

John 20:16

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[0 : 00] For a short time this evening, let's turn back to the chapter we read, John chapter 20. And if you take our takes from the words that we find in verse 16.

John chapter 20, verse 16. Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him, Rabboni, which is to say, teacher.

Throughout scripture we see many different encounters with Christ. You remember Christ when he encountered Zacchaeus in that tree and he called him down.

You remember also when Christ met the woman of Samaria at that well and he got into conversation with her by asking her for a drink.

You also remember when the woman with the issue of blood met Christ and had that encounter by touching the hem of his garment.

[1 : 20] An encounter that was to be life-changing for her. Well, tonight before us here we have yet another encounter with Christ.

This time it is between Mary Magdalene and her Saviour. This is an encounter that I'd like us to look at briefly for a short time this evening.

And I'd like us to do so just by looking at it under two short headings. A faithful follower and a risen Saviour.

Firstly then, let's look at this faithful follower, Mary Magdalene. Let's remind ourselves who this woman was. Well, she was the one from whom seven devils were cast out.

And the one who showed her thankfulness and her faithfulness to the Lord for doing this by being with him at any given moment.

[2 : 22] She was the one who was a peasant at the cross when he was crucified right before her very eyes. She was the one who would have no doubt witnessed those crows when they shouted out, Crucify him! Crucify him!

She would no doubt have heard the terrible crows of the Saviour when he shouted out on that cross, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

She no doubt would have witnessed the darkness, the earthquake, and finally the silence of the death of Christ.

This was a woman who was faithful to the one who had changed her life beyond all recognition.

This evening I'd like us to pick up the story in verse 11 where we find Mary weeping at the tomb of Christ following his death.

She'd come to the tomb early in the morning. We read in another gospel that she came with spices to anoint his body. No doubt she was seeking some kind of closure, some kind of comfort, and so she wanted to come and to carry out this last ritual to her beloved Saviour.

[3 : 45] Nothing unusual here, you might say. Even now we often see friends and family of loved ones going to a graveside after they've been buried and perhaps putting flowers down and paying respect.

This visitation to Christ's grave, to his tomb, this is a visit that would prove to be anything but normal. Because when Mary got to the tomb, you can just imagine her making her way there in anticipation of what she was about to do.

And as she got there, as she saw the tomb, she saw that in fact the stone had been rolled away.

And you remember that this was a tomb on the side of a rock.

It wasn't a grave like we would know a grave to be. There was a large rock covering the mouth of the tomb. And so when she got to it, the rock had been moved.

A rock that would have been so heavy to move. And in a panic, she ran. She ran to get Peter and John because she simply couldn't believe what was before her eyes.

[4 : 56] They were not going to focus too much tonight on their reaction, but we do read that they came back with her. And when they saw what was before their eyes, they didn't hang about.

They went back to their homes. But Mary remains. Here she is outside this open tomb, weeping at the fact that as far as she was concerned, someone had taken her saviour.

Because as she peered into that tomb, she saw that this tomb not only was open, but it was empty. She began to sob.

Her heart was broken. And this was a constant unrestrained sobbing. That's how it comes through in the original language. Sammy Rutherford said that missing Christ is indeed the most bitter ingredient that the Christian has to drink in his cup of sorrow.

And so it was for Mary Magdalene. She had come to anoint the body of her saviour. And he wasn't there. What had happened to him?

[6 : 11] Where was he? All sorts of things were no doubt passing through her mind. And all she could do was sob, was to cry. She was missing him, even in his death.

And you know, I think I agree with Samuel Rutherford that missing Christ can indeed be one of the most bitter things that can come into the experience of the Lord's people.

We can have so many different trials in life. Perhaps you're going through such a trial at the minute. But none so much as a trial of knowing that distance between us and our saviour.

None so much as a trial of perhaps feeling that he isn't even there. Friends, there's nothing like the comfort and the peace of God.

And you know, the strange thing is that Christ had many times told his followers that indeed, he must die, he must rise again.

[7 : 22] And so in life of this, we would assume that this empty tomb wouldn't be a surprise to Mary. But it was. She was, of course, a faithful follower of Christ.

But yet she lacked so much understanding. She heard the words of Christ. Yet she, like so many others, she couldn't really grasp the reality of what had happened.

The reality that he was to die and that he was to rise again. And isn't that, in a sense, how we are? It's so easy for us to condemn characters in Scripture for their behaviour.

How did she not realise that this was to happen? But isn't it true that we have Scripture in front of us and all too often there's so much about what we read that we simply don't understand?

When we think of the second coming, when we think of the end times, yes, he has told us here. But yet, I feel there's so much that we haven't grasped and so much that we won't grasp until he comes again.

[8 : 29] And also, as well as in his word, there can be so much in our own providence that leaves us asking questions. So much in our providence that we just do not understand.

But yet, like Mary, we continue to follow. Although Mary was mourning, although she hadn't really grasped what was happening, we can see here, nonetheless, that her love for her Saviour was so, so evident.

In spite of all the disillusionment and despair of Christ's followers at this point, they all loved their Master and they couldn't help but think of him and grieve about him.

Here in Mary, we have then a great example of love. A love that brought her to this tomb along with those spices. A love that gave her that desire to anoint the body of her beloved, even in her state of uncertainty.

She was so determined to do all that she could for her Saviour because of all that he had done for her. Isn't it true, friends, tonight that we are here and we are in Christ, that in many ways he has cast from us seven devils, that in many ways we have so much to give him thanks for.

[9 : 57] How then do we respond to all that he has done for us, even in the uncertainty of life? Mary stoops down and she looks into the tomb.

It's as if she can't quite believe what had happened. She's taking that second look just to almost confirm to herself that what she saw was right.

You can just imagine her clutching at straws as we so often do when we get bad news, when we realise that something has gone terribly wrong.

I'm sure many of us can identify with that during times of immense grief. But Christ isn't there. The tomb is empty.

And instead, what we read is that Mary is faced with two angels. We know from the accounting mark that at least one of these angels is in the form of a man.

[11:01] These angels speak to her. Woman, why are you weeping? They ask. Now, of course, to Mary it was so obvious to her why she was weeping.

Yet the fact is that this question that had been asked to her, in fact, highlighted her own ignorance. Because the fact, friends, that the tomb was empty, it wasn't a reason for Mary to weep.

The fact that the tomb was empty should have been a reason for Mary to rejoice, to give thanks. Because this was proof that Christ had risen triumphant over the grave.

Had Mary come to that tomb and had the stone been over the tomb with Christ still in it, that would have been cause for her to weep. Because it would have been a dead saviour she was coming to anoint.

Why do you weep? They asked her, to which she replies, They've taken away my Lord and I don't know where they've laid him.

[12:12] At this point she is still so bound to the physical. She cannot comprehend what exactly has happened. She cannot see the significance of this empty tomb.

I wondered if we can identify tonight with Mary's tears. It's true to say that we are not grieving over the missing physical body of Christ.

But surely we ought to mourn. Ought we not to cry tears of grief that Christ is so evidently missing? That he is missing from the lives of our husband or wife or son or daughter or mother or father?

Should we not mourn the fact that he is missing from our workplace?

Should we not be in despair over the fact that he does not play such a prominent role in our community as he once did? Should we not indeed weep over the fact that his day and his laws are being desecrated day after day?

[13:27] Friends, we may, as the Lord's people, we may even have tears, as I mentioned earlier, over the fact that for one reason or another he is not drawing close to us as he once did.

Perhaps due to our own disobedience or our hardness of hearts, we are feeling him so far away. Friends, these are things to mourn for.

But even more so is the fact that if you are here tonight and he is completely missing from your life, he has never even been part of your life, that is the case tonight.

You ought to mourn. You ought to weep. And just then maybe he becomes aware of someone standing behind her. It was Christ, but we read that she didn't know it.

Perhaps she saw the expression on the faces of the angels that alerted her to the fact that someone was behind her. Perhaps maybe she heard footsteps coming behind her that told her that someone was there.

[14:31] Or maybe it was that the Holy Spirit prompted her to turn around at that moment.

Personally, I would rather think that it was that the Holy Spirit prompted her to turn around at that moment to make her aware of the fact that Christ was there.

And so we see that Mary, this faithful follower, comes face to face with her Saviour. In many ways, this expedience that so vividly echoes what takes place in the lives of those who come to know Christ.

Is it not so that the Holy Spirit prompts us? Perhaps gently, perhaps in a more forceful manner, the Holy Spirit prompts us to turn away from our sins in that true and right spirit of repentance, so that we see Christ face to face?

She didn't know him.

Others have said that perhaps the Lord kept that from her at this point. But do you not think that it could be that there was something different in Christ's face?

[16:22] Something supernatural that had occurred that had led him to not be recognized by her? Yes, he was human. Yes, he was human. Yes, he was human. He was still man.

But he was different. Let's not forget, friends, that before the cross, Christ was a suffering sin-bearer. He was a man of sorrows.

He was acquainted with grief. His whole life had been characterized by suffering and pain and sorrow of an unimaginable kind.

suffering that no doubt would even have been visible on his face, especially on that cross. Maybe Mary's last vision of Christ had been on that cross, or she would have seen him as the prophet Isaiah has seen his countenance, his face that had been so marred beyond all recognition.

But now things were different. Now he had conquered the devil and sin. He had satisfied the justice of God, and no longer was he weighed down by all the many burdens and fearful enemies that he

had had to endure in the past.

[17:41] Surely then it's not unfair to say that many didn't recognize Christ because his face had been gloriously transformed. Then he spoke to her, Woman, why are you weeping?

Who are you seeking? Aren't those words so encouraging? Here we have this distraught follower of Christ at her wood's end, looking desperately, searching for her Saviour, and here he is, right in front of her.

Why are you weeping? He cares for her tears. He desires to comfort her in the same way that he desires, even tonight, to comfort each and every one of his children.

Yes, we can be distraught. We can be in the depths of despair. We might have lost a loved one. We may be having problems in our family that maybe no one else knows about.

Perhaps we're having financial difficulties, or we're struggling with our health, or even with our faith, and we're desperately looking for God.

[19:02] But in it all, we just cannot find him. Friends, doesn't this show us, this account that we have before us, that quite often he's there, just like he was in front of me.

He's there, and we don't even recognize him, or we don't even realize it. Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you seeking?

Christ in this question shows me that it's because she's looking for a dead Jesus. That's why she's weeping. Her confusion has led her to look for the wrong thing in the wrong place, and her answer only confirms this.

Sir, if you had borne him hence, meaning if you had carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, I will take him away. She still doesn't know that this is Christ.

She still cannot see him for who he is. She still hasn't understood that the resurrection has taken place. But yet, in her own faithful way, she is still seeking after him.

[20:17] She still continues to show her love for him. And when you think of it, here Mary is offering to do, without even thinking, to do the impossible.

This woman is offering to take that body away on her own, something that would have been impossible for her to do. This was love offering to do the impossible, as love so often does.

Friends, isn't that such an example to us as the Lord's people as to how we ought to serve our Lord, that nothing would be too great for us? And I say that to myself also.

With Mary, he detected a seeking heart. And you know, he came and he responded to this woman's plight. You might find yourself like Mary tonight, in a dark tomb, scrabbling in the darkness of this world, looking for Christ.

You might be seeking him, as I mentioned earlier, but you might be finding that you just cannot find him. Perhaps you've been seeking him year after year after year, and still nothing.

[21:41] Well, friends, you continue to seek him. But as you do so, ask yourself the question, am I truly seeking my Lord? Am I looking for him where he is to be found?

Maybe he wasn't. Am I in his word at any given opportunity? Am I with his people in his house? At every chance I get, so that I can hear his word?

Friends, don't give up. You keep seeking, because if there is seeking on your part, there is almost certainly seeking on his part. He can hear your cries.

He can hear your sobs. And he promises to come to the door of the tomb that you find yourself in tonight, and to provide that way of escape.

Mary then turns away from this man who she thinks is a gardener, obviously turning back to refocus on that empty grave.

[22:52] She wasn't really interested in this man that was before her, because as far as she could see, he didn't have the answer she was looking for. All she wanted to do was to find Jesus.

But how ironic is it that in actual fact he had found her? Little did she know that, yes, he was a gardener, but here right before her very eyes was a divine gardener.

He was the cultivator of souls, the one who could not only just plant a seed of grace in her heart, but make it grow.

And then, that great revelation, Mary. It was at this point that everything changes for this woman, this faithful follower, who by this one word that was more powerful than any sermon realized that here, right in the front of her very eyes, was the one who she had been looking for.

That brings us to our second point, the risen Saviour. Christ reveals himself tomorrow by speaking personally.

[24 : 13] His word is so powerful. He calls her by her name. And it's not until he calls her by her name that she recognizes who he is.

And you know, even although she had got it so wrong, even although she had misunderstood what had happened to Christ, even although she couldn't comprehend who he was, he nonetheless saw a genuine, bold, and heartfelt determination on her part.

And he honoured her desire to honour him. Friends, what an encouragement and exhortation that is for us to daily look for Christ, to search the scriptures, even when we don't always understand what they say, that we would search them, that we would search them in anticipation of Christ revealing himself to us.

then we hear her responding. Her response is simple, yet so powerful.

He calls her Mary, and she responds, Raboli, meaning teacher or master.

[25 : 38] all of a sudden, Mary could see Christ for who he was. She could see that right before her eyes was the one who had taught her so much in the past, the one with whom she had enjoyed so many times of blessed fellowship.

Can you just imagine how she felt? She was sure that he was dead, but here he was alive, right in front of her very eyes. And in the twinkling of an eye, her world goes from one of mournful sadness to joy and relation.

And isn't that what happens to us when the power of God calls us by our name? Our world changes. Our world changes beyond all recognition.

Here, this insignificant woman, Mary Magdalene, and she is the first of countless millions to be brought face to face with the resurrected Christ.

You know, there's encouragement for us in that. How encouraging that he chose to reveal himself to this ordinary, everyday woman, this sinner saved by grace.

[27 : 07] What a picture of God's love this is. Friends, he is no respecter of status, of persons, of previous sins.

He doesn't care who you are, what your standing is in this community. He's not looking for you to be anyone in society. No, he asks us to seek him just as we are.

And you know, without this great revelation that we have before us tonight, the gospel would indeed be in vain. Had Christ not revealed himself to this one woman, I might as well leave this pulpit and go home.

we wouldn't be worshipping the living, resurrected God. We would be worshipping a God who was a dead God. We would be worshipping a God that so many tonight in this world are worshipping.

A God whom we cannot communicate with. But he revealed himself to her. 1 Corinthians 15 verses 14 and 17 tells us that if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is also in vain and you are yet in your sins.

[28 : 35] You see, the resurrection is the stone that holds up the arch of the gospel. It was the late John Stolt who said that Christianity in its very essence is a resurrection religion.

The concept of resurrection lies at its heart. If you remove it, Christianity is destroyed. You know, the resurrection, this encounter with Christ that we have before us, it is evidence tonight to us that we can confidently come and boldly worship a God who lives.

you can just imagine the scene before us here. Mary is overjoyed. She is reunited with her Saviour. She had been searching for him and now he is here. And you know, there is no greater joy for you or for me than when we realise that Christ is before us, when he reveals himself to us, when he allows us to have that sweet communion with him once again.

And you know, all Mary can do and you can see why all she can do is embrace him. She never wants to let him go again. And when we go through a period in our Christian lives when we are perhaps struggling and all of a sudden Christ speaks to us in his word, we want that moment to last.

[30 : 12] We never want to let it go because it is so, so sweet to us. And he says to her, touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to the Father.

she was wanting things to be as they were before. She was wanting that fellowship to be reinstated with Christ as she had enjoyed in days gone by.

But he tells her to wait. He tells her to wait until he has ascended to be with the Father. I don't think we can say that Christ objected to be physically touched.

We read later on in the chapter that he says to Thomas who was doubting, reach your finger here and look at my hands and reach your hand here and put it into my side.

But no doubt Mary is perhaps thinking, as I said, that Christ is going to stay with her, that things would go back as they once were. But things have changed.

[31 : 20] He's telling her that yes, their fellowship would be resumed, but it would be far richer and more blessed than ever before. This would be a spiritual communion with the risen and ascended Lord, the same communion that you and I enjoy even now.

But you know, the story doesn't end there. Yes, Mary had this encounter with the risen Saviour. Yes, he died, he rose again and he ascended to be with the Father. All that is true, but yet there is more. In a few weeks we're once again coming up to the communion season in our island and during such precious times of communion, I'm sure we're all familiar with the words prior to the elements being dispensed.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. You see, our communions as we know them here, they are but a temporary arrangement because if we are here tonight and we're in Christ, we are looking for that greater day, a day where we will enjoy unbroken, sinless, eternal communion with our heavenly Father, another day when all the tombs, all the graves will open, and a day when the dead in Christ will rise first that great and glorious resurrection day.

[33 : 11] Question 38 in the shorter catechism asks, what benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection? And I love the answer that we have here.

At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

What a thought. Maybe thought that she would have Christ there with her, but what she was to get would in fact be so much better.

And what a thought for you and for me tonight that we too will hopefully come face to face with our risen saviour never ever to part again when we see him and we will be like him.

If you're yet to know what it is to be a follower of the risen saviour, you keep looking for him and you don't give up until you find him.

[34 : 24] you keep looking for him and don't give up until you hear him call you by your name. Dear friends, my greatest desire as I part from you here tonight is that your eyes would be opened so that you too would fall down before that risen saviour with that word of realisation upon your lips.

Rabbone, that he would be your Lord and your God. Amen. We pray that he would raise these few thoughts to us.

We'll conclude