

John: Conjuring, Tricks with Bones

John 19:38–20:9

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Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.

So the disciples went away again to their own homes. But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and 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 Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that He had said these things to her. So when it was evening on that day,

the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then (rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send 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, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

Amen. Thus far God's holy and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to the reading of it. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my God, my Rock, and my Redeemer, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

We come now in John 20 to what is undoubtedly the climax of the entire gospel, the story that John has been telling us about the life and ministry and significance of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. This twentieth chapter describes for us the way in which these Christians, these early Christians, discovered the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead, and how it was that they began to rejoice in that fact. At the end of the chapter, in verse 31, a verse we have cited frequently in the course of this study of John's gospel, John tells us once again why it is he is writing this gospel. And he explains to us that this gospel is, in fact, an evangelistic tract, that John's purpose in writing this gospel and telling us this story, is to put before us the evidence, to put before us the facts of history that John believes with all of his heart can change the lives of men and women because if you believe what it is that John is writing here, you will never be the same again. If you allow these truths to penetrate your heart and soul, if by the Spirit of God these truths penetrate into your inner being, you will never be the same again, John says. If you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God, you will have eternal life.

John, in this chapter, is telling us four things. He's telling us how it is Jesus conquered death, then how it was that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene. Thirdly, he recounts the way in which Jesus commissioned the apostles, and finally, at the end of the chapter, Jesus convinces Thomas, doubting Thomas, and for circumstances that will not be altogether oblique to you, I'm keeping doubting Thomas for a sermon all by himself, because I feel particularly close to doubting Thomas.

I. How Jesus conquers death.

John begins this chapter with a factual account, an eyewitness account. John

was there. John is the beloved disciple, the disciple who Jesus loved. The one who is running with Peter, actually outruns Peter as they make their way to the tomb. But John is describing the events on that Sunday morning. Jesus had been crucified on Friday afternoon. He had been taken down from the cross before sundown on Friday, and buried in the tomb prepared by Joseph of Arimathea that Friday evening. It must have been the longest Saturday - Sabbath day, you understand for these disciples - they had ever known. Who knows where they had gone. Some had scattered. Some had gone all the way, perhaps to Emmaus or Bethany. We know that. They make their way back to the upper room on that Saturday evening, once the Sabbath is ended. John's describing now the scene on Sunday morning and the discovery, this mind-expanding discovery of an empty tomb and a stone rolled away.

Mary, Mary Magdalene, comes to the tomb while it is still dark, John says. Now, she is not alone. John, you notice in verse 2, has her speak in the plural, because John's aware, and other gospel writers will tell you, that there were at least two other women along with Mary Magdalene; Salome was one, and Mary the mother of James was another. And she discovers that the stone has been rolled away and she draws the inevitable, logical but erroneous, conclusion that someone has stolen the body of Jesus, somebody has taken the body and put it somewhere else. And she runs, immediately, and bumps into Simon Peter and John, who are also now making their way on that Sunday morning to the tomb.

John and Peter seem to have been living in different locations in Jerusalem. You notice in verse 10, they went back to their own homes, in the plural. She drew these two men together and these two men run to the tomb, hearing that Mary Magdalene has said that the body of Jesus isn't there. And John outruns Peter.

Now, you may be fascinated to learn what the Church has done with that simple little statement, and it would blow your minds away what the Church has done with statement. I won't go into all the interpretations now, but let me conjecture one. Apart from the obvious, that John was just faster than Peter, it just may be that Peter was reluctant to run to a tomb and meet Jesus whom he had denied, whether Jesus was alive or dead. And that just may be the explanation. The personalities of these two men have emerged once they get to the tomb. John reverently peeping into the tomb, and noting the layout of the grave clothes, and Peter arriving breathlessly and going straight past John and into the tomb and seeing the same things but not drawing the same implications as John at this point. The grave clothes are neatly spread out on the slab where Jesus had been laid. The band, John notices and comments on, the band had been around Jesus' head, neatly folded in a place all by itself. The point being at least this, that the clothes were not in disarray as they might have been if someone had stolen the body, and in any case, why would anyone take the bands off and then steal the body. Why not take the body with the bands on it? And perhaps John is also carefully saying to you that it looked as though the body of Jesus had just passed through the clothes, and the grave clothes and the headpiece all

separate from the rest of the grave clothes, had just, as it were, fallen into the place where it was when the body had vacated it. John sees these things and he draws the implication that Jesus' body could not have been stolen. John saw and believed that robbers wouldn't unwrap a body and leave the clothes all neatly folded on a slab. And besides which, John at the end of chapter 19 has described the enormity of the spices, worth a considerable amount of money it has to be said, and if robbers had come to steal the body, they would have made attempt to take these spices along with them. No, John looks at the evidence and draws the conclusion that no one has stolen this body. That somehow, somehow, Jesus has risen, unlike Lazarus. This is not a resuscitation. Lazarus came forth with the grave clothes still bound around him. Lazarus came forth still with the curse of death upon him, and he would die again. Perhaps in John's mind, now, some of the words of Jesus are coming back to him. Words like, that He would be handed over to be crucified and on the third day rise again; like, I have power to lay down My life and I have power to take it up again; or, the words that Jesus had cited in John 10 at the resuscitation of Lazarus, I am the resurrection and the life.

And perhaps some of those very words were swimming in John's mind. You remember how John has aid in the prologue, and how those words in the opening prologue of John's gospel have come back again and again and again, as John writes the gospel. And you remember how John writes in that opening chapter, that the One who was light, and entered into the world, and how the darkness would seek to overcome the light, and it would look as though the darkness had actually won. Isn't it interesting that John should make the comment, and there may be nothing to it, that Mary Magdalene came when it was still dark. And I may be pushing the envelope just a little for all of you exegetical, hermeneutical folk out there, and I may be, but I don't think so. Because John is so fond of the double entendre, the double meaning, because in a way, as Mary Magdalene made her way to that tomb, in her mind it looked as though the darkness had won, and her dear Lord and Savior was buried, lying dead in the tomb. And it would become obvious to her, and to the rest of the disciples, that in actual fact, the light has conquered the darkness. And as that sun rose on that Sunday morning, it would become evident of the magnitude of the redemptive event that Jesus had, in fact, accomplished. John understands, you see, that darkness cannot master the One who is light.

Do you notice the little footnote that John adds in verse 9, "For as yet they did not understand the Scripture that He must rise again from the dead." Why does John say that? And John is saying that because what he wants you to understand is that he's not making up this story as a result of reading in the Old Testament that Jesus was to rise again, so he's putting forth now an explanation, a story of how the Scriptures are going to be fulfilled.

In actual fact, John is saying, "We really didn't understand the Old Testament. In actual fact, when Jesus had spoken of the resurrection, we didn't get it." Isn't that

an astonishing confession on John's part? In a perverse sort of way, that comforts me, that the apostle John could read the Old Testament and not get it, that he could hear the words of Jesus but still he couldn't get it, that Jesus was going to rise again. And John's saying that he didn't make the story up, as if he is anticipating the Bultmanns of the twentieth century. I didn't make these stories up to fit our preconceived notions of what we thought was going to happen. This is the conclusion we drew from the evidence, from what we saw with our very eyes. So what John is giving testimony to here is this astonishing, breathtaking fact that somehow, somehow, Jesus of Nazareth who had died and who had been buried, has conquered death, has conquered the grave.

My friends, we've all stood beside an open grave. We've all done that at some point in our lives, and we've looked down into that abyss as a coffin is lowered into a grave. And there is no more somber sight in all the world. We in the twenty-first century, we camouflage it all. We're so very good to ourselves. We hide the coffin. We don't even see the coffin go down anymore. That doesn't happen until everyone has gone away, such is the way we've sanitized death, because it's a somber reality. And you see what this story is saying, that that's not the end, that Jesus has the power to conquer the grave, to conquer death and the brutality of it. But John has a second thing for us to see here.

II. The calling of Mary Magdalene.

John tells us that Mary had gone to fetch Peter and John, and then had been drawn back again to the Garden and to the tomb, and now, Peter and John having gone, rushed off to tell the other disciples, she's there and she's alone, this time. And she looks into the tomb and now she's sees something that Peter and John had not seen. She sees two angels, one at the head and one at the feet of where Jesus' body would have been, and she begins to converse with these angels. And she hears these words, "Woman, why are you crying?"

Isn't this a poignant scene. Here's Mary Magdalene, and the church and history has painted the worst possible sort of picture of Mary Magdalene; that she was a prostitute, and they have identified her with the story of Luke 7, with the one who anointed the feet of Jesus with the oil, and there is no basis for doing that. Mary Magdalene was the one, out of whom had been cast seven demons, and I think, for the moment Jesus called her, her heart just overflowed with love and gratitude to Jesus. And now, He's gone, and in her mind someone has stolen the body of Jesus and she's weeping, she's crying, she's crying at the graveside of the One that she loves and the unimaginable, the thoughts that are running hither and yon in her mind, that somebody has stolen the body of Jesus. And she hears this person saying, an angel, she doesn't realize it's an angel, but she hears this person say, "Why are you weeping?" And then she turns around and at the door, apparently of the tomb, there is another who says to her the same thing, "Why are you weeping," and then adds something more significant, "Whom are you

seeking?" And it's Jesus and she doesn't know it's Jesus. And John, well, forgive me, it's the double entendre thing again. John says that Mary thinks He (Jesus) is the gardener. Maybe that's what she thought.

But maybe John is saying something more here, because John has been alluding in the gospel to the Garden of Eden. All the time in the gospel of John he's been drawing out how it is that Jesus is undoing that which Adam had committed, and wouldn't it be an interesting thought that the first Adam in the Garden of Eden, who had brought death into the world, well, Mary's now thinking, "Here's another gardener in another garden, who is the second Adam, the last Adam, who has conquered death." But she doesn't recognize Him and that's an interesting thought because does that mean there's something about the resurrection body of Jesus that made Him appear differently from the way that He had appeared in His state of humiliation? You remember some of the details as He walked down the road to Emmaus with the two disciples? They didn't recognize Him either. But the text says, "their eyes were prevented..." That is, there seems to have been some sovereign intervention that prevented them from recognizing Him until they came and broke bread and then recognized it was Jesus.

Jesus now is at the right hand of God. Now, Paul tells us in Philippians 3, Jesus has a glorious body. What's the nature of that glorious body and we don't know the answer to that. When, in the transfiguration, Luke tries to describe what happens to the physical body, all he can say is that it shone like the flash of lightening in all of its brilliance. Doesn't get you very far. There do seem to be properties of the preascension body of Jesus that were different from the properties of His incarnate body of humiliation. John notices here that in the next incident, when the disciples are in the upper room, Jesus appeared in the room but the doors were locked. And John seems to be saying that He passed through locked doors. Now, I know there are interpreters who balk at that, one of Ligon's friends, Don Carson, balks at that; so did John Calvin, an even greater friend of Ligon's, I understand that, but something extraordinary is happening here. Something divine is happening here. Something of another order of being is happening here.

And then, all of a sudden, Jesus utters a word, and perhaps Mary remembers some words of Jesus from the time of the resuscitation of Lazarus, "I call My sheep by name and they follow Me." I don't know your names. I am sorry. I'd like to think I knew half your names. I'd be exaggerating, don't put me to the test. But isn't it a wonderful thing, an extraordinary thing, that Jesus knows my name. He knows my name, and as soon as she hears Jesus utter her name, "Mary," she realizes who He is. "Rabboni," she says, "Master." Jesus is calling her, and she is responding in faith and love and worship and adoration. She's so overcome, and you can understand why, she's so overcome she's in an emotional state as it is, she probably falls down before Him and lays hold of His feet or His legs or something, and He says to her, not, "Don't touch Me," as if would be

inappropriate for her to touch the resurrected body of Jesus. After all, Jesus would say to Thomas, "Thrust forth your hand into My side." No, what Jesus is saying to her is, "Don't hold on to Me."

And why is He saying to her, "Don't hold on to Me."? Because there is an even greater redemptive event that Jesus must undergo before His work is finally done. Because not only must Jesus die, and not only must Jesus rise from the dead, but Jesus must also ascend, He must ascend into the cloud. And it's from a cloud that He will come again at the second coming. He's not to be kept down here; He's to be exalted. He has to go back home. And what He's saying to Mary is, "Mary, Mary, I've got to go home, now. Don't hold on to Me, Mary, because there's something even greater that I must do now. And I'm going to go back to My Father and I'm going to sit on My Father's throne, and then you'll see the fulfillment of the promise that I made, that when I go away, I will come to you again. I will come to you in the power of the Holy Spirit. Don't hold on to Me, Mary, because if you hold on to Me, the Spirit will not come."

And you see how the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus and the ascension of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost are all part and parcel of this great redemptive act of Jesus. No wonder John would say, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God," using a Greek word that suggests that the love that God has shown us is from out of this world. And if I may borrow a phrase from Star Trek for a minute, it's as though Jesus is saying to Mary, "I have to go to a place where no man has gone before." Because I must take my seat at My Father's side.

And do you see, dear Christian, what privileges are ours? Do you see what privileges are ours? And then there's a third thing.

III. Jesus commissions the disciples

Jesus not only conquers death, and He not only calls Mary Magdalene, but He commissions the disciples. In verse 19, He appears, first of all, in this closed upper room where the disciples are now gathered. He pronounces a benediction, "Peace be upon you." And that's more than just, as one in my Sunday School class had the Apostle Paul saying, "Cool." I can't imagine the Apostle Paul saying, "Cool," but it's more than just, "Hello," it's the peace of the gospel, the peace of the benediction of the covenant of grace, because in a very real sense, the resurrection of Jesus brings our peace. Because it's through the resurrection of Jesus that sins have been dealt with and we have peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

So Jesus says, "Peace," and then in verse 22, He breathes on them. And we've seen on several occasions how John, way back in chapter 7 at the Feast of Tabernacles, at the Pool of Siloam, at the bringing of the water, the pouring out

of the water at the altar of sacrifice, and Jesus saying, "If any man thirsts, let him come to Me and drink, for out of his side," that is, out of the side of Jesus, "will flow rivers of living water." And John makes the comment and says Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit. We saw in John 19 how Jesus' side was speared and out of it came blood and water, and how that water in John's gospel was symbolic of the Holy Spirit that would come as a consequence of Jesus' death.

And Jesus is now linking together all of what He's done. He's linking His death and resurrection with the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, some six weeks from now, and He breathes on them, in the same way that God, back in the Garden of Eden, had breathed into man, and formed him into a living being. And in a sense, Jesus is saying, "The Spirit will come and will breathe into you, and in a sense, you will become the new community in Jesus Christ."

And He commissions them, sends them forth now, with the power to forgive sins. Not because of inherent power within themselves, but the power to forgive sins lies absolutely in the gospel itself, because as a consequence of what Jesus does, what do the disciples do? What does dear Peter do? Dear, dear Peter, who had denied the Lord, he goes forth and he preaches the gospel. And as a consequence of preaching the gospel, men believe, and women believe, and boys and girls believe the gospel and are saved, their sins are forgiven.

It's all together breathtaking, what Jesus has accomplished for us, and just as He calls these apostles, so He calls you and me, to go forth into the world with the message of the saving love of God in Jesus Christ. May God so capture our hearts with it for His names' sake. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You for this marvelous, wonderful story, and we thank You that it is true, every word of it, and we pray, Lord, this evening set our hearts ablaze with a love for Christ that knows no bounds, and that as a consequence of Your love for us in Jesus Christ, we might give ourselves away to You, and hear us for Jesus' sake, Amen.

A Guide to the Evening Service

The Hymns and Songs

Praise Him! Praise Him!

One of many hundreds of hymns by Fanny Crosby, *Praise Him! Praise Him!* echoes the words of Psalm 63:4, "I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live." Our sermon will center on Jesus and His saving work. This hymn should help us prepare for the sermon by reminding us of what He has done for us: "for our sins He suffered, and bled, and died." Nothing is sweeter to contemplate than the finished work of Christ as our

Prophet, Priest, and King.

Beneath the Cross of Jesus (RUF Tune)

Another hymn, well known to our congregation and written by Elizabeth Cecelia Douglas Clephane in 1868. It was not published until after her death. It appeared in a Scottish Presbyterian magazine called *The Family Treasury*. The magazine's editor, W. Arnot, wrote: "These lines express the experiences, the hopes and the longings of a young Christian lately released. Written on the very edge of life, with the better land fully in view of faith, they seem to us footsteps printed on the sands of time, where these sands touch the ocean of Eternity. These footprints of one whom the Good Shepherd led through the wilderness into rest, may, with God's blessing, contribute to comfort and direct succeeding pilgrims."

Thine Be the Glory

The hymn's author studied theology in Lausanne, Switzerland, and pastored at Cully and St. Croix (1881-1889). He then became pastor of the Free Church in Vevey, Switzerland, for 35 years more, retiring in 1923. Besides writing original hymns, he translated German, English, and Latin lyrics into French.

I Belong to Jesus

We sing this simple but profound text, set to a tune familiar to our children, immediately prior to the children's devotional tonight.

Up from the Grave He Arose

This gospel song celebrates the dramatic reversal of sin's curse in the resurrection of Christ. The author was a Baptist minister who served churches in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and who wrote over 500 hymns.

The Sermon

Jesus' resurrection was not just a resuscitation of body whose heart had stopped beating within the time frame (20 minutes?) that the brain can still function without fresh oxygen supply. He had been dead for "three days" which, even by Jewish reckoning was at least 30 hours – from before sundown on Friday evening to before sunrise on Sunday morning. It was something more than that. Jesus' resurrection body seemed to possess properties that His earthly body did not – properties associated with the new world order: that He could appear and disappear at will, could pass through locked doors, and could appear in one location and then another. This body, unlike His first body, could not die – will never die. He lives now in a body still, but in such a body that is deathless. In 1 Corinthians 15:50-54, Paul tells us that we who are in Christ will experience something very similar at the end: whether we are still alive when Jesus returns,

or have already died and exist in the meantime in deathless souls – “unclothed” to use Paul's way of describing it (2 Cor. 5:1-5). At Jesus’ return, we shall be clothed in a body similar to that which Jesus knew at the resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus confirms His victory over death and hell; it signals the vindication of His claim to deity; it corroborates every word He uttered; it tells us that the gospel is true and trustworthy; it shows the Father utter satisfaction of all that Jesus accomplished as our representative and Mediator. In short: it crowns the gospel with a visible sign of Jesus' victory over sin – our sin; that, in Paul's understanding, by virtue of our union with Christ, we have died to sin and been raised to life again. "Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 6:8-11 [ESV])

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