

God Only Speaks to Sinners

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Date: 28 August 2022

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[0 : 00] Well, if you don't know already, Susie and I have had some happy news that we are expecting baby number two in February next year, and we are thrilled.

But it's fair to say when we found out that it was hard to believe, we took a test, and then we took another test. And finally, we saw before our very eyes that it was real.

But of course, you don't tell anyone, do you, until you see a bit more. We had our scan on Monday. And what's the first thing they look for on the scan?

Well, the fuzzy kind of gray pictures and blobs move around, don't they, until they see the heartbeat, a sign of life?

And I can testify, and Susie can too, that we have seen that there is a living baby in the womb. But here's the thing.

[1 : 10] How do you know that there's a baby? You can't see it. I could show you pictures, but it could be anyone's baby, as far as you were concerned.

How do you know? You can't see what I saw. How do you know it's true? Now, I'm not just saying this to share some news, but because today we're coming to John's account of the resurrection of Jesus.

And John is going to tell us that seeing is believing. Seeing is believing. But you say, well, we weren't there to see it. So how can I believe it?

Well, says John, there are three people who did see it. We have their eyewitness testimony. That's how we can believe and know that Jesus really rose from the dead.

Now, perhaps you're thinking, well, that sounds like a stretch. But the reason I wanted to start by telling you about our new baby is that this is how we operate not only as Christians when we come to the Gospels, but how everyone knows anything.

[2 : 24] How do we know how a heart works if we ourselves have not operated on a heart? Or how do we know what goes on in another country or another city if we have not been there ourselves?

Well, because someone has seen and they have told us or written for us what they saw and we weighed up what they said and we believed it. And that is exactly what John's telling us this morning as we come to his Gospel and his news of something that is much bigger and more relevant to you than a new baby, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

How do you and I know that Jesus rose from the dead? We didn't see it. We weren't there. But some people were there. And they saw.

And this is what they saw. And so the question John asked us is, do you believe what they saw? Seeing is believing.

That's right. The heart of what we read. Did you notice as we read, it's all about what these disciples saw that morning. Mary went to the tomb and saw, verse 1, that the stone had been rolled away.

[3 : 43] The other disciple got there and he looked in. In verse 5, Peter went in and saw, all building up to the breaking news, of course, in verse 18, Mary went to the disciples and what did she say?

I have seen the Lord. You can't tell this in English. But I have seen the Greek. And in fact, John uses four words in this passage for seeing.

It's as if he's saying they looked, they peered, they laid eyes on, they glimpsed. He's drawing us in to this visual sensory experience of what these people saw in the dawning light on the morning of the first day.

Why? Because, friends, seeing is believing, even if you weren't there. And John invites us this morning then to see with their eyes what they saw because, verse say, it was because of what he saw that he believed.

Okay, Christian faith is not a leap in the dark. No, it is based on things that have happened in this world. Real people have seen them, can tell us that they are true.

[5 : 04] Perhaps you have never thought of Christianity in quite that way before. Well, let John surprise you this morning. Okay, come and see then.

First, the empty tomb. The empty tomb. Just before our verses, if we had read them, we would have read about how Jesus' body had been taken down from the cross where he had died.

And people wrapped his body in linen and in spices, and he was laid in a tomb in a garden. The next day was the Passover.

But the day after that, this happened, says John, verse 1. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, and she saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

Okay, imagine seeing that. You go to the graveyard where somebody who you love has been laid to rest, and you get there, and you see that the grave has been dug up.

[6 : 08] Okay, imagine her shock. This is a crisis for Mary. Feel her distress. Yes, she runs to tell the others what has happened.

Peter and the other disciple, lots of people would say that disciple is this John who wrote this gospel, and she tells them his body is gone.

Now, what do you notice about what she assumes has happened? What does Mary think has happened? Verse 2, they have taken the body of the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him.

She assumes, doesn't she, foul play. Okay, someone has taken the body. Interesting, isn't it? That is exactly what their opponents, the people who put Jesus to death, thought that the disciples would do.

Okay, each side thought that the other would try to take the body. No one at this point suspects that Jesus has, in fact, risen from the dead bodily and walked out of the tomb.

[7 : 18] And yet, they are confronted with an undeniable fact that the tomb is empty. And that is important. So important, John wants us to check the evidence.

See, we run back, don't we, with Peter and John himself to take another look. You can kind of see it, as it were, playing on a cinema screen, can't you?

They're running, but John is pulling everything back into slow motion. Okay, they didn't just run, verse 4. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

Okay, notice John zooms in on all these details, a bit like a detective. And what does he want us to see? Well, some have wondered whether this race has any kind of spiritual lesson.

Is it to say that John is somehow a more devoted follower of Jesus than Peter? Something like that? Well, I think it's actually a bit simpler than that.

[8 : 22] That John, who wrote the gospel, is actually remembering in vivid detail these few minutes of his life as if they had happened. As it happened.

He's playing it back like a film reel in his head. Every detail. We do that, don't we? With really big historic events in our lives.

My mom was walking me home from school. And we crossed over at the lights. And we were walking around the pub on the corner when she told me that a plane had flown into the Twin Towers in New York.

Where were you when you heard that news? Sure, you can picture that in your head in vivid detail. I was only six. The news didn't really calibrate.

But it felt big. And somehow every detail of that news has wedged itself up here in a special way. We do that. We sweep up every fragment, don't we, of memory.

[9 : 24] Of times that feel big and important. And so it shouldn't surprise us to find an incredibly vivid memory in the writing of a man who ran to Jesus' tomb on the morning that he rose from the dead.

And any idea that John is somehow trying to outdo Peter here is blown up, isn't it, by what happens when they get there? John has to stop outside the tomb to catch his breath.

While Peter is the first one to go in. John bent over, looked in at the strips of linen lying there, but didn't go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb.

And so now on the scene, picture this. Got not one, not two, but three witnesses. Mary, Peter, John. And whereas before we just got a quick glimpse of the tomb, didn't we?

Now we get a good look around. Notice all the detail. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head.

[10:30] The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. He's describing in almost forensic detail how the grave clothes were laid out in Jesus' empty tomb.

It has the detail, doesn't it, the feel of firsthand experience, what he was there to see, because that is what it is. A really popular view of the Bible is that it has probably some vague connection with spiritual things.

Maybe it has some things to teach us, but it can't possibly tell us the truth of what really happened, can it, in history? Isn't it just more a collection of stories that people told that were kind of passed down generations?

Maybe things were blown up out of proportion, exaggerated. Maybe things got changed with every telling. Now maybe that is how you view the Bible today.

But let me ask you, with respect, whether you have read the Bible. Because what we have here, friends, is far too specific to be word of mouth.

[11:52] It's far too specific for anyone to bother inventing these details, nor is it obviously exaggerated. It sounds more like a witness statement than a fable, doesn't it?

And that is because it is a witness statement. It is John's firsthand experience, what he saw that day in the tomb, and it was empty.

Only the strips that had previously wrapped Jesus' body that is now gone lie there. So what do we do with that? Some of you know, before I began training for ministry, I did a degree in social anthropology.

For those of you who don't know that, it's just people studies. You watch people. And that's part of what sets anthropology apart. It's based on what's called participant observation.

And so kind of people watching. You be part of things. You see how it works. And then you write about it. And so in my essays when I was a student, if there wasn't enough just basic observation and detail and description of what I was writing about, I would get marked down.

[13:09] They would say, you're not giving enough evidence for the point that you're trying to make. Now, I would want to just get straight to the point. But what I learned was that if you're not clear on the evidence, well, you can make whatever point you want to make.

But it doesn't make it true. It doesn't make it believable or credible. So why is John's firsthand detailed description, observation in our Bibles in front of us today?

Well, not only because he's a good theologian, but because he is a good anthropologist. He is telling us in detail what he saw when he was there so that when he gives us the point, we know that he's not imagined it, invented it, so we believe him.

Okay, friends, the Bible, the resurrection, it's not a fable. It's not a myth. It's not a nice spiritual story about how we can overcome difficulties in life or reach a kind of higher spiritual plane.

It's not a vague hope that death is not the end. There was an empty tomb, says John. Jesus was dead and buried, and then he wasn't.

[14:34] And whoever we are, however we come, whatever we do with that, we cannot ignore it. If you don't believe Jesus physically rose from the dead and walked out of his tomb, well, what do you do with the empty tomb?

All that was left was the things that a grave robber would have been interested in, the grave clothes. Why would someone steal a body? At least of all the people who feared that his body might go missing.

The point is, friends, that it wasn't a nice thought for the day that made John believe that Jesus was the Son of God. It was the evidence of his eyes, verse 8.

He saw and believed. Seeing is believing. It wasn't even that he had read somewhere that this should happen or had to happen.

Verse 9, they didn't even understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead. He simply saw an empty tomb and believed what Jesus had said had to happen.

[15:39] So, friends, do you see? I'm not even asking, do you see with the eyes of faith? Do you see with the eyes of the people who were there?

We saw an empty tomb, says John. And no one since has been able to say otherwise. If anyone had said, well, here's a body, Christianity would have been dead in the water, never got out of the first century.

But no one ever has. Where is Jesus' body? Well, second, come and see. The occupied garden. The occupied garden. The two men go home, and Mary is left standing outside the tomb on her own. Now, as I say, today, we need simply to see, with the eyes of the apostles, that the tomb was empty and Jesus is risen.

But we're also going to see that, spoiler alert, next Sunday, and the Sunday after. Because John takes two chapters to give us four resurrection appearances.

[16:49] Now, apart from stacking up the evidence that Jesus is risen, what's unique about this gospel is that we get the personal encounters of Jesus with his disciples.

This time it's Mary. Next time it's Thomas. Time after that is Peter. It's something that makes John's gospel unique among the gospels in that way. And all these people stand in a slightly different relationship to Jesus.

What was the last thing Peter did before Jesus went to the cross? Well, he denied ever knowing him. Thomas, the last thing he does before Jesus comes to him raised from the dead is to doubt him.

But what is Mary doing when the risen Jesus comes to her? See that verse 11? What is she doing? She's crying. She's crying.

Why is she crying? Ask the angels. They've taken my Lord away, she says. She wants Jesus back. She is longing for her Lord. God, it's what makes this encounter unique.

[17:59] And I find it really moving how gently Jesus comes to her. This longing disciple who misses him. You just think, just hours ago, this man was raised in unspeakable glory.

His body given life with resurrection power. He is without doubt the most glorious and supreme being in heaven and on earth. And Mary turns around, verse 14.

She sees Jesus standing there, but doesn't know who he is. And of all things for Jesus to say to her at that point, what is it he says?

Why are you crying? Why are you crying? Who is it you're looking for? So tender. So merciful. But I also find it hard to imagine Jesus asking without laughter in his eyes.

It's kind of touching humor, isn't it? Especially in a chapter that's full of seeing. You hear his Mary longing for him with all of her heart, but through her tears, she cannot recognize him.

[19:10] Until, of course, he says her name, Mary. Mary. And then she sees, this is not the gardener, but this is the longing of her heart, the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

How do we know it really was Jesus? Or how did she know? Because he called her by name. You remember what we heard earlier in our service from John 10.

Remember what he said, the true shepherd, the good shepherd, what does he do? He calls his own by name. And his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

Jesus speaks, and the veil drops from before Mary's eyes when she hears him speak her name. This is the real Jesus. And once Mary has seen, she can't unsee him.

She runs to the disciples. I've seen the Lord. So see then, friends, the tomb is empty, but the garden is occupied. His body wasn't lying inside the tomb because he was standing outside the tomb.

[20:18] Now, if you're still not convinced today, okay, please don't just draw a line onto this. As I say, we're coming back to this next week, and in particular, a man who really struggled and who doubted that Jesus could rise from the dead.

So if you're not convinced today, please come back next week and Thomas will help you and speak to you. But while we're here with Mary, there's something that we need to see, something wonderful about how Jesus comes to his longing disciples.

Okay, as Christians, what does the resurrection do for us? Well, what it says is this, the resurrection of Jesus meets the deepest longing of his people throughout all ages.

Okay, you're going to need your Bible open for this. Okay, put your glasses on if you've taken them off a second. And just follow this with me. Okay, what does John call the place where the tomb is?

Okay, have a glance at 19, verse 41, where he says the place Jesus was crucified was a garden, and in the garden was a new tomb. So we're in a garden, okay?

[21:32] And what in this garden is Mary called by the angels and the Lord? Okay, verse 13, woman. Verse 15, she's called woman.

And the final piece of the puzzle, who does Mary think Jesus is. The gardener, or literally, the keeper of the garden.

So build this picture up in your mind and follow it back, back, back. Where have we heard before in our Bibles about a woman in a garden who has lost her Lord?

Where have we heard before a woman in a garden who no longer knew intimately the keeper of the garden, but only the shame and the heartbreak of her loss? Okay, are we all there in the garden of Genesis chapter 3?

See, it's as if John has taken us back to that first garden and the beginning of humanity's longing for the promised for the promised redeemer from sin and darkness and death.

[22 : 41] And Mary can taste all that, can't she, as she stands outside of the tomb in the hours before dawn as she cries for her crucified Lord, the sin and darkness and death that is hung as a veil over humanity since the fall?

But John has taken us back almost as if to rewrite the story. What if he said the keeper of the garden had come, a true Adam to keep the woman from losing her Lord?

What if the keeper of the garden had come and crushed the head of the serpent there and then and stopped sin in its tracks and saved the woman and redeemed humanity from the curse?

Well, on the morning of the resurrection, John says it's not what if anymore, it's he has. A new true Adam, the gardener, has risen in glory to seek and save his longing bride to crush sin and death and darkness.

He is risen to meet the longing of all those who have hoped in the promise of his coming throughout the centuries of history who have longed for him as they burnt the offerings and sacrifices on the altar as they waited with tears for a redeemer to take away our sins.

[24 : 07] See, brothers and sisters, Jesus rose from the dead to rewrite the story of our lives and the lives of his people. and if we, like Mary, recognize him and know him and believe in him, we are no longer left, are we, longing for a Lord who is not here in sin and death and darkness, though we are looking into the loving eyes of a Lord who died and rose again and has come to take away our sin as far as the east is from the west and to put us right with God.

See, this meeting, it's not just for Mary, is it? Look, verse 17, Jesus says, don't hold on to me, go instead and tell my brothers I am going to my father and your father, my God and your God.

Go and tell the rest of my people, he says, that I am going back to your father and your God, plural. Okay, see what he has done?

We believe in Jesus and his death and resurrection while he has made his God our God, his father our father.

I wonder if that is lost on us sometimes. How is it that we can call God our father? Have we forgotten that God is not our father if Jesus Christ is not our Lord?

[25 : 38] Have we forgotten that God is not our God unless Christ had come to die to save us from being enemies of God? But in his resurrection, the Lord Jesus says, tell those who believe in me, tell them this, I have returned to the one who is my God and your God, my father and your father.

See the great breach that we created with God through our sin is bridged by the resurrection life of Jesus so that the deepest longing of our hearts ultimately to be right with our God and creator again is met when we put our trust in him.

This is eternal life, he says, that they know the true God and Jesus Christ who he sent. and that eternal life of intimate personal relationship with the living God is ours the moment that we lay eyes on Jesus and believe in him.

and that is a huge claim, isn't it? That is life-changing to say our eternity hangs on our response. Will we or won't we believe in Jesus? This morning, if that seems too big a thing, too big a claim, too unbelievable, if it doesn't feel quite real, well, remember this.

[27 : 09] The tomb was empty and the garden was occupied and people saw that and they have testified to that in detail.

They have staked their lives and eternity upon what they saw with their eyes. I have seen the Lord, says Mary, and it is on that seeing that John invites us to stake our eternity will we believe what they saw and will we put our trust in the one whom they saw raised from the dead?

Friends, do you see him? And seeing, do you believe in him? For that believing is eternal life through the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ for all who have longed for his appearing.

Let's pray together. gracious father, how we thank you that we can come to you and call you our father.

Our father, we praise you and we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ who died and is alive and that through him we are your sons and daughters.

[28 : 26] We are adopted as your children. Father, help us, we pray, never to lose sight of the precious gift of your son and what he has done to make us yours.

Father, we thank you that he is raised. And Lord, for those of us who struggle with that, Lord, how we pray that by your spirit you would open our eyes to see him.

Lord, those who struggle even seeing to believe in him, Lord, we pray that you would soften hearts to put trust in the risen Lord. And Father, for those of us who do see and believe in him, Father, how we pray that we would know and live our eternal life, that each day, Lord, we would love to be with you, the living God and Jesus Christ whom you sent.

Father, we thank you for the gift of eternal life and how we pray that you would help us to live it as we go from here, for we ask in his precious name. Amen.