

The Gardener

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[0:00] We're reading today from John's Gospel, John chapter 19, verses 41 through chapter 20, verse 18. This is God's holy word.

Now in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

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 she went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, They've 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 towards the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and he 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.

[1:13] 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, Rabbani, which means teacher. Jesus said to her, Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

[2:22] 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.

This is God's holy word. All right, here we are, week two in the upper pulpit. So I hope that's okay today.

We just read the story of the resurrection from John's gospel, and I have just two points to make for you this morning from it. First, the place of the resurrection, and then secondly, the gardener of the resurrection.

So let's think first about the place of the resurrection. So Mary, at the beginning of the story, runs to the tomb while it's still dark, before the sun is risen.

And she sees there that the tomb is empty, and so she, we read, she goes and she runs back to where the disciples are, and she tells Peter and then John. John's the one that it says, the one whom Jesus loved, the disciple that he loved.

[3:27] That's John. He's the author here. And then you've got to love that they all run back to the tomb, Mary, Peter, John. But in verse four,

I think this is great.

John says, we left at the same time, but I outran Peter. So John, a little healthy competition there. He's just faster than Peter, and he wanted that to be recorded.

So it was. And John sees the face cloth. He stoops down into the tomb, and he sees the face cloth of Jesus that had been over Christ's face, and it's folded neatly in the corner, and it says, he believed.

But then it says, he didn't understand all it meant. He didn't understand yet all that the Scriptures had said, but he believed that Jesus was alive. What does it mean? He believed Jesus was physically alive, not dead.

So he and Peter, they believe, and they leave. And then in verse seven, we're left with Mary, Mary Magdalene. She is alone there at the tomb by herself.

[4:30] And the text tells us in verse seven that she was there weeping. The Greek word for weeping there is not quiet grief, not just tears.

It is, the dictionaries say it means to bewail, to howl, to cry like a child is what one of the Greek lexicons said, to cry like a child.

So this is the kind of crying that she's doing here where you can't catch your breath, like when little children are crying and you have to calm them down because they're losing their ability to breathe. That's the type of tear she has here.

Jesus had removed seven demons from her in Luke chapter 8. She had had a life that was in ruins before that. And she had found a home in him, and he was everything to her.

She followed him. She worshiped him. He was her Savior. She watched him die. She was one of the last couple of people at the cross after he had died. So she always was there.

[5:29] She lingered. She stayed back. She came first to see the tomb. And she's already faced the grief of his death. And now she believes that his body has been disrespected.

So what does she say? She says twice in the passage, verse 2 and 13, they have taken away the Lord, my Lord, and we don't know where they put him. What does she think?

She thinks that grave robbers have taken his body. And grave robbery was a big issue in the first century and very much at this time. Now what is Mary's, in such grief, she's lost everything.

And now they disrespected his body. What is she assuming? Mary is assuming that the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ did not happen. She thinks that his body was taken, stolen.

He's still dead. It's just that he's somewhere else. Now she gives us one of two most common responses to denials of the physical resurrection of Jesus. And the two most common ways that people approach it in the modern world are to say, number one, his body was stolen.

[6:40] The scholars, you can read a wonderful book by Gary Habermas that is thousands of pages just working through details of historical facts around the resurrection event.

And one of the things Habermas argues very carefully is that it is a majority scholarly consensus, not exclusively, but in the New Testament scholarship and in historical scholarship, that Jesus Christ was a real man, that he really did die on a cross.

He was crucified under Pontius Pilate and that the tomb was empty. So that's a majority view of believing and non-believing historians that look carefully at the resurrection event.

But for many, they say what Mary says here, and that's, well, his body was stolen. That's one answer. The other answer people give is the resurrection. We don't know what happened to his body, but the resurrection is just a symbol.

It's just a symbol. And it's a symbol of hope and new beginnings in your life. You know, when you look at the resurrection, of course, he didn't rise from the dead because that is against the bounds of science.

[7:43] But, you know, you really can get out of debt. You really can walk into your boss's office and say, I deserve that promotion because the resurrection is the symbol of new beginnings.

And it gives you hope and it inspires you and it brings you to a place where you can do things you could have never imagined because you simply believe that it's a spiritual truth only. So there's a man named Rudolf Bultmann, who was a famous in his time, New Testament scholar in the middle 20th century.

And in 1941, this is what he writes about the resurrection. The resurrection was not physical, but, quote, something here and now, it's entering into a new dimension of existence. It's being set free from your past and from guilt and from care and from it's being freed to be open to loving one's fellow man. So it's just this mere symbol of new beginnings.

And so that's the product of what we call the enlightenment program, a program of thoughts that began here on the Royal Mile some two and a half centuries ago.

[8:49] And that's that we have to keep Christianity, but we're going to de-supernaturalize it. And so we can say the resurrection is a symbol, but we could never say Jesus Christ actually rose from the dead physically.

Now, I just want to ask you this morning in the first point, is that what John wanted you to think? Is that what the people who were closest to the event that wrote down the four histories we have of this story, the four gospels, was that the point they were making? Because the best historians are the people that are closest to the action, the people that were actually there that saw it.

And is that what John wants you to get out of this, that the resurrection is not physical, but it is something that can, you know, really help you in your life to do better and be better and give you new beginnings and things like that?

Here, John and Peter walk into the tomb in verse 8 and 9, and it says, They believe, but they did not yet understand what the Scripture had taught, that Christ, and here's the word, must rise from the dead.

So they immediately believe by faith that he's alive, but they had it over time, just the next few days, they began to realize the Scripture said, taught, he must be physically alive.

[10:04] And what Scripture is being talked about there is the Old Testament. There's no New Testament yet. He's talking about the Old Testament, and so we sang earlier from Psalm 16:10, that says, You will not abandon my soul to Sheol.

You will not let the Holy One see corruption. That's a prophecy in the Old Testament. And over the next few days, John starts to realize the whole Old Testament had to be fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ, or the Old Testament doesn't make sense.

It was meaningless. And so he begins to realize this is a historical reality that's been prophesied from centuries ago, and this is the moment that it all begins to make sense, this physical resurrection.

And so John's point is not, is he saying, you know, you should really look to the resurrection and be inspired today. No. No. He's saying that if, how did Paul put it?

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:14, If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still dead in your sins.

[11:11] And so Bultman's Christ, Bultman's view of the resurrection, and so many others that do exist in our time and in our moment, what are they saying to us?

Look, the Bible says either Jesus Christ is physically resurrected, or Christianity is pointless. The symbol of Christ's resurrection doesn't give you anything. All it tells you is that death still wins.

Yeah, you can get out of debt, or you can go get that promotion, or you can better yourself in this life, but you're still going to die, and there is no victory over death. If Jesus Christ is dead, you are still in your sins, and there is no hope at the end of this life to face anything other than death.

And that means that the symbol, the mere symbol, doesn't give you what's been offered by folks that have said that. You know, think about Mary. Mary is so right.

Mary, what does Mary do? When Mary, who is confused, thinks Jesus is still dead, what does she say? Well, you read it. She says, wow, well, at least I've got this great symbol.

[12:17] Man, I know that his body's not here, but I do feel uplifted today. No, she's weeping uncontrollably. She can't breathe, because she said, this has been in vain.

This has been pointless. This has not produced the forgiveness of my sins and hope in the face of death. She knows that without the physical resurrection, what she thinks has not happened, she tells us the right thing about that, that all we can do is weep.

Friends, the resurrection is not a symbol. Jesus Christ rose from the dead in real time, real life history, physically. And we've got to think about a couple things. One, the people who preached the resurrection in just those first few days did it in the very place where Christ was crucified and the tomb was publicly celebrated as empty.

The proximity is too close. If you go out and preach, as we read about in Acts chapter 1 and 2, to thousands of people within just 40 days, and there's thousands of people coming to faith in Jesus, the resurrected Jesus in the city, what can they do?

All they've got to do is go and look. They saw him crucified, and they can go and see the proximity is too near. And we've already said the best historians, we need to do what the historical scholars tell us to do, and that's understand that the best historians are the ones that were eyewitnesses, that were the ones closest to the action.

[13:44] And every eyewitness account we have of Jesus' life, his death, his resurrection, says that he rose from the dead. Every single one that we have says that, of people who were actually there and around in the time.

Paul says Jesus Christ, if you're a visitor today, we've been working through the book of James, the letter of James. We'll be back to that next week. Paul says that Jesus appeared very specifically to six individuals and then more than 500 people, and he says that James, the biological brother of Jesus, was one of those.

James did not believe in Jesus during Jesus' life and death. He did not follow his brother. What happened? Paul says Jesus Christ, the resurrected Christ, appeared to his brother James, and all of a sudden, James becomes the pillar of the church, one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem, the writer of this great letter that we've been working through.

Jesus Christ's resurrection is not a symbol, it's real life history, and today I'll move on from this point with these words. Christianity does indeed provide good feelings.

Yes, Christianity can, Jesus can indeed give a therapeutic quality quality to your heart and life where he does lift you up, and he does make your emotions healthier, but Christianity is not feelings.

[15:10] Christianity is the fact that God in the middle of history died for your sins and rose from the dead physically and has announced the end of death. Christianity is not first a feeling, it's first a fact.

Christianity provides a great source for introspective meditation, yes, but it is not self-help.

Christianity is a historical pronouncement. It is good news, it is not good advice, and it is the good news that his body cannot be found in Jerusalem today.

His bones, his ash are not there. That is the news of Christianity. As I move on, you've got to do what Paul did. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul whittled down, if you were to ask, what is Christianity?

You can whittle it down to just a few lines, and what Paul gives you in 1 Corinthians 15, three to four, the scholars tell us that this is one of the earliest creeds of Christianity.

So, you know, we write creeds like the Apostles' Creed, but there were little creeds already traveling about from Jerusalem, and Richard Baucom in his great book, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, says that within months of Christ's resurrection, this creed was already being stated in churches near Jerusalem.

[16:24] And the creed is in 1 Corinthians 15, three and four, and listen to Paul. He's footnoting it. He's saying, look, this didn't come from me. Listen to how he says it. I delivered to you as of first importance what I received.

That's like a modern day footnote in our books. I'm sourcing it. I'm telling you, this did not come from me. I did not originally write it. That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. That he was buried.

That he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. That's what John realized. He had to rise from the dead according to the scriptures of the Old Testament. And that he appeared to more than 500 people.

Everybody around was saying it. They were all there. They were all eyewitnesses. They could check. The gospel is good news. It's not just good feelings. And so today, if this is a fact, if this is a fact, then it is.

It has to reorder, reorient, disrupt your life. If Jesus Christ came into the middle of history as man claiming to be God and he died and he rose from the dead on the third day physically, that fact has to disrupt your life.

[17:32] It has to. It has to reorder it. Whether we want it to or not, whether we like it or not, and we don't. But it's a fact of history. It has to reorder us from top to bottom. It has to change us.

Secondly, lastly, what is then, if it's a fact, what then does the resurrection mean? And here John teaches us about the gardener of the resurrection. So in John's gospel, throughout John's gospel, it's full of irony.

That's one of the big things. Misunderstanding all the time up to this point. And here we've got, of course, a great misunderstanding where Mary Magdalene doesn't see him. She doesn't know who he is.

And so these two angels appear in the tomb, one at the head of where Jesus laid, one at the feet. And they say to her, woman, why are you weeping? Now, if you were around on Good Friday, you'll know, we talked about how woman is not an insult.

It's a term of honor in the first century. So they're honoring her, coming to see him. Woman, why are you weeping? And so you can hear in that a softness, but also a gentle rebuke of sorts.

[18:37] Why are you crying? What did you come look, who did you come looking for? And she had traveled around with him and heard him say, the son of man must die and must rise from the dead three days later.

She had heard it preached. And yet, she still just couldn't get there. She couldn't quite believe it. But then, of course, the culmination point of all John's gospel of misunderstanding comes here when all of a sudden she turns around and there is Jesus.

And it says, she's supposed him to be the gardener, the mere gardener, the one who would, you know, tend the flowers around the tombs and things like that. And he elevates the question. He says, woman, again, why are you weeping?

Whom do you seek? And what is he asking? He's asking something like, what kind of a God, what kind of Messiah, what kind of a Savior did you think you were following? Who are you looking for in this moment?

Now, I think this is the culmination point of all the misunderstanding stories in John's gospel. Remember Nicodemus, Jesus said, if you want to be saved, you've got to be born again.

[19:41] And Nicodemus said, how can a man be born of his mother's womb twice? That doesn't make any sense. It's impossible, right?

Misunderstanding, it's constant throughout John's gospel. And here is that culmination point of this moment of complete misunderstanding.

What do we learn? When you go through John's gospel and you realize that this woman had seven demons removed from her, she followed Jesus so closely.

You can read the other gospels and see how the apostles can never get it right. Nicodemus couldn't get it. Nobody could understand and see. What are we being told? We're being told, it is impossible to believe the resurrection.

It's impossible to believe in him. That's what John's gospel ultimately teaches. Why? Because the Old Testament and the New Testament says this to us in so many ways. Isaiah, you keep on hearing but you don't understand.

You keep on seeing but you do not perceive. No one is righteous. No, not one. No one understands. Nobody seeks for God. It is impossible as we are as human beings born into the veil of tears in the light of our sin to actually believe in the resurrection.

[20:51] We refuse. He has so clearly revealed himself yet in our struggle in our upside down hearts we say no. We can't do it.

We can't believe. We don't want to believe. John Calvin gave a really famous quote that I've said here too many times. In fact, there's a couple people in the church who sort of make fun of me for reusing the quote over and over again.

And so I know that will happen after the service today but it gets reused over and over again because it's so right and true and good. But I don't want to highlight you'll hear the most common point but listen to the very end.

Calvin writes, human nature, so to speak, is perpetually a factory of idols. We know that one. Man's mind, full as it is of pride and boldness, dares to imagine a God according to his own capacity. As it sluggishly plods, indeed is overwhelmed by the crassest ignorance. It conceives, and here's the word, an unreality and an empty appearance as God.

[21:53] Calvin says, we all live in unreality which is the world of self-deception, self-sufficiency where we take what is God revealed to us and we flip it upside down because we refuse to believe it.

Francis Spufford, the great novelist who was an atheist turned Christian, this is what he writes about it. What Calvin's talking about here, what we're talking about here, is not just our tendency to lurch and to stumble and to mess things up by accident, but this is our active inclination to break stuff.

And stuff here refers to promises, relationships, people we care about, our own well-being and other people's well-being, we break stuff.

We mess it up. You are a being, he writes, whose wants make no sense, who don't, you don't harmonize, your desires deep down are completely discordantly arranged.

You truly want to possess and you truly do not want to possess at the very same time. You are equipped far more for farce and tragedy than for happy endings.

[23:01] You see, what is unreality? What is being talked about here? It's this, that every one of us are not passive victims of confusion around the resurrection. We're not passive victims of confusion about who God is and whether or not he showed up and whether or not he's revealed himself.

We are active manufacturers of smaller gods and we choose them more than the true, real, resurrected Christ, the God who actually has revealed himself to us in world history.

We work hard to believe the tomb is empty yet he's still dead, that somebody stole his body. That's what the Bible teaches and so today if you come and you don't know what to make of the resurrection, I just want to gently say that the Bible teaches that we don't believe in the God who really exists and really has revealed himself not because there's not enough evidence, far from it, but because we don't want to.

Because if we did, if Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead in the middle of history, that means you have to give away your independence fully. You have to, you have to be completely dependent on him.

You know, no matter how we feel, if he really did rise from the dead, it changes everything. And that is so hard. And so we don't want it to be true. I was reading, or listening maybe, I can't remember, a story recently of Tim Keller talking about, in the past, talking about years of interviewing ministry candidates to plant churches.

[24:32] You know, a redeemer, when he was there, planted something like 80 or more churches in New York. And so they had a constant pipeline of interviewing ministry candidates to plant churches. And he said, one of the questions they would always ask is, first, we do this here in our presbytery, tell us your testimony.

How did you come to faith in Jesus? That's sort of question number one. And he said that he noticed over the years everybody would almost, almost inevitably say the same thing. They would all say, I grew up in the church, but I never heard the gospel.

And he said, boy, we got a lot of bad churches. Nobody's preaching the gospel. All these guys come through and they never hear the gospel. And of course, later on he heard one older man who came into ministry later in life say, I came to faith reading Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians. Talks a lot about justification and being forgiven. And Tim asked him, you know, well, was that the first time? He said, no, no, no, I'd read it many times. And he said, well, did you see something new in it?

Did you hear something new? No, no, it was so plain. I'd studied it. I knew it like the back of my hand. And he said, what happened? And he said, I didn't have eyes to see. And so many of these guys, what do they mean?

[25:50] I grew up in a church and I never heard the gospel. They didn't have eyes to see. And you can probably tell that story as well. I grew up in a church or I've been in churches, but all of a sudden, one day, some of you can tell this story that all of a sudden, it was as if the light

switch turned on.

You see, left to ourselves, we cannot believe the resurrection. So what does Jesus do? And in the middle of the story, Mary accuses, in verse 16, accuses Jesus, in 15 and 16, of being the one who stole the body.

Huh. And then what does he do? He just says her name, Mary. And the scales fall off.

What she could not see one moment before, now she can see. The gardener. The gardener himself. And in this moment, we are seeing the first moment in human history of the application of the resurrection of the Son of God to someone's personal life.

And how does it happen? It happens when Jesus, you know, you could study theology for 2,000 years. What you really need is for Jesus Christ to say your name. Mary, your name.

[27:06] and the scales will fall off. And what happens, he had already prepared her for this moment because a couple chapters ago when she was there, he had said, my sheep hear my voice and when I say their name, they come to me.

And that's what he did for her. And the Bible comes today and tells you the exact same thing. What does it say? It says, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

It says both that you cannot survive, you cannot believe without hearing your name spoken by him and today, don't harden your hearts. Hear his voice and you will come to him.

Come to him. Wake up if you're sleepy in your faith. Come to him if you've never been in the faith.

Hear it. He seeks you. He knocks at the door and just simply asks that you open it and you hear him calling to you.

The resurrection, this is the word of God being preached. He is calling to you. He is saying, come and believe and the resurrection will be personally applied to you and you can face death without fear.

[28:12] Let me give you two applications as I close. Number one, when Mary wakes up and she sees him for the first time, her words, her actions show us the power of the resurrection because what she does here, as soon as she awakens, she obviously gives him a big bear hug.

He has to say, do not cling to me. He's probably pulling her arms off because she's got her arms wrapped around him and she realizes in that moment that the power of the resurrection, that it is truly physical, that he's there.

What is happening? The gardener of the resurrection is there and he is proclaiming in his resurrection, what is God saying to you? He's saying, look, I made this world and I'm not going to let it go away.

I'm here to reorder it, to reshape it, to remake it and it begins with Jesus. He's physical, meaning that if you have things about this life that you love and I bet you do, gifts and your physicality and the people around you, the resurrection promises God is not letting creation order go.

This is not some Gnostic text where it's only about the spiritual, no, not at all. In his physicality, in the fact that he hugs her, she hugs him. We're being told he has come to remake this world and renew it physically, finally, and ultimately forever and you see, when she says, when she says, when she supposes he's the gardener, she's not wrong.

[29:46] She's not wrong because what John does over and over again in John's gospel is he brings us back to the creation story and in the very beginning of world history, God, God the son here, made the world and the very first thing he did was he organized a beautiful garden called Eden and he, this son, is the gardener of creation.

He made the garden in the beginning. He upheld it and it just so happens, it just so happens that in John 18, 41, John points out for us that the very place where Jesus was being crucified was next to a garden.

Why? Because Jesus Christ who is God, the gardener of creation, but also the son of Adam, the second human, the second Adam, the one who came to fix what Adam broke in that garden, he hung upon the cursed tree just next to the garden so that his dead body would enter and blast open the gates of Eden and you could enter in.

You see, when he comes out of the grave on the third day, he is not only the gardener of creation, he is now the gardener of new creation. He is the tree of life himself.

The tree of life now stands there in the middle of the garden of Eden, the new Eden and that's what Revelation 22 says that the story of the world is us running away from that beautiful garden and Jesus bringing us back to it.

[31:09] He is the gardener. The gardener of creation here becomes the gardener of the new creation and so finally, second application, that means, look at what he says to her. He says, don't cling to me.

I have not yet ascended. I go to my God and your God, my father, your father. What is that language? That is covenant language. That is the language that comes from the Abrahamic covenant where God promised to Abraham, they will be, you will be my people, I will be your God and now he is saying it to her for the first time.

The resurrection fulfills all the covenant promises of the Old Testament and what is he saying? Don't hold on to me because I have got to go prepare a place for you and you see what he is saying?

He said, because the covenant is fulfilled, everything that is true of me right now physically, resurrected from the dead is going to be yours as well so don't hold on to me.

I go and prepare a place for you. Now that means, and this is the last word, the resurrection that has already taken place in the past in Jesus' life means that your sins are forgiven today, that you, he defeated death and sin and therefore you today can be forgiven but it also has to point you forward to what is not yet about the resurrection and that is that you still live in the veil of tears and so if you come today and you say, yeah and my body is hurting today and my job is miserable and I've just lost somebody and there's the, we've got the diagnosis that it's not going to go away and that's true of all of us at different times in life.

[32:45] It's coming, right? We're all in different places of suffering today. You've got to know that the resurrection is now and not yet and that everything that is true of him physically is going to be true of you and so I just want to leave you with these words.

Paul says, therefore, you say, but the pain in my life, yes and the suffering of this present age is not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed in the sons and daughters of God.

We will look back one day and say, that was a faint, it's just a faint memory, the veil of tears, the life that I used to have that was so hard.

It was just a faint memory and today you can look at every problem you have in your life and say, the life that is to come for you in Christ is unimaginably wonderful. And everything that is truly good you will experience in him.

Mary came to the garden to find a corpse and she left with the gardener king and that's the resurrection, that's what it does.

[33:54] The resurrection today can find you weeping at the tomb. It can find you weeping in whatever it is that's brought you to that point and it can change the direction of your life forever and give you true hope, hope in the time of fear that we live in.

The good news, this is good news, it's his history, it has to reconfigure your life. So let it as we sing. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the resurrection promise, the hope, and we come today to experience hope.

So we ask that now as we come to you in singing that you would help us to see what a morning gloriously bright as the king enters into Jerusalem. And we ask for that vision, take away unreality for us and show us reality today.

We pray that in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.