The Resurrection of Christ
John 20:1-18

This might be a depressing way to start, but let me ask you: What's your attitude toward death? Because death certainly has an attitude toward you, doesn't it? It's coming - for each of us. The ultimate statistic - one out of one dies.

And as a result, at least in the West, we have a complicated relationship with it. Either we don't want to talk about it and we try and avoid thinking about it.

Or, increasingly, we say, 'hey, it's just a normal part of life' - when deep down we know it's not, and we resent it. Or we want to try and take control of it, and decide for ourselves when we die. But what's the result of that? A culture of death - in which a country like Switzerland has tragically led the way, and we're now faced with a situation where, in a country like Canada, one in every twenty deaths is at the hands of a doctor carrying a syringe.

Or probably for most of us, we just want to avoid it for as long as possible. And at one end, you have the crazy examples of the tech bros and what they're up to. But at the other end there are people like me, or you. Because my sports watch gives me my fitness age. And there's nothing better than when I've managed to push that age down by 6 months, because it tells me: I am getting younger by the day. And I post it on our family WhatsApp group, because you've got to tell people how fit you are, haven't you, or else they might not notice. To which Su says, 'darling, you're going to die one day.' 'Yeh but I can try and slow it down!'

But whether we want to delay it, or take control of it, or just not talk about it, none of us want death to have the last word, do we?

And today's passage tells us that right at the centre of Christianity is the answer to what we're all longing for, and it's better than a sports watch or a doctor carrying a syringe, because Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead.

And John, who's writing this, wants to convince you of that. And yet he doesn't give you a list of reasons why you should believe. Instead, he presents you with the historical fact of the resurrection, but embedded in the stories, and the lives and the emotions of those who were caught up in it.

So we're going to look at three things: there's a surprise for the skeptical, there's healing for the hurting, and there's a future for the fallen.

A Surprise for the Skeptical
Look at v1: 'Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark.' And Mary knows there's going to be a stone blocking the tomb, but she comes anyway, even in the dark, because she just wants to be close to Jesus.

And yet, for John, light and darkness have a symbolic meaning. Because as she arrives at the tomb it's not just that it's still dark, and the sun hasn't risen yet, it's that she's still in the dark. Because, John tells us, v1-2, she 'saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved [who is probably John himself], and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."'

So Mary sees that the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb - which is also the exit from death - has been moved, and she's surprised by that. Because it's not what she, or any of the disciples, were expecting.

And she only has one working hypothesis for who moved the stone. Verse 2, "*They* have taken the Lord." Who's the 'they'? Well she's probably thinking the Jewish or Roman authorities. And when she meets the man she thinks is the gardener, she's open to widening the possibilities: v15, "Sir, *if you* have carried him away, tell me…"

But however wide, or narrow, Mary's list of potential suspects, or explanations is, what's clear is that 'Christ has risen' is not one of them, is it? It doesn't even occur to her.

And if you're not yet a Christian, maybe that's true for you. That up until now, whether it's Christianity in general, or the resurrection of Christ in particular, you've got a working hypothesis, even if that's subconscious. But has it crossed your mind that this might actually be true?

And so as you see the stone rolled back, and the empty tomb, and see that that was as much a surprise for them as anyone, ask yourself, 'does your hypothesis really do justice to the evidence?'

Because that's the challenge Peter and John face. Mary goes and tells them, and v3-4, 'So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.'

And so John wants you, and all of history, to know not just that Jesus is risen, but that he won the Jerusalem Sunday morning park run, and that his fitness age was better than Peter's. And that's not just an amusing detail is it? It's an eyewitness detail, it's the kind of irrelevant-to-the-main-point detail that people who were there might include.

And when they get there, John peers into the tomb, but Peter goes in. And both of them see the grave clothes: v6-7: 'Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.'

And so the tomb is empty except for those cloths. And it's those cloths that get John thinking: v8, 'Then the other disciple [John], who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed.'

But what did he see? Or putting it another way, what did he *not* see? He did not see a body, but he did see the linen cloths Jesus body had been wrapped in. And over there was the head cloth. And he's thinking - 'Why? Why are there cloths but no body? Because that doesn't fit any of the hypotheses I can come up with.'

You see just a few days previously, back in chapter 11, John had been at the tomb of Lazarus, and heard as Jesus called Lazarus to come out, and watched as he came out. But how had he come out? Wrapped like a mummy: 'the man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth.' (John 11:44).

But here, Jesus' cloths are left, inside the tomb. But if the authorities had moved the body, why would they have left them? And if someone had stolen the body, why would they have left them? Because around this time, grave robbing was becoming such a problem that it eventually became a capital offence. But ask yourself, why were people robbing graves? Answer: for what the dead had been buried *with* or *in* - for stuff like these linen cloths and the expensive spices bodies were wrapped in. So if this grave had been robbed then there should either have been *nothing* there, *or* there should be a body but no cloths. So, why are there cloths but no body? And who did move this stone?

And as John is processing all that, it begins to dawn on him: the one explanation that fits what I am seeing with my eyes, is that the man I saw die, whose side I saw pierced, whose blood I saw flow, has risen from the dead. And unlike Lazarus, he's left the grave cloths behind, because he won't be needing them again. And so John tells us, 'he saw and believed'.

But again, it's not like John was expecting this, was he? He's as surprised as anyone by what he's seeing. Verse 9: 'for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.' So John's saying, it's not like we had everything worked out at this point, this was a process. But just like it had been dark, but dawn had come, so now faith is dawning.

And maybe that's true for you. Maybe you have questions and you know you don't yet have all the answers, but like John things are beginning to fall into place. And skepticism is beginning to be replaced by belief. And John would probably say, stick at it. Keep looking at the evidence and believe.

Because embedded in these accounts are other reasons to believe. After all, Mary's the first witness in a world where the testimony of women was not admitted in court. So why call her as your first witness if you're making this up? Why not have John or Peter encounter Christ first, or even better, men like Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus, men of social standing, and write them in if this is fiction. Why have Mary? Unless it was Mary.

Then there's the slowness of the disciples to believe at all. Because none of them come out of Jesus arrest, death, and resurrection smelling of roses, do they? Not least in the way they dismiss the women's reports of the empty tomb as idle talk. And yet now, they want you to believe what they struggled to believe: that the unbelievable has happened. If they were making this up, there might be more effective strategies, mightn't there.

But maybe, if you're skeptical, you read John's account, and then one of the other gospels and go, 'yeh but there are all these inconsistencies in who went to the tomb first, or in what order: and was it Mary on her own, or Mary with a bunch of other Marys?' Sure, but did you notice in v3 how she runs to Peter and John and says, '*we* do not know where they have laid him.' Whose the 'we'? Is Mary alone, or are there others with her and John just focused in on her? And so are these accounts *really* in conflict or is this just another example of what happens when you get multiple eyewitnesses telling their stories?

So if you're skeptical, be open to being surprised. Because the 'we', the race, the slowness to believe, the stone that's been moved and the cloths that remain, and the dawning realisation - all tell you, this has the ring of truth to it.

Healing for the Hurting

Now, if it was the grave cloths that caught John's eye, for Mary it's the angels. Verses 11-12, 'But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.'

Now, living in our materialist culture, you might consciously or subconsciously dismiss the idea of angels. But I want to suggest you reconsider. Firstly, in terms of global population, you are in a minority of those who do not believe. And that's just counting those who are currently alive. If, as GK Chesterton suggests in his book Orthodoxy you also count the dead - the Democracy of the Dead, he calls it, you are in a vanishingly small minority. And while that does not prove you wrong, it should at least give you pause for thought: is what you believe just based on culture rather than reason?

Secondly, are you so sure our secular culture *has* ruled the idea of an invisible realm out of court? Because just consider some of the top hits in film, TV, and books of the last few years: Lord of the Rings, Twilight, Harry Potter, Lucifer, or the endless films with superhero characters with superhuman powers. Or think of people's interest in near death experiences, or guardian angels or lucky charms. What are these appealing to, if they're not tapping into this innate sense we have that there is more to this world than we see?

But of course, it's not so much what Mary's encounters *inside* the tomb, as outside. They angels see Mary weeping and say to her, v13, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And they're not asking for more information are they? It's a gentle rebuke: woman, the time for weeping is over! Weeping might be appropriate for dark of the night, Mary, but dawn has come.

And then she turns and sees Jesus - except she doesn't see him. Or at least she doesn't recognise him. Is that because her eyes are full of tears, or it's still dark? Or is it that in some way his appearance is different? We're not told, are we. But what's clear is, he's a human, not an angel. She mistakes him for a gardener, not a cherub. *And* she is not expecting him.

And Jesus speaks to her and repeats the angels' question, v15, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Because in our weeping we're all seeking something or someone aren't we? Either we're grieving a loss and we wish with all our hearts it could be restored, or our hearts are hurting and we're longing for healing.

But what John's saying is, whatever the reason you're weeping, whatever the reason your heart is hurting, it's in the resurrection of Christ that you can find the thing that will wipe away your tears. That when Jesus asks Mary, 'why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?' It's in finding him that our tears can be stilled. Because in all our weeping it's ultimately Christ we're seeking.

You see, go back to v1, 'Now *on the first day of the week* Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.' And right back at the beginning of this gospel, John described Jesus as the eternal Word of God and that 'All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.' (John 1:3)? In other words, when you read the account of creation in Genesis 1 and God speaking light and dark, and sun and moon, and planets and stars, into being - it's Christ who's speaking that first day of the first week into existence.

But now, John says, a new day has dawned and a new week is starting. Because with the resurrection of Christ the new creation has begun.

And when you know that it can give you hope and purpose and endurance in the darkest and saddest of days. Because when Jesus asks her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" He's saying, 'Mary, don't you know what day it is?'

Because today is the day that the healing of hurts, and the righting of wrongs, and the wiping away of tears has begun. The day that death and the culture of death has been defeated. And in this life, we'll continue to experience grief and loss, but another day will come when the New Creation will be complete. And John sees it coming in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, as he sees the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven and as he hears the voice from the throne of God saying, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev 21:4)

And as Christ stands outside his tomb, he's the first fruits, the first beam of sunshine over the mountains at dawn, the first melting of ice that tells you winter is over, and the new creation has begun.

But of course Mary doesn't know any of that yet. She thinks he's the gardener. Verse 15, "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."

And this gardener *has* taken Jesus' body away - just not in the way Mary's thinking! And so he says to her, v16, "Mary."

Recently, I was listening to an interview with a guy who was recounting an experience he had when he was younger, in that confusing period after graduation when you don't know what to do with your life. And he'd gone along to a lecture given by a well known professor from another university, who he'd met briefly a few years previously. And at the end, he went up to the professor and said, 'er, you won't remember me but I'm…' at which point the professor interrupted him and said, 'I know who you are, you're so and so.' And the man said, you would not know what that did to me. To be known by a man you looked up to. And not just be known, but be named.

And here, Jesus doesn't make himself known to Mary with some great display of glory. He makes himself known by naming her. And in that moment her grief and despair dissolve into delight.

So whatever you're grieving, or why ever you're hurting, the gospel tells you, Christ is risen. All that is wrong will be put right. All that is hurt will be healed. And Christ knows you by name and he calls you by name.

A Future for the Fallen

Look at v17: 'Jesus said to her, "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."'

Now, who is it that Jesus is calling his brothers? The disciples, who just a couple of days ago, to a man, abandoned him or denied him. Who either fled when he needed them most, or denied ever having known him.

Now, if you've ever been let down by a friend, or worse felt like you've been stabbed in the back by a friend, it can be a relationship ending event, can't it. But for these guys, there's no doubt the relationship's ended. Because added to the grief of Jesus' death, is the grief of their failure.

And when you fail, either morally, or relationally, or in your career, it can feel like life is over. But Jesus' resurrection tells you, the only thing that's over is death - and the darkness of the night. And the hole you've fallen into is not a bottomless pit. It's one he reaches into, to lift you out.

You see back in chapter 15, he said to these disciples, "No longer do I call you servants… but I have called you friends." (15:15) But here, he goes further, and calls them brothers. Because now, through his death and resurrection, through his ultimate act of atonement for their sins and our sins, his Father has become their father, and his God, their God. And they have a future.

And so do you. If you're trusting Christ, but you know you've fallen, you're not an enemy, you're a friend. You're not a failure, you're a beloved brother, or sister of Christ. You're family, and you are loved.

And like Mary, that gives you a message. Verse 18, 'Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."' Because whether you're a skeptic who comes to realise, 'o boy, he really has risen from the dead', or someone who's hurting but you've found that Christ is what you're looking for, or if you've failed but experienced the grace of Christ and know you have a future in Christ, you've got a message to share.

And Mary is sent to the disciples with that message, and we're sent to the world. And today is the first day of the week. So let's go into the world - of the skeptics, the hurting, and the fallen, and take it to them.