

The Lord's Message: Am I Guilty of Believing in the Resurrection

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Where: Tilghman UMC

Scripture Reference: John 20:1-18

The defining aspect of Christianity is that God comes to us. We do not go to God. God searches for us. I find the most beautiful parable that Jesus told was The Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd has 99 sheep accounted for, but he is missing one sheep. One of his sheep is out there lost, probably facing death. The Good Shepherd leaves the 99 and goes to find that one lost sheep. To save that one sheep. He brings that sheep back into the sheepfold, because he loves all the sheep. He wants none of the sheep to perish. God wants none of us to perish, but to have everlasting life with Him.

In order for us to have everlasting life, God must conquer sin and death. God does this through His Son, Jesus. Jesus makes atonement for our sin by dying on the cross for us. On Good Friday, Jesus dies on the cross and is buried. Most people think that is the end of the story. As Paul Harvey would say, Now Here is the Rest of the Story. Easter is the rest of the story. Jesus conquers death and is risen. How do we know that Jesus is risen? Some say it is because of an empty tomb. I have come to a difference of opinion on this. An empty tomb proves nothing. If Jesus died on the cross, was buried in the tomb and then on Easter morning rose from the tomb and ascended into heaven, He would have left an empty tomb. Jesus did not simply ascend into heaven on Easter morning, but He gave us confirming evidence that He conquered death and rose from the grave. Am I guilty of believing in the resurrection?

Let us pray.

The first evidence that Jesus rose from the grave and was resurrected from the empty tomb was His appearance to the people. Paul was one to whom Jesus appeared on the road to Damascus much later than all the others. Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 15:3-8**, that Jesus appeared to many people. The Gospel writer, John, gives us a wonderful sequence of events to the people to whom Jesus appeared, starting with the first person, Mary Magdalene.

In **Luke 8:1-3**, Mary Magdalene meets Jesus. Jesus heals her of seven demons. Mary Magdalene follows Jesus. This reminds me of the story of the man of with many demons that Jesus cured in **Mark 5:1-13, 18-20**. Mary Magdalene, after being cured of seven demons, was so moved by Jesus' love for her to become a devoted follower of Jesus. She probably did what she could to support Jesus and the disciples. Most likely her greatest support came from her witness. While following Jesus, Mary was probably telling others that Jesus cured me, Jesus can cure you. Her devotion knew no bounds.

She followed Jesus to the cross. All four gospels tell us this fact. I will use the reference found in **John 19:25**. These same women would assist Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of the body of Jesus. They would go to the tomb with the spices and wrap Jesus' body in the burial cloth. They would witness the stone being rolled in front of the tomb. They would observe the Roman guards coming to guard the tomb. They would feel the heartache and sorrow of it all. Their friend dead and buried.

These would be the same women that would come to the tomb on Easter Sunday. They came out of a sense of duty and responsibility to finish the job properly that was hastily done on Friday.

What did they find? An empty grave. In **John 20:1**, the stone had been rolled away. In other Gospel readings, we learned that an earthquake caused the stone to be rolled away. The guards all panicked and fled at the effects of the earthquake and an empty tomb. They were to guard the body of Jesus. Jesus' body was gone.

The women go running back to Peter and John and tell them: the guards are all gone, the stone is rolled away and the tomb is empty. Peter and John go to see for themselves. They confirmed all the women have told them. In **John 20:9**, it says that they did not believe that Jesus rose from the dead.

To see an unguarded tomb means nothing. A stone rolled away means nothing. An empty tomb means nothing. There is nothing here that supports that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. If after Jesus resurrection, He had simply ascended into heaven, then we would have no proof. We needed more. That is why Jesus stayed on this earth and appeared to numerous people. Starting first with Mary Magdalene.

Mary comes back to the tomb, not understanding what has taken place. She is only overcome with her grief, and that has now turned to bewilderment. Look at **John 20:11-12**. The appearance of the angels did not help. The angels asked her in **John 20:13a**. She responds in **John 13b**. Seeing the angels is not confirmation that Jesus has been resurrected.

Now, Jesus appears at the empty tomb. Mary does not recognize Him. (**John 20:14-15**) Mary thinks that this man before her is the gardener. That is not confirmation that Jesus has been resurrected. She needs more.

Jesus knows that and Jesus provides that to her. In verse 16, Jesus simply calls her name. This woman of heartache and despair is changed and transformed by simply hearing her name being called by the one that she loves and has had a personal relationship with, Jesus. Just as the curtain was torn in the Holy of Holies area on Good Friday at the death of Jesus. Now, the curtain of heartache and despair is torn from Mary. She cries out “Rabboni!”, which means My Teacher.

In this moment of awakening, her reaction was to grab hold of Him. Just as we would of someone that we thought was lost. I remember the time I was about eight or nine years of age. Our family, with another family, went to the Washington Zoo. I wanted to see the monkeys. They wanted to go to see the other animals. I took off for the monkeys, thinking they were right behind me. I realized that they weren't. I got scared, but reasoned that they could not leave without the car. So, I proceed to the parking lot and sat down in the grass in front of the car and waited. I waited and waited. Finally, someone from the families came out to the parking lot and there I was asleep in front of the car. They awoke me and took me back to my mom and dad and the rest of the family. Mom and Dad could not decide whether to hold me or scold me. They did both.

I can imagine the scene of Mary grabbing hold of Jesus. One, to know that Jesus is real and not a ghost, and two, being so overcome with emotions. Jesus has to say to her in verse 17. Jesus gives her instructions to tell the disciples that Jesus is alive. In verse 18, we know that Mary does this.

Mary Magdalene, one who once was controlled by seven demons, is the person to whom Jesus first appears after the resurrection, to give us confirmation that Jesus is alive. Not the disciples, that would come later. Not the empty tomb. An eyewitness account by an unlikely source, is the first evidence that God has raised Jesus from the dead.

I fully confess that I am guilty of believing in the resurrection because of the confirmation of eyewitness. Are you? If not during the Season of Easter, the Bible will provide you with more proof that Jesus, once dead and buried, is now alive. Amen.