

## "Sunday's Here"

A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church

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9 April 2023

John 20:1-18

Acts 10:34-43

### John 20

<sup>1</sup>Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>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.”

<sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup>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.” <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing

there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

## Acts 10

<sup>34</sup>Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup>but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup>You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup>That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: <sup>38</sup>how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup>We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; <sup>40</sup>but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, <sup>41</sup>not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup>He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the

one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup>All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

## I. Introduction

Happy Easter Sunday, everyone! I have to admit that of all the Sunday's in the year, Easter Sunday is my favorite one, even more than Christmas. Of course, when I was a child, I preferred Christmas to Easter for all the reasons that a child would: the gifts under the Christmas tree, the goodies in the Christmas stocking, the scrumptious food that my parents made. All that stuff made Christmas my favorite holiday as a child. Add to that the fact that there was snow on the ground AND we didn't have to worry about going to school for at least another week, and it is easy to understand why Christmas would be a child's favorite holiday.

But as the apostle Paul said to the church at Corinth, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways" (1 Cor 13:11). And as I grew older, and as I outgrew my childish interest in gifts and goodies, I've come around to the idea that Easter is my favorite Sunday. Why is that? Well, that's what John and Acts have for us this morning.

## IIA. Pivot to John

(**slide2**) John 20 is the original conclusion to the gospel of John (e.g., ABD 3:914 ["Chap. 21 is clearly an appendix, added after the completion of the first 20 chaps."]; IVP Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, second edition 421 ["Johannine scholarship also maintains a strong tradition of viewing John 21 as an appendix added by a later hand"]; Barclay-Nida, UBS Handbook 601 ["John's Gospel originally ended with Chapter 20 (see verses 30-31)"]; Brown AB 2:1077 ["was chapter 21 part of the original plan of the Gospel? ... few modern scholars give an affirmative answer"]; Meyer CECNT 388 ["this chapter (= chapter 21) can only appear as a *supplement*"]; Thompson NTL 622 ["John originally intended his Gospel to end with 20:30-31"]; Schnackenburg 3:344 ["an ultimate editorial chapter"]; somewhat cautiously, see "John, Gospel of" Lexham Bible Dictionary ["The final chapter of the Gospel (John 21) is sometimes thought to be a kind of appendix"]), and it describes in three different

parts the appearance of the risen Lord to his disciples. In verses 1-18, he appears to Mary; in verses 19-25, he appears to the remaining disciples except for Thomas; and in verses 26-29 he appears to Thomas, thus completing his appearances to everyone who believed in him and who followed him. Then in verses 30-31, John concludes the gospel with these words: "<sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

<sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may ~~come to~~ believe (πιστεύ[σ]ητε; there is a longstanding and still unresolved question as to whether John's purpose is that unbelievers will come to believe in Jesus [aorist subjunctive; so, e.g., NASB; NIV; NRSV; NJB; Haenchen Hermeneia 206 ("that you may believe"); Beasley-Murray WBC 387 (so that you may believe"); Meyer, CECNT 386] or whether believers will continue to believe in Jesus [present subjunctive; so, e.g., NET; RSV; Bernard old ICC 2:685; Ramsay Michaels NICNT 1021 ("the evidence for the present is stronger"); Thompson NTL 429 ("this commentary assumes the originality of the present subjunctive") Schnackenburg 3:338 ("it is to be maintained that 20:31 is formulated for those who already believe")]; on the text critical issue see e.g., Metzger, TCGNT 219; Barclay and Nida, UBS Handbook 620; and the online NET note to this verse. Brown's translation ["*that you may have faith*"] does not clearly state his preference for the aorist or the present subjunctive reading. The NRSV assumes the aorist subjunctive is the correct reading, hence its translation "that you may come to believe," but I think that the present subjunctive is preferable.) that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." These two verses are the key to understanding the entire gospel of John: It is all about the readers believing *that* Jesus is the Messiah and believing *in* Jesus as God's Messiah. Nor it is not accidental that John 20 starts with Mary, because when we left Jesus in John 19, he is attended to by three women - Mary, his mother; Mary, the wife of Clopas (a man otherwise unknown in the NT); and Mary Magdalene - and the unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved. Everyone else was gone. Everyone else had run away. No one else was left because no one else had any hope any longer.

And so it is no surprise that the only person who goes back to the tomb in John 20 is Mary Magdalene (John 20:1; note that John differs from the other gospels on this point of detail; see Matt 28:1 ["After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene *and the other Mary* went to see the tomb"]; Mark 16:1 ["When

the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him"]; Luke 23:55 - 24:1 ["The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb ... Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested ... But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared," where "they" in 24:1 clearly refers back to "the women" of 23:55]). When she gets there, she sees "that the stone had been removed from the tomb" (verse 1b), and goes to find Simon Peter and the unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved to tell them the strange news. The two male disciples race toward the tomb, find it exactly the way Mary described it, and find it empty! (Note that verse 8 affirms that "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed," but the object of his belief is unstated. Most commentators [e.g., Barclay-Newman UBS Handbook 606 ("the most natural solution is that the other disciple believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead"); Haenchen Hermeneia 208 ("what he sees causes him to believe in the resurrection"); Brown AB 2:987 ("he is the first to believe in the risen Jesus"); Smith, EGT 2:862 ("John saw the truth. Jesus has Himself risen"); Meyer CECNT 369 ("that Jesus was *risen*"); Thompson NTL 412 ("The beloved disciple believes in the resurrection before and apart from seeing the risen Lord, thus providing the initial witness to the resurrection"); Schnackenburg 3:312 ["To what kind of belief? ... undoubtedly, to the full faith in the resurrection of Jesus"] take the object of this belief as belief in the resurrected Jesus, but that makes for a difficult problem with the following verse, which states "*for* as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." T. Slater suggests that "They did not yet believe in the Resurrection. They merely believed that the body was gone and they did not know where it was. They simply could confirm what Mary has said is indeed true, "<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/resurrection/commentary-on-john-201-18-4>, accessed 3 April 2023, which seems to me to be the more natural way to interpret the larger text) And what happens next? They go home, leaving Mary by herself, crying outside of the tomb.

And it is in the midst of these tears that Jesus appears to Mary even though she doesn't realize it or recognize him. In verse 14, after speaking with a couple of angels who appear in the narrative for the first time, she "turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus," and even mistakes him for a gardener (per ZIBBC and the NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, gardeners were low on the social hierarchy at this time), and does what any one of us might have done: She asks him "If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I

will take him away" (verse 15). This is when Jesus calls her name and she finally (!) recognizes that the man standing right in front of her is the same Jesus who had been crucified and is now risen from the dead. (slide3) Jesus instructs her to "go to my brothers" - not his literal flesh and blood family but the remaining disciples - "and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father (compare Isa 64:8, "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hands" and of course the introduction to the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father, who are in heaven"), to my God and your God (compare Ruth 1:16, "Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God")" in verse 17. That last phrase is the key to understanding the importance of the resurrection. The Father who raised Jesus from the dead is *our* Father, and the God who created the heavens and the earth is *our* God. That is the first enduring truth of Easter Sunday: through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have become members of one gigantic family of believers who follow our Risen Savior, one gigantic family that worships the one true God and obeys the one who is the Father of us all. On this Easter Sunday, I can't think of any better news than that.

## IIB. Pivot to Acts

But our second passage from Acts 10 puts that great news into an even more exciting context. Why is that? Because Acts 10 is the beginning of the spread of the gospel from a strictly Jewish audience to a strictly Gentile audience. In those days, "all" didn't mean "all" when it came to salvation. It was common for Jews to have nothing to do with Gentiles, because Gentiles were thought to be unclean, and if a Gentile was to be saved, they needed to convert to Judaism or at the least become what the New Testament calls "God-fearers" (Acts 10:22 [φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν]; see, e.g., the IVP Dictionary of NT Backgrounds 846 ["In the Acts of the Apostles the term Godfearer is used of Gentiles who honor God in various ways (including almsgiving and synagogue participation) who are

distinguished from run-of-the-mill Gentiles, and the term seems to be nearly synonymous with “proselyte” or a category of proselytes; that is, for Luke the Godfearer is a quasi-official sympathizer with Judaism (Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 17:4, 17; 18:7)" and the image from Keener's shorter commentary on Acts below]). Nor should that be much of a surprise. Even today, our toxic culture is hard at work dividing the world into the good people who believe the right things and the evil people who don't, the angelic people who vote for the right candidate and the demonic people who don't. The difference is that in antiquity, the good, angelic, people were Jews or the Gentiles who had converted to Judaism and pledged to follow the Jewish Law, while the bad, demonic, people were the rest of the Gentiles.

(slide4) So when Peter is told to go and visit Cornelius, "an upright and *God-fearing man* ([φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν]; see, e.g., the IVP Dictionary of NT Backgrounds 846 ["In the Acts of the Apostles the term Godfearer is used of Gentiles who honor God in various ways (including almsgiving and synagogue participation) who are distinguished from run-of-the-mill Gentiles, and the term seems to be nearly synonymous with 'proselyte' or a category of proselytes; that is, for Luke the Godfearer is a quasi-official sympathizer with Judaism (Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 17:4, 17; 18:7)"]), who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation" (Acts 10:22), he does go, and what a sermon he delivers when he gets there! Even though Peter admits that "it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile," he realizes that he was wrong, and thus says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in *every* nation *anyone* who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (vv 34-35). And after rehearsing to perfection the life and the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, Peter closes his sermon by saying that "*everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (verse 43).

In other words, God's intention as expressed as far back as his conversations with Abraham - "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3) - and Jacob - "and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring" (Gen 28:14; on this tradition from the Hebrew Bible, see especially Hans Walter Wolff, "The Kerygma of the Yahwist" [The Vitality of OT Traditions]).

(Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp 41-66, esp page 65: "The word of promise is revealed as a continuum, in which Yahweh's saving will in Israel remains true to itself for all the nations of the earth") - have now come to fulfillment. Now that Jesus

has risen from the dead, all the families of the earth *will* indeed be blessed.

### III. Pivot to Today

Our two passages contain two pieces of good news, both of which are intimately connected in the New Testament. The death of Jesus on Good Friday and the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday combine to do two things: First, to save each one of us who is here this Sunday, to save every one of us who can accept that we are sinners, estranged from God but now reconciled to him as an act of divine grace and human repentance. I've been that one for almost 50 years now, and I can't imagine how much different, how much worse, my life would have been had it not been for the synergy of God's grace and my repentance. So let's make sure that we celebrate what God has done for us this Easter Sunday.

But while we celebrate what God has done for *us*, let's not forget that God's grace has not *only* been extended to those of us who are here this morning, and human repentance is *not* limited to those people around the world who are celebrating Easter this morning. God's saving grace has been, is, and forever will be extended to all of God's children, whether they are here in church or not. That grace extends and will be extended to everyone, even - I know that this will shock us to our core - even to those who don't look like us, don't speak like us, or don't dress like us. Human repentance is open to everyone, even those who don't vote like us, don't think like us, or don't support the issues that we believe in. The cross and the empty tomb together have paid the price for the sins of *everyone*, not just those of us who sit in church this morning. And thus the reconciliation and salvation that we have all experienced is open to all us, whether we are Jews or Greeks. Slaves or free. Male or female. Rich or poor. Black or white.



Immigrant or natural born citizen. Capitalist or Socialist or Communist. In the light of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, all the contentious issues of our day, no matter how important they might be to us, and no matter how near and dear to our hearts they are, these issues all pale in significance for the church. What matters most is what Paul says in Romans 10: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."<sup>10</sup> For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.<sup>11</sup> The scripture says, '**No one** [emphasis added] who believes in him will be put to shame'" (vv 9-11). Hallelujah! Amen.

Image referenced above:

Cornelius was *devout* and *feared God* (10:2). These expressions have a range of uses, but Luke often applies them to gentile sympathizers who were not yet full converts to Judaism (10:22; 13:16, 26, 43; 17:4, 17).<sup>1079</sup> Inscriptions attest the diverse religious interests of soldiers throughout the empire, although worship of the emperor pervaded communal military life.<sup>1080</sup>

<sup>1077</sup> Surely not Luke's invention; where we can most firmly test Luke against another source, he does not add a centurion's name (Matt 8:5; Mark 15:39; Luke 7:2; 23:47).

<sup>1078</sup> J. B. Campbell, personal correspondence, June 19, 2006; Pliny, *Ep.* 10.77.1. Josephus also knows of centurions in Judea with Roman names (e.g., *War* 2.298; cf. Acts 27:1). Since equestrians also could enter the army as centurions (P. Southern, *The Roman Army: A Social and Institutional History* [New York: Oxford, 2007], 130), it is no surprise that some citizens entered auxiliary units (143).

<sup>1079</sup> See, e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 20.195. Objections to this category by a minority of scholars in the 1980s were roundly refuted by other scholars and subsequent epigraphic discoveries of even Luke's nomenclature, especially at Aphrodisias. Such sympathizers were common (cf., e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 20.41; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.9.20) and their children often became full converts (Juvenal, *Sat.* 5.14.96–106).

<sup>1080</sup> J. B. Campbell, *Army*, 127. For primary sources covering soldiers' religion, see J. B. Campbell, *Army*, 127–36.