

April 4, 2021

2021 Easter
Do You Understand?
John 20:1-9

Opening words: There are 52 weeks every year. Each one is important and not one should be wasted. Have you every stopped to consider how many weeks have occurred in the history of the world? However, there is one week that changed everything, Holy Week! On the Christian calendar, Holy Week is the last week in Lent, beginning on Palm Sunday, and ending at dawn on Easter. It is the week the church remembers the passion of Jesus. It recalls the expectations of Palm Sunday, the rejection of Holy Wednesday, how Jesus was memorialized on Thursday, the devastation of Friday and the final victory of Easter morning. Let me say it clearly. Today is Easter! We are resurrection people because we serve a risen savior!

It is well documented. Abraham Lincoln was the first American President to be assassinated. The date was April 15, 1865. His assassin was well-known stage actor and confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth (1838-1865). Abe has had a difficult time resting in peace. Through the years, Lincoln's coffin has been opened five times and moved seventeen times. The final time was September 26, 1901. It was open for a simple reason. Many believed Lincoln was not in his pine box coffin. In 1876, thieves tried to steal the corpse and hold it for ransom. Once the confirmation of the body was made, Lincoln was lowered into a cage and 4,000 tons of cement were poured around the cage and the coffin. Today, Lincoln's body lays ten feet below the floor of his tomb in Springfield, Illinois, where he is visited by a million people annually. This is the point. Lincoln's grave was opened to prove he was in his tomb. The stone was rolled away from Jesus's tomb to prove he was not. There is a world of difference. This is Easter Sunday! The day we remember we serve a risen Savior! Our Gospel reading for today is John 20:1-9. Let me call this message *Do You Understand?*

John 20:1-9 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.

4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.

6 Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there,

7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.

8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

When we last left Jesus, he was dead! They took his lifeless body down from that instrument of death, the cross, and placed his corpse in a tomb. His lungs were flat. His heart had stopped beating. There were no brain waves and the people who loved him were grieving. If you do not believe me, then ask his mother, Mary. She will tell you; Jesus was dead. Jesus broke the unspoken rule every parent fears. Children should never die before their parents.

A large stone was rolled over the mouth of the tomb for two reasons. First, the stone prevented the body from being stolen. Second, the stone prevented the smell of the decaying body from escaping. There is no other way to say it. Jesus died on a Friday. However, the story is not over. This is Sunday and you know what happened on that Sunday. It is the worst kept secret in the history of the world. Evangelical Christian author and former pastor of the Menlo Church in California John Ortberg (born 1957) once said, *"At the very heart of the Christian faith is the death and resurrection of Jesus!"* That takes us to the scripture reading for today.

We find ourselves today in the twentieth chapter of John. According to this text, it was early in the morning when Mary Magdalene and some unidentified others went to the tomb of Jesus. She is mentioned in all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There must be a better way to say it, but Mary Magdalene and Jesus had some history together. She owed him a great deal. Jesus had cleansed her of seven demons. In other words, Jesus saved her life and she never forgot it. In return, she financially aided Jesus during his time in Galilee and she supported him when things grew ugly. She was present at his crucifixion and now she is visiting his tomb. She is surprised the large stone had been rolled away from the entrance. She expects the worst, and she runs to Simon Peter and John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, to report. The words are not pleasant to them. They ran to the tomb. John arrived first. He only investigated the tomb. When Simon Peter arrived, he enters the tomb and discovers Mary's report is accurate. Jesus is gone, only his burial clothes remain.

Verse nine is key in our reading. It says, *John "saw and believed. (They still did not understand from scripture that Jesus had been raised from the dead.)"* What does that verse mean? It means, they believed because they had experienced the resurrection. However, they were blind to how this resurrection would impact the future of the world. In other words, they were captured by the moment and failed to see the big picture. I do not want to sound critical. They are not the only ones. It has happened to many people on many occasions. Let me give you an example.

On December 17, 1908, the Wright brothers had their first successful flight. (Actually, Orville was the pilot. They had promised their father they would not fly together. He did

not want to lose both of his sons at the same time.) Orville's flight lasted 12 second and covered 120 feet. The speed of the plane was less than 7 mph. As unimpressive as that flight sounds, it changed the world. The Wright Brothers themselves understood the significance of that moment so they telegraphed their sister, Katharine (1874-1929), back in Ohio. The telegraph simply read:

We have flown. We will be home for Christmas.

Katherine understood the significance of that telegraph and was thrilled with the news! She was so excited, he handed it to the telegraph operator. He read it and responded, "That is nice. Your brothers will be home for home for Christmas." He missed the point and failed to understand the big picture. Do not be critical of Simon Peter and John. Many fail to understand and miss the big picture. That leads us to the question of the day, do you understand?

Do you understand without the resurrection of Jesus there is no Christian faith? Today, we celebrate with Christians around the world the resurrection of Jesus. The church stands alone. The scientific world has dismissed the resurrection as nonsense. The secular world has replaced the resurrection with community service. Other world religions have simply denied it. We are the only ones who understand of the significance of the resurrection. It is the cornerstone of our faith and the only thing that really matters. If you do not believe in the resurrection, then you are not a Christian. One of my favorite Bible verses is Romans 10:9. It says, *"That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* Many consider that verse to be the first creed in the church. It is a timeless truth. Your belief in the resurrection is not plainly important, it is indispensable. It is the one thing that separates us from everyone else. The resurrection is the only thing that really matters in the church. If you understand the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith say, **"Amen!"**

Do you understand without the resurrection of Jesus our understanding of God's power is stunted? In Matthew's account of the resurrection, he adds a significant detail. Matthew 28:2 says, there was a violent earthquake. That earthquake does two things. First, the earthquake rolled away the stone that covered the entrance of the tomb. Second, the earthquake underscores the power of God. There are many who ignore the power of God. It is painfully obvious. We live in incredibly arrogant times. Consider two Bible verses with me. The first is Colossians 1:16. It says, *"For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers, or rulers or authorities, all things were created by God and for God."* The second is Psalm 115:3. It says, *"Our God is in heaven; he does what he pleases."* Think about those words. God created this world for himself, we act like God created this world for us! We are just caretakers of God's property. How do you think we are doing? If you understand the resurrection of Jesus demonstrated the full power of God say, **"Amen!"**

Do you understand without the resurrection of Jesus there is no hope of eternal life?

David Seamand's (1922-2006) life was dominated by missions. He was raised in a missionary's home and served sixteen years in the mission fields, himself. He was a professor at Asbury Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky during my time there. He once told of a Muslim in Africa who converted to Christianity. "Some of his friends of the former Muslim asked him, 'Why have you become a Christian?' He answered, 'Well, it's like this. Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly forked. Next to the two roads were two men, one dead and the other alive. Which one would you ask for directions?'" We serve a risen savior!

The twelfth chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews tell us there is a great crowd of witnesses surrounding us at this moment. Some of those saints include some of the spiritual giants of the past. Some of the saints are past family members who have died. Some of the saints include some of the saints of this church. Some of the saints are personal friends. Each one of those witnesses are encouraging to be faithful to Jesus. It is a great cloud of witnesses! Can I ask you a question on this Easter morning? Who are you going to look for when you get to heaven? If you understand the resurrection of Jesus is your only hope of eternal life say, **"Amen!"** Perhaps you have heard this story before on a sad day.

I was raised in a house that was built in the 1920s. Houses built in the 1920s are different from houses built today. Houses built in the 1920 did not have air conditioning. Houses built in the 1920s did not have decks, they had porches on the front of the house. On hot August night in this part of the world, we would escape the heat and the humidity and sit on our front porch. We were not the only ones. The entire neighborhood sat on their front porch and prayed for a cool breeze. It was on those evening we did something we do not do today. We talked to our neighbors. When I was young, I would go and visit one of our neighbors. Her name was Mrs. Ortmyer. I thought she was as old as the hills, but she was probably younger than I am today. She welcomed me onto her porch with the same refreshments daily, ginger ale and soda crackers. As I swung on her swing, I would talk and ask a million questions. My questions reflected my young age. I asked her, "Why is it so hot in the summer and so cold in the winter." I asked her, "Why is the grass green and the snow white?" I asked her, "Why do birds fly in the air and fish swim under the water?" Every night our time together ended the same way. Mrs. Ortmyer would cover her ears and point to the steps. She would say, "Russell. Go home. When you get old you will have all your questions answered.

I hate to say it, but Mrs. Ortmyer was WRONG! I did get older, but I still have a mountain of questions. Why is it some are born with so much and some are born with so little? Why is it you can raise your children in the same house, feed them the same food, give them the same experiences and they end up being completely different people? Why is it someone in our world starves to death every seven seconds, but

everyone I know is fighting the battle of the bulge? There is a mountain of things I still do not know, but I know and understand one thing clearly, we service a risen Savior! Do you remember the quote from John Ortberg? He said, "*At the very heart of the Christian faith is the death and resurrection of Jesus!*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Do you understand the resurrection of Jesus changed everything!