

### SCRIPTURE:

John 20:1-10

### SERMON NOTES:

Back in John 8:51 Jesus makes this remarkable claim:

***Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.***

If you remember this passage, the religious leaders understandably challenge Him for this. They know that Jesus considers Abraham righteous because He just commended Abraham's faith as an accusation against them. Then Jesus says that the one who keeps His word will never see death. They perceive the seeming opportunity to trap Him. Perhaps thinking, "*But Abraham has been dead for hundreds of years. Are you better than him?*" Of course, this is no problem for Jesus; He goes on to assert His deity by saying, "*Before Abraham was, I am.*" But prior to that, He said something else striking. "*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.*"

Past tense. "*He saw it and was glad.*"

Jesus said that the one who keeps His word will not see death. They said, "Well, Abraham is dead." And then Jesus said that Abraham, who had been dead for hundreds of years, saw Jesus' day.

This leads to two conclusions:

Jesus was alive before He was born in a manger at the beginning of the first century. We see that all through John.

The second that we may give less thought to is that Abraham, in some way, is still alive.

We see this again when Jesus says His friend Lazarus' condition will not end in death when Lazarus, in fact, dies.

So, we're faced with this tension around the way that Jesus talks about death.

But that was John 8 and John 11, and we're looking at John 20 today. So, what's the relevance here?

We've seen over the years that we've studied this book that the Gospel of John is not only a historical account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is also a literary masterpiece. John has been weaving and building contrasting themes under the surface of his narrative since chapter one.

Some of these themes are light and darkness, the world above and the world below, the Spirit and the flesh, and, of course, life and death.

In our text today, we see John drawing this theme of life and death nearer to a close. It won't quite close out yet, but it certainly hits a crescendo here at the empty tomb.

Before I unpack that, let me ask, how many of you have seen the movie *Shawshank Redemption*? There's a scene in the movie...

We don't yet know how he got out, where he is, or if he made it, but it's a turn in a corner in the movie. We haven't seen him successfully on the outside, but one thing is certain. The cell is empty. The warden has been defeated.

This is precisely what we're observing in our text. In the greatest of all dramas, the drama of God's word, the conflict is not quite resolved. The rising action is still building to a climax, but for the first time since Jesus arrived on the scene, the outlook changes. The Gospel of John introduces Jesus in chapter one, and then, as early as chapter two, the opposition begins. By chapter five, the conspiracy to kill Him is already underway. This tension builds with no release until we get to our text today. This is the turning point in the narrative.

We see here that Christ has defeated death, and its power over those who trust in Him is forever broken.

On the way to this realization, John teases out three characters, three lives, that will be changed for eternity by this event.

***VS 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.***

Verse 1 opens with Mary Magdalene. Mary was one of Jesus' most devoted disciples. Early in His ministry, He cast seven demons out of her. The number seven is almost certainly intentional here. Seven being a symbolic number in scripture of fullness or completion. The idea is probably that Mary was thoroughly lost, oppressed, and hopeless when Jesus found her. Which explains her intense devotion to Him. When the men fled in fear and left Jesus all alone, Mary Magdalene stayed at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother. And now we see her rising early in the morning, while it is still dark to go and visit the tomb. She and the other women are going out the dead body of Jesus, not in hopes that He would be alive; remember, no one expected that. She was going with spices to finish anointing the body of Jesus. She sees the tomb open and realizes that the body is not there.

***VS 2-3 -- 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." 3 So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb.***

You can see the panic here. She is frantic. Her concern is that the body of this Jesus, who had been so compassionate to her, who met this tragic end, whom she was still devoted to even in death, had been moved or stolen by the authorities. She runs to the leaders of the disciples, Peter and John, and they take off back to the tomb.

***VS 4-6 -- 4 Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there,***

It's always funny to notice John's subtle shade here – that he outran Peter – but it's even funnier when you realize that he's been speaking in the third person the whole time. It's like, "Hey, I'm not bragging, just telling you that this other guy [cough, cough] was faster." In reality, though, most commentators think it was just because John was younger. I don't buy it. Either way, John gets there, looks in, and sees the grave clothes but doesn't go in. As you can imagine, from the personality of Peter that we've become familiar with, Peter gets there and barrels straight in. Some of us are like this. We all know someone like this. This is the ready, fire, aim approach to life. One thing to note here is just the realness of the account. These aren't mythological heroes. These are real men and women. With real lives, real personalities, real flaws, real hopes, real dreams, that had just been dashed to pieces with the execution of the man who they had not only put all of their stock in, but a man who was their closest friend. In one of John's last moments with Jesus, he was laying his head on Jesus' chest. And the last time Peter saw Jesus was through the heartbreaking glance of the friend whom he'd vowed to die for that he had in turn, denied three times. These are the men in this scene.

***VS 6-7 -- 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, 7 and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.***

We have to appreciate the confusion they would have experienced while trying to process this. Again, the last thing on their minds is that Jesus rose from the dead. He told them clearly that that's what would happen, but over and over, they just didn't get it. Mary tells them that someone took the body, but they arrive, and all the grave clothes are there folded and neat. The clothes would have already had Nicodemus' oil and spices on them to mask the odor of decomposition. They would have also made the body much easier to move. If someone had taken the body, the last thing they would have done would have been to take the time to unwrap it, let alone unwrap it, and then neatly fold the grave clothes. This lends itself to one of the many, many pieces of evidence for the resurrection – the historicity of the empty tomb and the lack of any other explanation. We don't have time to get into it today, but we've got a whole episode on the Everyday Apologetics podcast about this called "Defending the Resurrection," check that out if you have time.

It's also worth pointing out the differences between this and the other account of someone coming out of a tomb in the Gospel of John. These same elements are present in John 11 with the raising of

Lazarus. The tomb, the stone, and the grave clothes. All there in John 11. The differences are telling. Jesus told the people at Lazarus' tomb to move the stone. But no man needed to move the stone of Jesus' tomb. Lazarus had to be called back to life and given power to walk out of his tomb. But Jesus walked out by His own power. Jesus told the people to remove the grave clothes from Lazarus. But no man had to remove Jesus' grave clothes.

The contrast is that Jesus left on His terms, in His power. This is what He'd been saying all along. *"I lay my life down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and to take it up again....No man takes my life from me...destroy the temple of my body and in three days I will rebuild it..."*

No mess, no struggle, no need for the help of man. Jesus got up and left because He is God. Because He won. He defeated death. One of our characters is about to realize this.

**VS 8-10 -- 8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples went back to their homes.**

After Peter goes in, John is emboldened to follow, and it clicks for him. He hasn't seen the risen Christ yet, but upon seeing the grave clothes, he believes. Up to this point, he didn't understand, but now he does. Luke's Gospel tells us that Peter, on the other hand, is still trying to figure all of this out.

So we've got the devoted Mary, who loves Jesus with all heart even in death, John, who was arguably Jesus' closest friend, and Peter, who put all his hope in Jesus, but crumbled under pressure, and is carrying the guilt and regret of that with him. But there's a fourth character in this account that we've missed. In fact, we missed him because He's missing.

Where is Jesus in all this? Where He is is not nearly as important as where He's not.

He's not in the tomb.

He's not in the tomb because He won. We went to battle with death, sin, and Satan, and He came out the victor.

Christ has defeated death, and its power over those who trust in Him is forever broken.

"Those who trust in Him" feels generic against the backdrop of John's highly personal account here, though.

It's true. His victory is for all who trust in Him, but see if it hits differently when you consider it from John's perspective.

These three at the tomb – Three people with very different backgrounds, different connections to Jesus, different levels of understanding of what is happening here, and different responses to it – He defeated death for them. You see, for John, this is personal. The one who he “believed in” is his friend. The one who is not in that tomb is his friend. The one who defeated death is his friend. Isn’t that exactly what Jesus said, *“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”* – John 15:13.

For His friends. This reminds me of one of my favorite verses. In Galatians 2:20, Paul uses this phrase, *“the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.”*

If you trust in Christ this morning, you can be sure of this. Jesus didn’t just defeat death in general. He defeated it for me. He defeated it for you. He defeated your death. Your loved ones in Christ who you’ve lost to the grave. They’re not lost to the grave. Their bodies may lie inanimate. But Jesus said, they didn’t see death. They didn’t see death, and you won’t see death because death isn’t waiting for you. Your death has been defeated, and this empty tomb is your guarantee. You don’t have to worry about dying, and you don’t have to worry about your loved ones in Christ who have passed on. The life in them has never and will never cease, and their tombs will be empty one day as well. As sure as they live now in the presence of Christ, He will raise their bodies and change them to indestructible bodies when He returns. And, as sure as He came the first time to defeat death, so He will come again to culminate the victory that He has won on your behalf.

This brings us full circle back to where we began. These claims that Jesus made, that the one who keeps His word, who trusts in Him, will never see death. He can say that because He not only defeated death. He defeated your death. Yes, your present body will cease to work one day, but for you, just like Abraham, just like Lazarus, that is not the end. For you, not even your death ends in death.

The empty tomb is a sign of victory. And it’s a sign for you. A sign that the sacrifice was accepted. A sign that your sins are gone. Forgiven. Taken away. Removed as far as the east is from the west because your sins went into that tomb on the lifeless body of Christ, and He came back out without them.

He defeated death on your behalf. All of death. The physical death that we one day face is defeated because it’s not the end for you. Your life will continue unbroken, and later your body will be resurrected. He defeated the spiritual death that kept you and me separated from God and enslaved to sin. The resurrection life in Him is the new life in you. And He defeated the eternal death that we deserve in the Final Judgment because the acceptance of His sacrifice by the Father forever removes your condemnation. All signified by this empty tomb.

Your physical, spiritual, and eternal death has forever lost its power over you if you belong to Jesus.

What do we do with this? What does this change in the day to day?

I want you to pray that the Lord will cause the empty tomb to change your perception of three things.

**The empty tomb changes the way we view our own deaths.**

**The empty tomb changes the way we view the deaths of our loved ones.**

**The empty tomb changes the way we view our present lives.**

**First, let the empty tomb remove any fear that we may have of death.** This is not just some wishful thinking or some comforting line in a hymn. This is 100% certain. If you trust in Christ, you will never see death. Your body will fail, but the gap between that moment and your first breath in the presence of Christ is nonexistent. You don't have to fear death because your death has already been defeated.

**Second, let the empty tomb comfort you in your grieving your loved ones in Christ who have passed on.** Mourn, but not for them. Mourn for what you have temporarily lost. For what you're missing now. But it is most certainly temporary, and you have no need to mourn for them. They are not dead in any significant sense because Christ defeated their death.

**Lastly, let the empty tomb change the way you view this life.** One of my good friends has a painting on their wall. It's a painting of James Dean with a famous quote of his:

*"Dream as if you'll live forever. Live as if you'll die today."* – James Dean

So far as it goes, it's not a bad quote. There's a true, Biblical idea of living for the day because we're not promised another one here on this earth. But James Dean probably didn't mean it that way. What this likely means is, "Get all you can out of life today because it's all you've got." That death is coming for us all, so you better live it up today. We're inundated with messages like this. "Yolo." "Live like you were dying."

I would say, yes, number your days but not because you only get so many. But because you only get so many here. You only get so many to accomplish the mission that you've been given here. Compare Dean's view with something CS Lewis once wrote:

*"Son, he said, ye cannot in your present state understand eternity...That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, 'No future bliss can make up for it,' not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. And that is why...the Blessed will say 'We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,'"* – C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

Let the empty tomb cause you to see this present assignment as temporary, but one that spills into eternity. An eternity where even the worst pains will be seen in heavenly light. Where all suffering is not seen as a means to an end, but in its redeemed state, as part of the glory that has been purchased for you at the cross and validated at the empty tomb. The awful cross of Christ is only glorious because

the tomb is empty. But it is indeed glorious. Your present sufferings will be absorbed into glory as well, because, in Christ, your death is defeated.

For those outside of Christ this morning, Lewis says that this truth works the same way.

*And of some sinful pleasure they say "Let me have but this and I'll take the consequences": little dreaming how damnation will spread back and back into their past and contaminate the pleasure of the sin. Both processes begin even before death. The good man's past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven: the bad man's past already conforms to his badness and is filled only with dreariness.*

No one wins but Jesus. He went to the cross to pay the penalty you deserve. To absorb death in all its fullness on behalf of sinners. That you might be free from its power. The tomb is empty. He's not there. And that means He's somewhere else. The Jesus that Mary could not find, can be found by you today. He is at the right hand of the Father. Victory over physical, spiritual, and eternal death in hand, and He is willing to freely give it to you if you will call on Him today in faith.

Christ has defeated death, and its power over those who trust in Him is forever broken.

## BUILD UP

- **REVIEW:**
  - Read John 20:1-10
  - Why was Mary going to the tomb so early in the morning?
  - What is the significance of the grave cloths being neatly folded?
  - What did John believe upon peering into the empty tomb?
- **REFLECT:**
  - What is the significance of the tomb being empty? (Hebrews 2:14; John 11:25-26).
  - What does the resurrection of Jesus mean for you personally? For those followers of Jesus who have preceded you in death? (2 Corinthians 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:13).
  - How does the response of these three witnesses add validation to the gospel?
- **RESPOND:**
  - How should you live differently in light of the empty tomb?
- **MEDITATE:**
  - 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.*
- **MEMORIZE:**
  - Philippians 1:21 -- *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*



## SEND OUT

- **GROW:** How will you abide in Christ this week and grow in your love and understanding of Him?
- **GO:** Who in your sphere of influence needs to hear this story or the gospel?
- **PRAYER:**
  - Director of Young Adults - **Hunter Christian**
  - Ministry - **The Fount**
  - **Pray for our long-term families:**
    - The Wilsons
    - The Grays
    - The Starks (departing in October)
  - **Pray for our mid-term sent ones:**
    - Kaesi
  - **Pray for our short-term teams:**
    - Central Asia Team departed on September 29
  - **Pray for the lost - Unreached People Group (UPG):** Chara in Ethiopia



- **Population in country:** 24,000
- **Global population:** 24,000
- **Christian Adherent:** 3.00%
- **Evangelical:** 1.90%
- **Primary Religion:** Ethnic Religions
- **Primary Language:** Chara
- **Summary:** The Chara make their living through farming. They had a high population until they were decimated through war and frequent slave raids. Along with their ethnic religion, the Chara practice a syncretized form of Orthodox Christianity.
- **Prayer Focus:** Pray for the Lord to raise up, prepare and send out those who will use gospel materials and take them to the Chara people. Pray there would soon come a day when Chara disciples will make more disciples. Ask the Lord to



strengthen the existing indigenous church to reach its people. Pray for gospel resources to become available in their language.

- Want to keep up with other Unreached People Groups? Download the Unreached of the Day App <https://joshuaproject.net/pray/unreachedoftheday/app>