

## wHiLe iT wAs sTiLL dArk

By Dr. Dave Neale, Ph.D.

Let's look forward a bit before I come to our text for the day. Next week it will be a pleasure to have Rev. Ron Corcoran in the pulpit, giving me a week off. Normally, in the weeks following Easter the lectionary turns to the Book of Acts, probably my favourite book of the Bible to preach and teach from. But, this year, I want to depart from the lectionary to do a series I was going to do for Epiphany (after Christmas).

I'm calling it the ***We Believe Series***, and in six messages I will attempt to unpack the Nicene Creed and, hopefully, draw us back and back to the basic beliefs, the core, central ideas of our faith. I'll begin with an introduction to the series on May 1 exploring what belief means in a modern context.

This could occupy a month of Sundays, but I'll share some of the challenges I think we face as modern believers. Then in the next five messages there will be one on God the Father, two on Jesus the Son, one on who He is and one on what he did, one on the Holy Spirit and one on the Church universal.

Consideration of the Creed serves an important basis for us as a community of faith to return to the basics in our beliefs and thinking, and in our preaching and teaching. So I hope you'll look forward to that with me and join us in May.

Now to our text for the day, John 20:1-18.

All the gospels agree in the most important points about the events of that momentous morning. In my office I have a *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*. It lays out the four gospels in a parallel so you can see how each writer treats any given saying or event in the gospel. Generally, all four gospels agree on the main points: who discovered the empty tomb – Mary Magdalene and Mary, mother of James, Peter and the “other disciple” of John, presumably a self-reference.

All depict a bodily, physical resurrection of the Lord Jesus. All report the presence of angels at the tomb and then the appearance of the Lord himself. All indicate that this happens early on the morning of the first day of the week, the day after the sabbath.

A close reading shows there are differences too. Notably, the first 18 verses of John 20, our passage for today, do not appear in any of the other gospels. And it does have the feeling of a unique first-person report. The interesting detail of the foot-race to the tomb, run by the fleet-footed disciple, presumably John. There is the charming detail about the ***...napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself*** (v 7).<sup>1</sup>

The gospels are of one accord in this crucial respect: Jesus' bodily resurrection is the foundation of our belief in his unique status and role in history. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:

***For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.***<sup>2</sup>

***Easter is the Completest Thing***

The whole idea of Easter is the completest thing because its reality encompasses the whole range of God's relationship with humanity.

It contains the monumental themes of *creation*, the *fall of humanity* and the *ultimate redemption of humanity*, that is, victory over death.

### **Creation**

We usually associate our images of the resurrection with the sun gleaming on the horizon, the dawning a new day.

Notice that John's account is different from the other gospels in that he says that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb **while it was still dark**.<sup>3</sup> I think this accounts for Mary's lack of recognition of the Lord. She assumes he is the gardener when she first peers toward him.

This darkness has a metaphorical significance for John, that's why he mentions it. He tells us in v 9 that ... **they did not yet know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead**. The disciples were yet in "darkness."

And if we reflect on the unspeakable grief of those intimate followers, whose lives were shattered on long sabbath day of following his death, and the sleepless night that followed, we will have some inkling of the depth of the darkness that shrouds the tomb on the Sunday morning.

But for John nothing is without layered meaning, and this darkness is real, but it is a metaphor for the spiritual darkness represented by the cold, lifeless body they expected to find in that tomb.

John, I believe, is thinking about the biblical narrative in Genesis 1, where darkness reigns at creation.

In the beginning, ...**darkness covered the face of the deep** in the first sentence of the Bible. Out of the waters of chaos, in Genesis, God brought forth an order. And at the separation of land from waters, still, yet all was in darkness... *Then*, He set **lights in the dome of the sky... to rule over the day and over the night, to separate the light from the darkness**.

And it is in this same darkness that John begins his account of the gospel in the first chapter. Again, in conscious emulation of Genesis 1:1, John 1:1 says: **In the beginning was the Word...** and in that darkness theme he says, **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it**.

And as that day dawns the reality of the earth changing event becomes clear. The shift from night to day is real, but it is also a metaphor for our realization of the victory of life over death that day.<sup>4</sup> It is the glorious realization that Christ has been raised. And creation has been reborn. The darkness shall never overcome the light again.

As Isaiah **For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind** (Isaiah 65:17).

The Easter story is the story of creation fulfilled and reborn in absolute purity.

### **The Fall of Humanity**

You might be surprised to hear that there really isn't much in the synoptic gospels about the atoning nature of Jesus' death. In fact, we have the most explicit statement:

***For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom*** [literally, a means of release] ***for many*** (Mark 10:45//Matt 20:28; Luke and John do not contain it).<sup>5</sup>

John's gospel has a fuller sense, certainly, of the idea that Christ died ***for our sins***, but it fell to Paul's to make this supreme contribution to Christian theology; if you read Romans 4-6 you will see his argument there. ***For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...while we were yet sinners... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life*** (Ro 5:6-11).

That is, by his resurrection from the dead. The resurrection is our only hope. And we need nothing in addition to it. The fallenness of all humanity is redeemed by means of it.

### ***Redemption***

As Paul says, ***The last enemy to be destroyed is death*** (1 Cor 15:26).

We are a funny bunch, we Christians. We gather and read ancient texts; we believe in a God no one has ever seen. We believe in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, not because we have proof, but only because we accept the testimony of those who say they saw it. We baptize people into the faith; we claim to walk in the Holy Spirit.

But as it is written, ***“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”*** -- (1 Cor 2:2; Isaiah 64:4).

Yes, we believe. And you can believe. You don't have to understand all this. I don't really. But you can come a step closer to God, and God will come a step closer to you. This is the assurance.

Paul was perfectly aware of how crazy this all sounds, calling the cross “foolishness” in the eyes of the world (1 Cor 1:18).

***If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.*** (1 Cor 15:13)

What does the resurrection mean for us? Here is what Jesus said about that in the Gospel of John... ***Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life*** (John 5:24).

Jesus says ***Very truly I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life*** (John 6:47). To reflect on just what “believe” means, join us for our We Believe Series beginning in May. But for the moment, let's observe the present tense of the participle and verb (ὁ πιστευων ἔχει ζωην αἰώνιον), that is, the one who believes as a matter of ongoing life choice (not will believe or had believed) has (not will have), eternal life. ***The kingdom of God is within you*** as Jesus said.

Easter is the completest thing. This morning we gather for baptism. What joy!

### ***Benediction***

And now, for us for whom death has been swallowed up in victory, thanks be to God who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. May your life this week be radiant with the presence of

the Risen Lord. Hosanna! Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> And there are other differences between the accounts, such as in the places, the witnesses and the order of appearances (see 1 Cor 15:5-7). This note about the napkin comes up in discussion of the Shroud of Turin, the authenticity of which is not to be accepted.

<sup>2</sup> See also Acts 10:34-43.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 28:1 “toward dawn”; Mark 16:2 “early on the first day”; Luke 24:1 “early dawn”.

<sup>4</sup> In verse 9 of our chapter we have this: ***Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.***

<sup>5</sup> There is the testimony of Acts: ***All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name*** (Acts 10:43).