

Easter 2020
John 20:1-31
“Jesus Will Be There”

Introduction

“See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a Son, and they will name Him Emmanuel, which is translated ‘God is with us.’” **Matthew 1:23 (Isaiah 7:14)**

I would like to begin by sharing a story with you that I read just this past week. It seems there was a small church that was living under quarantine. For health and safety reasons, they were all doing their best to practice “social distancing” and were, for the most part, staying put, locked up in their respective homes. The tiny church was separated from fellowship, and undoubtedly, they longed to be together in the closeness they had so often enjoyed. They also felt abandoned in that they were not even able to hear the teachings of their beloved shepherd, as they had before. Discouragement and anxiety had expelled the joy and peace to which they had grown so accustomed within this little group of believers.

To make matters worse, the founder of their church died very suddenly. He was beloved by the entire congregation, and his absence would leave a tremendous void. And, as if that wasn’t bad enough, due to the current conditions in the country, the membership were afraid to even attend his funeral. That is when one of the ladies in the fellowship decided to risk it anyway. If the rest of the church would not attend the funeral, then she would go, even if it meant going alone. This brave woman’s name was Miriam. Miriam was so overcome with grief at the loss of her friend and mentor, that she was determined to go to his funeral, whether it was safe or not. And her determination and conviction even managed to persuade a few of her fellow church members into going along with her.

The graveside service wasn’t much of a big to-do. There were many others who would have liked to attend, but they were all afraid. So, Miriam and her few friends were there, and that was pretty much it. And even those friends didn’t stay very long. They came and looked things over and left hurriedly to return to the safety of their homes. Miriam was so distraught, she could not bring herself to leave the cemetery. She stayed there alone to mourn the loss of her dear friend and teacher. It was there, in the eery silence of the cemetery, that something wonderful happened. She heard the voice of God. He spoke to her just as plain as any dear friend would do. The LORD assured Miriam that she would indeed be comforted, and that He would be there for her.

Not only did God restore Miriam’s joy and peace, there in that cold and lonely cemetery, He assured her that He was going to do something miraculous within their tiny church fellowship as well. God commissioned Miriam to go and tell her fellow church members to be prayerfully expecting to hear a word from the LORD. She left the cemetery and did exactly what God had told her to do. She contacted each of her brothers and sisters in the church and relayed God’s message, that they would all be experiencing His Power and Presence very soon.

That very same evening, the members of the tiny church had an encounter with The Living God! In fact, it was more powerful than anything any of them had ever experienced, or even imagined. And, it happened just as Miriam had told them that it would. They had gone from the utter discouragement over what was happening all around them, to an incredible strengthening of their faith. They received a peace that surpassed all understanding, for this encounter with God ushered in a great movement and the tiny church would never be the same. The fear that had so overwhelmed them was ended in a moment, and the church was energized like never before. They had all truly experienced a miracle of God!

If you would like to read this story for yourself, you will find it in the **Twentieth Chapter of John’s Gospel**. It is the story of that first Easter Sunday, when the disciples of Jesus thought that their world had ended, when in fact it had only just begun. It is a story of hope and everlasting joy, and without it, my friends, we the Church would all be as Paul says, **“pitied more than anyone” (1 Corinthians 15:19)**. But the story of the resurrection IS TRUE, so therefore, we have hope when the rest of the world does not. And even in the midst of trials, such as the ones we are currently facing, we know that our risen LORD is here with us. Just as He appeared to Mary in that awful cemetery, when she thought all hope was lost, He will also be with us. He will be with us, when we feel alone. He will be with us, when we are

afraid. And He will be with us, even when we are doubtful. Let us look together this morning at the wondrous Easter story and fully experience the presence of Emmanuel, God WITH US.

With us: When we are alone (vs. 11-17)

“But Mary stood outside the tomb, crying. As she was crying, she stooped to look into the tomb. She saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus’ body had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you crying?’

‘Because they’ve taken away my LORD,’ she told them, ‘and I don’t know where they’ve put Him.’

Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus. ‘Woman,’ Jesus said to her, ‘why are you crying? Who is it that you are seeking?’

Supposing He was the gardener, she replied, ‘Sir, if you’ve carried Him away, tell me where you’ve put Him, and I will take Him away.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’

Turning around, she said to Him in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ — which means ‘Teacher.’ ‘Don’t cling to me,’ Jesus told her, ‘since I have not yet ascended to The Father. But go to My brothers and tell them that I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.’” John 20:11-17

When we read all the accounts of this story, we see that Mary Magdalene actually had a couple of other women who stayed with her at the tomb that morning. But what happened to all the “big strong men”? Peter and John looked inside the tomb, and then, ran back to the safety of their homes. After all, there was a strong possibility that they could be arrested and tried as criminals as well. They were certainly afraid to be seen out and about. They were definitely unsure of what had taken place. They believed that someone must of stolen the body of Jesus. So, in their misgivings, they went back home and locked their doors.

Mary on the other hand was different. She had been a demon possessed prostitute, when Jesus had found her and saved her. That degree of rescue carries with it a deep sense of loyalty. Would to God, that we would always remember, that we were just as wretched before Christ found us! Perhaps we would remember to be more grateful.

“A creditor had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the fifty. Since they could not pay it back, he graciously forgave them both. So, which of them will love him more?

Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one he forgave more.’

‘You have judged correctly,’ He told him. Turning to the woman, He said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for my feet, but she, with her tears, has washed my feet and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss, but she hasn’t stopped kissing My feet since I came in. You didn’t anoint my head with olive oil, but she has anointed My feet with perfume. Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that’s why she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little.’” Luke 7:41-47

According to church tradition, that woman was Mary Magdalene, and just as she anointed Christ’s feet at the home of Simon the Pharisee, she came to the grave that first Easter morning to anoint her Savior once again. What she got was an incredible first look at the resurrected LORD! I find it absolutely wonderful that Christ appeared to her first of all. You see, in her culture, most people would not have given her the time of day. ...But Jesus did.

I imagine that even within the close knit circle of Jesus followers, she would have been way down on the list of those considered to be of any significance. After all, the disciples were constantly arguing among themselves, about who among them was the “greatest”. I’m quite sure that Mary Magdalene’s name never came up in those conversations. But there she was, the first to see the risen LORD.

She also got to see a vision that every high priest in Israel would have loved to have seen. She saw the two angels sitting at the foot and head of the place where Jesus had lain in burial. What is the significance of this you ask? Well, picture for a moment the Ark of The Covenant. The top of the Ark had two angels on each side. Every year, on the day of atonement, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle blood upon the “Mercy Seat”. This was a mere foreshadowing to what Mary had seen that morning, the two angels on either side of the stone table where Jesus lay, with the blood of the Lamb of God still fresh upon it! This was exactly what the High Priest’s sacrifices had been pointing to for all those centuries. And Mary is the only one who got to see it! What an honor it must have been for her.

You see, everyone had left Mary that morning, everyone that is... except Jesus. He was there to comfort her and let her be the first to see the miracle of the resurrection. Why does that matter? It matters to all those who feel that they have been forgotten or abandoned this morning. It matters to those, who believe they don’t matter. Jesus hasn’t forgotten you. If you love Him and will surrender yourself to Him, then He will always be there for you, wherever you are! We may not be “together” this morning to be able to worship corporately, but do not forget for a moment that Jesus knows exactly where you are. He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not forget that He is with you. All you need do is what Mary did that morning, just turn around and see Him. Emmanuel, God is **with us**.

“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He did not even spare His own Son but offered Him up for us all. How will He not also with Him grant us everything? Who can bring an accusation against God’s elect? God is the One Who justifies. Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is the One Who died, but even more, has been raised; He also is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us. Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”

Romans 8:31-35

With us: When we are afraid (vs. 18-23)

“Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen The LORD!’ And she told them what He had said to her.

When it was evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were gathered together with the doors locked because they feared the Jews. Jesus came, stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’

Having said this, He showed them his hands and His side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw The LORD.

Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As The Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ After saying this, He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

John 20:18-23

Mary was the one entrusted to go and tell the disciples that Jesus had risen. He would be ascending to The Father. According to the book of *Hebrews*, He went there to present His blood on the mercy seat in the tabernacle of Heaven (**Hebrews 9:24**). The sacrifice for mankind’s sin was complete, and the blood of the Lamb had forever done away with the need for animal sacrifice. God’s wrath had been satisfied. This was wonderful news! Had Peter and John stayed at the tomb just a bit longer, they might have heard it first hand. But Christ sent Mary to tell them that He had risen.

You see, every year on the day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter the holy of holies to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. He entered that holy place wearing a robe with bells attached to the hem. As long as the people outside could hear the bells, they knew that the High Priest was still alive and that he was offering the blood as a covering for the sins of the people. When the High Priest emerged from the Holy of Holies alive, then the people would know that the sacrifice for that year had been accepted. A designated person would stand at the entrance of the temple and cry out, "The High Priest has come out!" This was an expression of joy, made known to all the people, that God had accepted the sacrifice. Mary was entrusted to be the one to proclaim, "The High Priest has come out alive!"

The disciples were too afraid to go out in public. Many "legalistic" people would probably look back and criticize their lack of faith. Many would condemn Peter and John for not staying with Mary at the tomb. Many would, from the comfort of their reclining chairs at home, condemn these men and quote the many passages of scripture that command us to "fear not". I am told that there are actually 365 of those verses, one for every day of the year! But I am so thankful that Christ didn't criticize them. No, instead, He came to them.

Notice that they were meeting in secret with the doors locked, because they were afraid of the Jews. But a locked door can't keep Jesus out! He appeared to them. He had promised them that He would never abandon them, and that is certainly a promise that He kept my friends. They were hiding, cowering, afraid to even show their faces, and yet, He found them where they were. In fact, a couple of them, according to Luke's gospel, had even left town and were heading home to the village of Emmaus, and Jesus tracked them down as well. You see, even when we are fearful, Emmanuel, God is *with us*!

I don't know about you this morning, but as for me. There have been plenty of times that I have been afraid. I try very hard to have faith and not worry, but sometimes worry creeps in spite of my best efforts. I know that worry is the exact opposite of faith, and that we have been commanded to "be anxious for nothing" (Philippians 4:16), but sometimes I let my human weakness get the better of me. Can I get a witness? It is easy to get caught up in the panic of troubling times, such as we are living in today. It is easy to find ourselves afraid and anxious for what the future holds. But thanks to Jesus, we know Who holds the future. And He will never leave us. When we are afraid, He comes to us where we are and brings us comfort. Can you imagine the relief that the disciples felt, when He came into that tiny room on the evening of that First Easter Sunday? Fear was dispelled and rejoicing took its place. Jesus is still in the "comfort and joy" business today my friends. So don't be anxious or afraid. Emmanuel... God is *with us*.

With us: when we are doubtful (vs. 24-31)

"But Thomas (called 'Twin'), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were telling him, 'We've seen The LORD!'

But he said to them, 'If I don't see the mark of the nails in His hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will never believe.'

A week later His disciples were indoors again, and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'

Then He said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and look at My hands. Reach out your hand and put it in My side. Don't be faithless, but believe.'

Thomas responded to Him, 'My LORD and my God!'

Jesus said, 'Because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.'

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of His disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is The Messiah, The Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His Name."

John 20:24-31

Thomas wasn't even there for the "big reveal". Perhaps he was even too timid to venture out of his house for a meeting with the disciples even in a secret place with the doors locked. Or perhaps he had completely given up on faith altogether. It is sad that this disciple has become known as "doubting Thomas", because of this one isolated incident. No one calls him "Thomas the courageous" even though when Jesus was considering going to Jerusalem, knowing that He would be facing certain death, it was Thomas who boldly said, **"Let's go too so that we can die with Him." (John 11:16)**. I guess actions speak louder than words, Thomas.

Even after all of the other disciples reached out to Thomas and told them about Jesus resurrection, he still wouldn't believe it. He wanted proof. He wasn't about to take anyone's word for it. He needed to see it with his own eyes. You would think, that Jesus would have been offended by such lack of faith. You would think, that He would simply write Thomas off and allow him to remain in unbelief. But remember, my friends, it isn't us that's holding on to Christ. **It is Christ that is holding on to us.** And He never lets go of His own. He didn't give up on Thomas, when he lacked faith, and He doesn't give up on us either. When our faith is low, He comes to embolden it!

I can't begin to tell you how many times my faith has been weakened by circumstances that surround me, but my Savior always finds a way to hold me fast and restore my faith. It may be through some spoken word on the radio, or a song that reminds me of His faithfulness, or just a still small voice that brings to recollection a verse that I need, just when I need it. You see, Jesus made a special trip just to assure Thomas, and He will do it for you as well. He knows where you are, and He knows just what you need from Him to be able to hold on for a little while longer. He won't give up on you when your faith is running low. You may feel alone, you may feel afraid, or you may have doubts, but you can count on Jesus. He is Emmanuel, God **with us**.

I just love how John ends this chapter, speaking of all the signs and wonders that Jesus did; too many in fact to even mention. But he tells us that **"these things"** are written, so that we may believe in Jesus, and by believing, have life in His Name. Now, I realize that John is speaking about everything recorded in his gospel, when he says "these things". But honestly, it is the things that happened in this Twentieth Chapter, that confirm for us all that Jesus is in fact The Son of God. His resurrection establishes this fact like nothing else could. And it is that resurrection that gives us the hope of salvation and everlasting life. Because Jesus rose, we too shall rise. And that my friends is the message of Easter. Jesus is alive, and therefore, we know that we are alive in Him. He is Emmanuel, God **with us**. The risen Christ is **with us**, when we feel alone. He is **with us** when we are afraid, and He is **with us**, even when we doubt. To be in Christ is to be eternally secure in the knowledge that wherever we find ourselves... He is there!

Happy Easter!

And ALL of God's people said... TRUTH!!!