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John 20

Up From the Grave He Arose

I was watching a football game recently and it started off pretty dismally for the team I was rooting for. Going into halftime, they were down a few scores you could see their heads hanging low, and the half-time show commentators were pretty certain this game was in the bag for the other team. I was pretty tempted to just turn it off and stop watching. But then, in the second half, they came back out and they were on fire. They had an incredible come-back. It got to the fourth quarter, it was neck and neck, and then they marched on to victory. What started off as a disappointment, and felt boring, became an incredibly exciting game, culminating in a comeback victory. But that kind of excitement that makes a game thrilling to watch and a victory taste so much sweeter only comes through the initial difficulty, the threat of what looks like certain defeat. I mean, just think of how boring it is to watch a football game that's a total shutout. It's exciting at first, but then you lose interest when the game is in the bag. Or think of how boring it would be if you picked up an adventure book with no danger: the knight set out for conquest, only there were no bad guys to fight, no dragons to slay, no treasures to win, no crowns to claim, no princesses to save. There's no victory and glory without peril and danger.

Here in our text this morning we read of the ultimate comeback, the greatest and sweetest and most surprising victory ever won: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Last week, as we began advent, we looked at the cross of Christ; we were reminded that the point of Christmas, the birth of Christ, was for Jesus to come and die on the cross, as our Passover Lamb, the perfect sacrifice dying in our place, for our sins, so that we can be saved. But Jesus didn't just come to die: He came to *overthrow the grave*. The goal of Christmas is not just Good Friday, but also Easter Sunday. And His resurrection is *just as necessary* for our salvation as His sacrificial death was. Today, as we lit the candle of Preparation, we are reminded of our need to prepare for the coming of Christ through personal repentance and faith, and it is good for us to be reminded, once again, that the sin we're repenting of requires not just the payment of Christ's blood to be forgiven, but also the victory of Christ's overcoming righteousness as He overcomes the grave, so that *we* can be declared righteous and raised with Him! That our faith must be in Jesus Christ, who not only came down to us and died for us, but victoriously *rose from the dead* for us! That's

what this passage is all about: Jesus rose from the dead and revealed Himself to His disciples so that we can believe in Him, be saved from our sins unto eternal life, and so others can, too.

I. Jesus rose from the dead, truly and bodily, in fulfillment of the scriptures (vv.1-10)

Our passage begins on Sunday morning, the third day after Christ rose from the dead. He died that Friday afternoon, at the close of the first day of Passover, right before the Sabbath began. And then there was the long, lonely silence of Holy Saturday, this somber pause in between. Jesus had told His disciples over and over again that He was going to die and rise again - and yet, they still didn't get it; not yet. Imagine how sorrowful they were, thinking that their Messiah, their King, their friend, whom they put all their hopes in, was now *dead*. Defeated. Buried in the grave, along with all their hopes. All they were left with was sorrow and dread, tears and fears. They grieved Jesus's passing and feared that the authorities who killed Jesus might come and arrest, imprison, or even kill them, too, for following Him. Yet Mary Magdalene, one of the women who follow and supported Jesus's ministry, couldn't stay away. She came to the tomb that morning - but was not prepared for what she saw. We know the story, it's overly-familiar for us, but imagine how it struck her, caught her unaware and took her breath away, to look and see the stone rolled away from the entrance of the tomb, the grave empty, Jesus's body gone. She doesn't rejoice, not yet; she thinks someone has stolen Jesus's body, perhaps the Roman soldiers or Jewish authorities, angry that Jesus was given a proper and honorable burial in a rich man's tomb.

So she runs back, in v.2, to tell the disciples. And two familiar figures - Peter and the beloved disciple, that is, John, who wrote this book - act in very characteristic fashion: they race to the tomb, John outraces Peter as the faster one, yet Peter, brash and bold, enters into the tomb first, without hesitation. Cliff and I were talking in the office this week about why these verses are included here in the Bible. I joked that John obviously just wanted everyone throughout all the ages to know he was faster than Peter and beat him in a footrace. What guy wouldn't take the chance to boast about that, right? But Cliff made an insightful point: these seemingly mundane, incidental details are here because they prove that this isn't made up: it's history, a personal account of what actually happened, of what John and the disciples personally experienced. If you're making up a story, you don't make up details like these. It verifies for us that they really did find an empty tomb: Jesus really did rise from the dead.

And that's exactly what John and Peter believed when they stepped down into that empty tomb and saw Jesus's grave clothes lying there, folded on the empty bench. If someone was moving his body, they wouldn't have left those. *But*, if a dead body suddenly rose up and became alive again, He wouldn't have any needed for burial wrappings anymore, would He? So Peter and John saw and *believed*, just as we see in v.8: "Then, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and *believed*." What did He believe? That Jesus rose from the dead, as we see in v.9: "for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead." Up to this point they didn't understand that the Scriptures made clear that Jesus had to rise from the dead, but now they're starting to get it; now they believe.

John doesn't include a specific citation, because there are *tons* of places in Scripture that prophecy about the resurrection of Christ. Jesus told His disciples He would rise from the dead multiple times. But the Old Testament spoke of the resurrection of Christ, too. They spoke of how the Messiah must die as the suffering servant, such as in Isa. 53; yet also that the Messiah must reign forever as the true Son of David, King of Israel, and Son of God (2 Sam. 7; Psalm 2; Psalm 110). In order to be both the substitutionary sacrificial Lamb of God *and* the conquering, victorious King who saves His people and reigns forever, Christ had to both die on the cross *and* rise again. This theme is played out over and over again throughout the Old Testament to show us that this is the case. For example, think of Isaac, the son of Abraham, who carried the wood for his own sacrifice up the mountain, yet was spared from the knife by the angel of the Lord and replaced by a ram; or Joseph, who was thought dead by his father, cast into a pit, sold into slavery by his brothers, and cast into the pit of prison, yet through his descent into the pit arose on the other side to become the most important man of Egypt, like a King alongside Pharaoh, and saved the nations from starvation. Or the Exodus story, of Israel going down to Egypt, enslaved, passed through the waters of the Red Sea, which should have been death - yet came out unharmed, and eventually came up and entered into the Promised Land, conquering; this was remembered year after year by the Passover, which Christ just fulfilled, not only as the Passover Lamb on the cross, but also in His victorious resurrection from the grave, leading His people through the waters of the grave, parting the waters of the Sea of Death, charting the way to the true Promised Land of eternal life, the firstfruit of a New Creation.

Or think of Jonah, swallowed up in the belly of a fish for three days, as good as dead on the bottom of the sea; yet what should have been a watery grave became a refuge and vehicle for

salvation, by the mercy of God, as he was spat out on the third day to live. Or think of the Temple. In the Old Testament, the Temple of God was the very presence of God among His people, Heaven meeting Earth. But it was at a distance, like hugging through a blanket, a kiss through a veil, because of the barrier of the people's sins. Yet in Jesus Christ, God came down to earth that very Christmas night. Jesus is *the* temple, the very presence of God walking among us, the visible image of the invisible God. The physical Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, and then rebuilt after the return from Exile, in the era of Ezra and Nehemiah. It was later destroyed again, then rebuilt by Herod. It's a pattern of destruction and rebuilding; death and resurrection. And Jesus explicitly connected this pattern to Himself: "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up... [and] He was talking about the temple of His body" (John 2:19, 21). The Scriptures tell us, from beginning to the end, that Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the World, was always destined to rise from the grave. Death and resurrection; descent before ascent: that's the pattern of salvation, the path to glory and life, the vehicle of mercy and grace. It's the ultimate comeback, the greatest victory ever won, death swallowed up by life! The grave overthrown, Sin and Satan defeated, and death itself crushed to death! The Bible makes it explicitly clear and necessary that the Messiah physically die on the cross and then physically rise from the grave to accomplish the salvation of sinners. Bringing us to point...

II. Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to His disciples so that we can have peace with God, receive the Spirit, and be forgiven from our sins (vv.11-23)

Peter and John entered the tomb, saw it was empty, believed, and went home. But not Mary. She stuck around. And she didn't get it yet. She did not yet believe that Jesus rose from the grave. She enters, and sees two angels, dazzling and glowing. They are sitting right where Jesus's body had been laid, on either end of the bench. As one commentator put it, "It is as though the place where the body of Jesus was laid in the tomb has become the mercy seat in the Most Holy Place, overshadowed by cherubim" angels, "on either side."¹ These two angels sit upon the true mercy seat, where the Lamb of God was laid to rest, where the true Temple and Holy Dwelling place of God, the true Ark of the Covenant, was placed; where the sacrificial blood of Christ was poured out on the true mercy seat of God, securing atonement for His people, abolishing and paying the penalty for our sins, once and for all. And Christ rose because the Father accepted that sacrifice once and for all, never having to be paid again.

¹ Jim hamilton, *ESV Expository Commentary*, John, p.295.

So Mary looks in, sees this incredible scene and the angels. They ask her why she's crying, and she replies, in v.13, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." She still doesn't quite get it. But then Jesus Himself shows up right behind her. She thinks He's the gardener and doesn't recognize Him, asking where they've put Jesus's body. But then He speaks her name: "Mary." And then she turns and looks at him, in v.16, crying out, "Rabboni!" which means Teacher. As soon as He calls her by name, she recognizes Him. He is her Good Shepherd, and His sheep know His voice. This is a sweet scene, showing Jesus personally showing up, personally revealing Himself to His dear sheep Mary, a dear daughter of God, giving her comfort, consolation, and peace in her heart. He doesn't leave her weeping, but comes and shows Her that He is alive. And it's a stark reminder to us today: God doesn't just give us the historical facts of the resurrection and leave us to figure out that it happened on our own; He doesn't even just give us the authoritative, trustworthy testimony of others. In His infinite love and gracious kindness, Jesus draws near and calls us by name, opening the eyes of our hearts and showing us the truth: that He is alive. Jesus calls each of His sheep, every child of God, every Christian, to Himself. That's what happened when you became a Christian: Jesus called you by name, you heard His voice, you recognized Him and believed.

Jesus tenderly draws near to Mary and calls her by name, to draw near to Him. But then he tells her, in v.17, to not cling to Him. We read: "Do not cling to me, for 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.'" Jesus isn't telling her to not touch Him or get away from Him. What He's doing is telling her that He is risen, but He's not yet come to stay permanently on earth: He still has work to do. He rose from the grave, and has come to reveal Himself to her and the other disciples, but then He must ascend to the Father, sit on His throne at the Father's right hand, and reign until all enemies are conquered beneath His feet. And this, too, His part of His work of salvation for us. Jesus's incarnation, becoming fully God and man at His birth; His perfect life and ministry; his sacrificial death; His victorious resurrection; and His triumphant ascension are all necessary parts of the gospel, necessary parts of Jesus accomplishing our salvation. And that's what He's telling Mary here: He's not just ascending to *His* Father, but also *her* Father, *our* Father; His God and *our* God. The veils has been torn, the price paid, reconciliation complete; He's ascending to prepare a place to come and dwelling in the Father's house forever; a return to Eden, the true promised Land!

So Jesus tells her not to cling to him, not yet, because there is still more to come. And we're reminded today: though we can't see Jesus walking around on earth right now, that should not distress us or make us doubt, but remind us that *even now* He is alive and ascended, working on our behalf as the Lamb who was slain but arose again. That's why we can call God our Father and trust that we shall be raised with Him to eternal life. And that's exactly what we're meant to see here. Jesus tells Mary to go and tell the other disciples the good news: Christ is alive! So she runs back and tells them in v.18. That evening, when they're all gathered behind locked doors, afraid the Jews will come and arrest or persecute them all of a sudden - BAM! - there's Jesus, standing among them, like he teleported or something. You can imagine how startled they must have been. And so he greets them by saying, "Peace be to you." In one sense, it's a soothing, comforting greeting to calm them down and not freak out after he suddenly appears in their midst. But also, in another sense, he's saying, "Shalom," the common greeting. So it's also like He's popping up and saying, "Hey, what's up?", nonchalantly like rising from the dead and teleporting behind locked doors is no big deal. He is comforting them, personally assuring them He's not a ghost, but it's really Him: Jesus is alive! He proves to them, in v.20, that it's really Him, physically raised in the flesh, by showing them His pierced body, the holes in his hands and side from the nails on the cross.

Then, in vv.21-23, Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when He had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." These verses might strike us as confusing at first: why does He breathe the Holy Spirit upon them if they don't receive the Holy Spirit until Pentecost, a month later? And why does Jesus say that whoever forgives will be forgiven, and whoever they don't forgive won't be forgiven? What we're seeing here is that Jesus is sending out His disciples as *Apostles*, as personal eyewitnesses of the resurrection, to go out and tell everyone about the resurrection of Christ and the wondrous promise it offers to all who believe in Him: Peace with God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and forgiveness from sins. This is the good news of the gospel: peace with God for sinners, where peace is not, because Christ died for our sins and rose from the grave so that we can be reconciled to God by grace through faith in Christ alone! Just as Christ personally revealed Himself to Mary and the other disciples to comfort them and give them peace, so Christ offers *us* peace in our souls, peace with God, through believing in

the resurrection of Jesus. He also wants us to see that the Holy Spirit is secured by the finished work of Jesus's Cross and Resurrection. He secured the work and presence of the Holy Spirit for every believer, which we receive upon faith. And He wants us to see here that the resurrection assures the forgiveness of sins for all who believe in Him. Christ died to pay the penalty we deserved for our sins; we are guilty and owed a massive debt for all the bad things we did, and could never pay it on our own, yet Christ paid our debts by His own blood on the Cross! BUT that's not all. If He wiped away our debts, we still wouldn't have enough righteousness to make it to Heaven. And so he also *rose again*, so that we can be raised with Him and declared righteous *in Him*. The resurrection assures us that we are forgiven and accepted by God, because the Father accepted Christ in our place.

So why, then, does He say that whoever the *Apostles* forgive will be forgiven? It's because they were the ones who witnessed the resurrection and were commissioned to go out and proclaim the gospel, the faith once and for all delivered to all the saints. We have to hear their gospel and believe it, to believe in Jesus's life, death and resurrection, in order to be forgiven! So they were sent out to proclaim the resurrection, and proclaim peace and forgiveness to all who receive this gospel, this good news, in faith. Friend, if you recognize that you're a sinner who deserves judgment and death and the wrath of God in Hell, and if you believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and then *rose again*, and trust that He rose to defeat *your sin*, and overthrow the grave *for you*, then you can be assured: you are forgiven! Christ has carried your sins away and left them in the grave! Christ has risen and ascended to prepare a place in the Father's house for you! Christ is the firstfruits and you shall be raised with Him! Christ has sealed you with His own Spirit! You are forgiven, declared righteous, and have peace with God!

This is a promise for *all* who believe. Friend, if you're not a Christian, this is how you become one: believe and receive this offer. Believe in Christ today. Because this good news of forgiveness and eternal life is *only* for those who believe. And that's why we must believe. Which brings us to our third and final point...

III. Jesus arose and appeared to His disciples so that *we* can believe in His resurrection and have eternal life (vv.24-31)

When Christ appeared to His disciples, showing them He was alive, one of His core eleven disciples was absent: Thomas. Infamously known as "Doubting Thomas," and verses 24-25 show us why: when they told him, "we have seen the Lord," he responded, "Unless I see

in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will never believe.” His stubborn unbelief is jarring. Yet Jesus, in His mercy, reveals Himself to Thomas. Eight days later, in vv.26-28, Jesus appeared to them again, with Thomas present, and told him to stick his fingers through the holes in his hands and side. And Thomas believed, crying, “my Lord and my God!” Thomas sees and believes. But Jesus said to him, v.29: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have believed.” Jesus proclaims that those who believe in the resurrection of Christ and yet *have not seen* with our physical eyes are *blessed*.

There are a lot of people who say that they refuse to believe that Jesus rose from the grave until they see Him with their eyes, like Thomas did. But the reality is, we don’t actually need that to believe. Christ has given us everything we need, right here in His Holy Word, to know, see, and believe in Him as our resurrected Lord and Savior. In fact, that’s the very reason why John wrote this book, the gospel, of John: to record His eyewitness testimony of the life, death, and *resurrection* of Jesus, *so that we will believe!* We see this in vv.30-31, the purpose and thesis statement of the book: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these things are written *so that you may believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.”

Jesus appeared in the resurrected flesh and revealed Himself to His disciples so that we can believe: we don’t need to see Jesus in the flesh to believe He has risen; we are given everything we need in Holy Scripture and the testimony of the Apostles, who were eye-witnesses, to believe that Jesus truly rose from the grave; we are to believe by hearing, and God gives us the book of John and all of Scripture so that we will believe; we who believe by hearing, without seeing are *blessed* - we are blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing and will be blessed by being raised from the dead along with Jesus, blessed unto eternal life.

The Apostles saw Christ and were commissioned to go out and tell everyone what they saw: that Christ has indeed risen from the dead. In the same way, Jesus commissions us to go out and tell everybody that Jesus has risen from the dead, so that they can believe, too. Look back at what we’ve seen in this passage: Jesus commissions Mary Magdalene to go tell, after revealing Himself to her and calling her by name. Jesus commissions His disciples to go tell everyone about His resurrection and revealing Himself to them. Jesus says people are blessed if they believe by hearing, not sight, and that the book of John was written *so that* people will believe!

We who believe experience that these things are true; we have been blessed to see Christ by faith, to experience peace with God and know Him as Father, to receive the spirit, to be forgiven, and have eternal life! And so we, too, have been commissioned by Christ (Matt. 28) and sent out to tell the world that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead: He came into this world, born as a baby, God in Human flesh; He lived perfect life in our place, fulfilling the righteous demands of the Law of God on our behalf; died in our place on the cross, bearing our sin, guilt, and shame, paying our penalty; and then He *rose from the grave*, in the greatest upset and victory ever, defeating Sin, Satan, and even Death, swallowing up the grave with life, so that we can be raised to eternal life with Him! But only if we *believe*. This offer of salvation is for *anyone* who will believe! But they must believe. And so they must hear. And so we must go and proclaim: Christ has risen from the dead! Do not disbelieve, but believe in Him, be blessed, and you will have eternal life in His name.

Friend, if you're not a Christian today, let me ask you something direct and point blank: do you want to die in your sins and be defeated and swallowed up by death forever? If you that's what you want, then continue on in your stubborn disbelief and denial. You can be as skeptical and doubtful as you want, but it will do you no good; you're only hurting yourself. It will not bless you or make you happy

But do you want to be *blessed by God*? Do you want to receive the blessings of salvation, forgiveness, physical resurrection from the dead yourself, and eternal life in perfect joy and peace? Then *believe*; believe that these words are true; believe that Jesus has risen from the dead, defeating your own sin, Satan, and even the grave itself; believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the grave could never contain Him; believe in Him that you may have eternal life in the name of Jesus Christ!

Brothers and Sisters, let us *continue* to believe that these things are true. It's not good enough that we believed this once upon a time; walking and aisle or saying a prayer does you know good unless it's real and you truly, personally have faith and trust in Christ. And I'm not talking about simply believing that Christ rose from the dead historically. That's crucial and essential, and you must believe that. But you must believe that He rose *for you*, so that you can rise *with Him*, both from death in eternal life to come, and also *now*, being spiritually raised to Him in eternal life. That's what happens when you believe: you join Jesus in His resurrection.

And that's exactly what's pictured in the ordinances, or as some call the, the Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Romans 6 tells us that baptism pictures us being united to Jesus through personally faith in Him, taking part in His death for sins on the cross, and also taking part in His resurrection; we are plunged into the water with Him, and raised from the water, washed clean by the blood of Jesus and raised from the dead, raised to walk in Newness of Life, righteous in Christ. That's what baptism *is*. That's why only believers can truly be baptized. It's also why biblical baptism requires *immersion*, being plunged into the water, because only immersion symbolizes our union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Sprinkling takes away the very essence of what baptism represents. And it is a *crucial* truth that it shows us: when we believe in Christ's resurrection we are raised with Him! Both now - and we *will be* raised with Him, physically, when he comes again, in the resurrection of the Dead. And that's part of what the Lord's Supper shows and symbolizes. As we take the Lord's Supper, we are proclaiming the Lord's death *until he returns*. We are proclaiming our faith, publicly yet again, that he didn't stay dead, but is reigning now, and shall return and raise us with Him.

So if you are trusting in Christ's resurrection through personal faith, and if you have proclaimed your faith publicly through baptism, and are a member in good standing with a gospel preaching church, then we invite you to come to the Table with us in just a moment.

And if that doesn't describe you, we invite you instead to believe in Christ, and to make your faith and union in His resurrection known publicly through baptism. If you have any questions about this, we would love to speak with you after the service. Until then, let's have a moment of silence as we prepare to come to the Table.