

The first to believe and the first to see

Please read John 20 v 1-18

And pray ...

Lord, open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your word. Amen

As we open the Holy Scriptures at John chapter 20, I am full of joy over the fact that there is a chapter 20 (and 21) to read and rejoice in. The story of Jesus Christ does not finish with the end of chapter 19 which records the facts relating to his swift and solemn burial. Rather chapters 20 and 21 open up for us a most glorious and triumphant conclusion; they record the facts about Jesus' empty tomb and some of his special resurrection appearances to the disciples. How precious and powerful are these facts recorded by the apostle John, and by the other gospel writers in their equally blessed accounts.

I invite to think through John's account of the events of the first Easter Sunday morning, praying that we may personally know the reality of his risen life and power in our hearts. We are each invited to know and rejoice in the living experience of "Christ in us, the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:27). We talk about Jesus and indeed relate to him in the *present tense*.

The apostle John places much more of his focus on *individuals* in his narrative. In the early chapters we have the story of Nicodemus and the woman of Samaria. Later, there is the lengthy stories of the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus from death. Now, at the climax of the gospel, we have John's pin point focus on Mary Magdalene, Thomas and the restoration of Peter. The apostle John does not leave himself out, but on several occasions, he mentions "the beloved disciple", a distinct way of referring to himself. (eg: see 20:20f)

My purpose today is to invite you to see again, or perhaps for the first time, the disciple who was the "first to believe" and the disciple who was the "first to see." Although Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Lord Jesus in the garden where the tomb was set, it was the beloved disciple John, our writer, who was the first to believe.

Very early on that Sunday morning, sometime between 4-6 am, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been laid by Joseph of Arimathea with some help from Nicodemus (19: 28-42). Did Mary go on her own as verse 1 implies? No, she went with other women, but because John likes to concentrate on *individuals*, the other women are not mentioned as they are in the other gospels. You notice later that when Mary Magdalene speaks to Peter and John, she does in fact refer to the others;

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and **we** don't know where they have put him."

When Mary (and the other women) discover that the stone has been moved, she (and she alone) immediately runs back to find Peter and the other disciple (John) to tell them about the empty tomb. She believes at this stage that someone has "taken the body."

Now for the next few verses, Peter and John come into the limelight of the narrative. They both spring to their feet and start running toward the tomb as quickly as they can. John is the younger one, and he out sprints Peter and arrives at the tomb first, but he does not go in. He is hesitant and stays by the doorway, perhaps out of fear or reverence, or of concern for ceremonial defilement. Then Peter arrives and there is no holding him back. He just goes straight in. What he saw was the grave clothes – the strips neatly folded and left behind. John finally also enters. He saw what Peter saw – merely the grave clothes, but significantly, we are told;

He saw and believed.

John believed!

Let us remember something about John and the writing of this precious gospel account. John almost certainly wrote this toward the end of his life. It was the last of the gospels to be produced. He was a very old man and had outlived all the other apostles. He had a special relationship with Jesus. He was the beloved disciple. He leaned on Jesus' breast at the last supper. He stood at the cross with Jesus' mother. He took her into his own home. Christ spoke to him from the cross.

John would always vividly remember these sacred events. They were burned into his memory. Nothing could eradicate them. When he wrote his resurrection narrative, he remembered it so precisely, like it had happened yesterday. He remembered Mary arriving with the news. He remembered running to the tomb, getting there well ahead of Peter. He remembered his hesitancy. He remembered Peter entering ahead of him. He remembered everything vividly. **But**, if there was one detail John remembered about that morning *more than any other*, it was the sight of the grave clothes!

As he thought back to that experience, he realised, that it was at that very point, when he first saw those neatly wrapped grave clothes, that something happened in his own heart. The beloved disciple believed. He saw and experienced something right then, in that empty tomb that caused him to believe. Amazing! This would be John's eternal memory and testimony. If someone asked later in life, when did you first know that Jesus was alive, John would say, when I saw those grave clothes lying there in the empty tomb!

What John saw, and I hope you can see, was something that he reasoned immediately *could not have been done by human hands*. He sensed the divine hand of God! Peter clearly didn't. Neither did Mary at this stage. John was the **first to believe**.

I wonder friends if you can record in your mind the hour you first came to believe. What was the point in your life when you first knew Jesus was alive? When did the resurrection first become a reality for you? Let us thank God for the divine realisation and revelation which took hold in our own hearts at some vital point in our personal histories and faith journey's.

If John believed at this point, even though he had yet to see Jesus alive, we can understand more fully his emphasis on **believing without seeing**. (read 20:29)

And according to Peter's first letter, as believers today, this is where we find ourselves. We do not physically see as yet, but we nevertheless trust, believe, obey and await our future sight of him, and our full salvation and experience of glory.

Though you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1: 8-9)

My dear friends – we shall see him! John tells us in his first letter that we shall actually see him *and be like him*. (1 John 3: 2-3). Two glorious facts!

Thank God for these very precious promises and truths!

Now we come back to first person **to see** the risen Lord. We come back to Mary Magdalene. This woman loved Jesus so much. He had delivered her from a living devilish nightmare. She was perhaps his closest follower. She had led the women before and after the crucifixion. She had stood at the cross with John and Jesus' mother and others. She had *followed* even to the tomb – seeing where his body was to be laid. She had prepared special spices for his body. She had run to tell Peter and John of the discovery of the empty tomb. What a devoted follower of Jesus! Was she his closest follower? It is worth consideration.

To Mary, in her grief and pain, confusion and heartache, Jesus makes his *first resurrection appearance*. It's all recorded there by John from verses 10-18. As she wept and wept her heart out over the disappearance of Jesus' body, the ***risen living body of Jesus arrives next to her. He is beside her.*** But like all the others she is not expecting a resurrection. She's not looking for a risen Jesus; she only wants his body back in order to anoint.

She desperately asks the stranger if he knows where the body of Jesus has been taken. Does he know? Can he help? Thinking he was simply the gardener, maybe he had seen something; maybe he knew something.

Then the voice – so familiar – personally calling out to her. "Mary". How many times had she heard that divine voice before? It was unmistakable.

Mary then turns quickly toward the person there in the garden and says with joyful amazement and wonder **"Teacher"**

She sees Jesus now. Mary fully recognises Jesus! Her Master is alive! She is the very first eye witness of the resurrection. Will her witness go on to be believed? Not at first, but eventually – yes – but only after the others had seen Jesus for themselves in the upper room later in the day.

It is not recorded that the male disciples apologised for having doubted Mary's testimony; but I like to believe they did later on. How could they not seriously apologise to her?

We have been looking at John's narrative today, but the first gospel to be written was Mark's. Mark wrote this; (*although not in the oldest manuscripts*)

*When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared **first** to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.” Mark 16:9*

How beautiful and how gracious of Jesus to reserve his first appearance as risen Lord to Mary Magdalene! What does that tell you about Jesus? How does that help your understanding of the Jesus you have come to know and love?

I will leave you to ponder on these questions and others that arise in your hearts and minds.

But Mary had now “**seen the Lord**” (v18), and she went off excitedly to tell the others.

This is what the aged apostle John remembered, cherished and faithfully recorded about himself and Mary Magdalene. They had stood at the cross together with Jesus’s mother. Both had unique reasons to think back with deep joy of that first Easter morning.

In the words of Graham Kendrick’s hymn;

O what a morning, O how glorious; sudden light has broken through...

My dear friends, let this story prepare you for your personal hope of seeing Jesus. Let this story fire up your desire to **live for him** who died and rose again for your salvation. May it provide a great spur and spring to your personal witness to others about the Jesus who **even now** lives in your heart. Is there anything greater or more precious than “Christ in you – the hope of glory?”

May the grace of the risen Lord Jesus, the love of the God our Father, and the blessing of the eternal Spirit be with you always. Amen

He has risen!

*Peter Clarkson
11th April 2020*

