes I have a tough time believing that a man walked out of the grave in the first century.

What John is saying to every one of us here is that you need to hear the word of Jesus to you. You need to actually hear Jesus today speak your name.

You need to hear him say your name. In other words, coming to faith, the embrace of faith, the choice to believe today is all about first listening to what has been written, what has been spoken by him, to hear him say and say to you, I love you and I have spoken your name.

Look, here's how you can know. How do you know? Well, for one, he speaks through Scripture. He comes today in the power of the Holy Spirit and actually speaks to you.

[22 : 57] He speaks your name to you right now in the midst of the presence of this congregation. And you can, here's how you can know if that's happening to you. You can know it if you're willing to say today something like this.

Lord, I don't have all the answers. I don't know how a man can die and come back to life. But I know that if you really are God, then you're big enough to do things like that.

And I don't have to understand it. In other words, it's a simple prayer. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. It's the willingness to say, I'm willing to step forward in faith and then seek understanding. And that's, if you're there today in any small way, whether it's the first time or you've been there for 75 years, but today, if you're there at all, then you know that Jesus Christ has spoken your name. And the glasses have come off. The illusion has gone away. Reality has come into your life and into your heart. And you see him. Look, in the incarnation, in the incarnation, Jesus says to every one of us, you are not what you should be.

[24 : 05] That's why he came. And in the resurrection, he says your name and you do not have to any longer be what you once were. You don't have to be left there.

Now, let me move on as we come to a close shortly to say this, that, look, Mary, Mary does live in a bit of a world of illusion here.

She can't see Jesus. She sees the gardener. But it's important to note that she's not entirely wrong. You know, she sees the gardener.

She sees Jesus Christ. She sees the gardener and then she sees Jesus. And then she sees Jesus Christ the gardener. Because, you know, you go back all the way to Genesis 1 and 2.

And the man of John 1, who we're told created the world, we find in Genesis 1 and 2 as the God who creates. And in Genesis 1, 2, the God who created the world is told to us that he is the ultimate gardener.

[25 : 06] You know, he's the one that first built the world. He put the vegetation where he wanted it. He cultivated the land. He built the Garden of Eden. And he put humanity into the midst of it.

He is the garden. He is the God of the garden. You come all the way to the end of history. Revelation 22 and the very last thing we read about is the restoration of God's garden, that the ultimate gardener would come again one day and recultivate the land, bring back to us the Garden of Eden.

Now, right here in the crucifixion story that was looked at last week, John chapter 19 verse 41, just before we started reading today, John gives this little phrase where he says, it just so happened that Jesus Christ was crucified next to a garden.

And John is trying to bring together the entirety of the Bible in that one sentence. And this is what he's saying. In the beginning of history, Adam and Eve were put in the Garden of God.

And when they rebelled against the Lord, and they were kicked out east of Eden, they went to live in the land of death just outside the garden. But in the middle of history, when the second Adam, the true Adam, the real man, he came, he lived through the ultimate death just outside the garden.

[26 : 32] Adam was in the garden, he got kicked out. Jesus was outside of the garden so that he could go back in. You see, when Jesus was murdered at the hands of his own creatures, he was buried in the garden so that when he rose again, he could walk over, lift the latch, the lock that's on the gate of the Garden of Eden, and he could open the gate and say, now you're welcome.

He died outside, but he went in to open the way for us, to the Garden of God. We were made for the garden. And Jesus Christ here, Mary was only half wrong.

He really is the God of the garden. He is the God who has opened the way for us. And that's why at the end of the passage, the first part of the story, Mary all of a sudden realizes, and what does she do?

She gives him a big hug. What does it mean? It means that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, you can hug God. You have access to the garden.

One day you really will physically step into the garden of God with Jesus Christ, and you will hug Him, and He will hug you. What do you need? Who are you seeking?

[27 : 44] And here's the answer. We don't know, but here's the answer. We need resurrection life, and we were made to give a hug to the living God. And that's exactly what the God of the Garden has come to offer you today.

So don't settle for small salvation, little happinesses. Your circumstances getting better is great, but oh boy, you were made for something much bigger than that.

Now let me close with just a very short final word, and that's the gift that God has given us in doubting Thomas. At the very end of John chapter 20, we have this story that Mary is not the only one that struggled.

Thomas the apostle did as well. And what happens to Thomas is that he wasn't there the first time Jesus showed up to the apostles. And so he says at the end of the passage, if I, oh boy, how modern, if I can't see the man and touch him, if I can't take his soft tissue and put it under the microscope, then there's no way I can believe this.

If I can't do the scientific experiment and form a thesis, then there's no way that I'm willing to believe in this. And Jesus in utter kindness shows up again for Thomas.

[29 : 00] Now let me just point out two things to you and we'll be done. First is this, Jesus comes to him and says, Thomas, touch me. Jesus comes and offers to Thomas exactly the physical evidence that Thomas wanted.

Now Bertrand Russell, in the beginning of the 20th century, the famous atheist philosopher, he said not long before his death, he wrote that when I die, if God exists, I'm going to go straight to him and say, you didn't give me enough evidence.

And that's the problem of divine absence. That's what the philosophers called it, not being able to see God right now and the struggle that we sometimes have with that as modern people.

But boy, it goes all the way back in history to the beginning, to Thomas, to Mary. And Thomas said, if I can't touch him, I can't believe it. And so Jesus comes and he says, well, touch me, but why? Jesus comes to Thomas for a real reason and here it is. It's because he was an apostle and every single one of the apostles had to be an eye witness of the physical Christ so that they could spread forth the message.

[30 : 10] You know, what's an apostle? Apostle is an eye witness of the resurrection. So Jesus was coming and saying, well, you're an apostle, you have to see me. But at the same time, the ultimate point, Jesus says this at the end, he says, blessed though is the one who never sees me physically and believes.

And you see what Jesus is saying? You do not have to see the physical resurrected Christ today in order to believe in the physical resurrected Christ. And he says, in fact, more blessed is the one who can believe without yet seeing more than Thomas who needed to see in order to believe.

And he said, boy, in other words, what was he saying to Thomas? He was saying, Thomas, you need the same thing that every single person today needs and that simply this believe the message of the apostles.

That there really were eye witnesses, that there were more than 500, that Peter really did see him, that Mary, that John and the 12, they went out and they said that they saw him, they gave their lives saying it and they flipped the Roman Empire upside down in the matter of just 20 years with this preposterous claim.

Now, you don't go out and die for something like this unless you think it happened. And he was saying to Thomas, you should have listened to the apostles. And today, Jesus is saying to you, listen to the apostolic testimony, the eye witness accounts.

[31 : 33] If you're a Christian today and you're struggling with your faith, you feel like your heart is a bit cold and hard. Have you come lately and wrestled with the apostolic account, which is the Gospels themselves, with the eye witness testimony that tells you exactly what happened with the account that was a first person account?

And you see, that's the invitation, but the last word is simply this. I don't know if you noticed when we were reading, but Jesus says to Thomas, touch me.

But Thomas never did. He never actually touched the scars or the wounds. He never touched his hands. Instead, he simply replies by saying, my God, my Lord.

Now, Jesus says, touch me. Thomas says, my God, my Lord, I believe he never touched them. And I think that's because Thomas realized something so important. And maybe today, if you're struggling with Christianity at all, this could be the thing, exactly what Thomas realized in this moment that might help you.

And it's this, Thomas realized, I am not willing to put conditions before God where I dictate to him what he has to do to make himself real to me.

[32 : 50] Thomas realized that I'm not going to say to God, here are my conditions. And only if you meet my conditions am I willing to believe in you. Oh boy.

If God is God, then who, Thomas realized, I can't tell God, this is what you must do in order for me to believe. Instead, I have to say, my God, my Lord, my God, creator, my Lord, redeemer, I'm willing to believe you and I'm willing to follow you.

And Thomas helps us to see here that we can never put conditions in place. Instead, we have to have the heart that says faith that is willing to seek understanding. And so the prayer today before the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ is this.

Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. That can be your prayer today. And so let's pray that now. Lord, I pray for many hearts here this morning that you would give us faith in order to seek understanding, Lord, that you would help us to believe and help our unbelief.

And I do pray, Father, for people here that might be wrestling with such an enormous claim that a man died and rose again in the middle of history. And just we asked, Lord, that you would pull away the 21st century illusions of scientism that unless we put something under the microscope, it can't be real.

[34 : 24] We say before you today, oh Lord, would have love, would have morality. If that's the truth. But Lord, help us to reject that and to realize there are so many things that we've never seen that are very real.

And we say today before you, Lord, help our unbelief. Give us eyes for the resurrection like you gave to Mary Magdalene that day. Say our names and may we hear you.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.