

Investigate the Mystery
Part Two. The Gospel Accounts of What Happened After
April 9, 2023

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If you want to wrestle with the Christian faith, here's a good place to start.

The incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus: that person, Jesus, unlike any other person who has ever lived, and those three historical events, also without parallel, stand at the center of the Christian faith.

The incarnation. The riddle of the occupied womb. There was a child in the womb of a woman who had never been with a man. Where did it come from?

The crucifixion. The riddle of the occupied cross. There was a man on the cross that didn't belong there, and shouldn't have been there. Why was he there?

And the resurrection. The riddle of the unoccupied tomb. There should have been a body in the tomb but there wasn't one. Where did it go?

Christianity stands or falls on these three events. If they're false, the faith collapses. But if they're true . . . well, that potentially changes everything, doesn't it?

The first of those, the mystery of Jesus' birth, we investigated at Christmas. The second – the mystery of his death – we explored last Sunday. And the third – the mystery of what happened three days after Jesus died – we explore today.

So let's walk through the account in John's gospel of what happened three days after his body was put in the tomb.

Incidentally, you may have wondered why the bible talks about this happening three days later. If you do the math, you realize this is hardly thirty-six hours after Jesus was placed in the tomb.

Sounds like a mistake . . . until you realize that this is just a different convention for counting days, just like Europeans have a different convention for counting stories in a building. It all depends on your starting point. For the ancient Hebrew people, you began with the day you were in, and then the next day began at dusk, not at dawn. So – Friday, Saturday, Sunday – three days.

John 20.1-2

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she

came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

John 20.3-5

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, [but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.]

Eugène Burnand, *Peter and John Running to the Sepulchre*,



I've always loved this painting by **Eugène Burnand, *Peter and John Running to the Sepulchre***, ever since I first saw it in the Musée d'Orsay.

Mary runs to the disciples. Now the disciples run back to the tomb. Eagerness, hope, consternation, and fear are all written on their faces as they run in the breaking dawn light to see what has happened.

John 20.3-5

[So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.] Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.

John 20.6-8

Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

What do they see that convinces them?

First, the yards and yards of linen strips that had been tightly bound around Jesus' body were lying there, still in the shape of the body, but the body was gone. And second, they saw the cloth that had been tied around the jaw folded and set to one side.

There was no good earthly explanation for what they saw. Certainly this wasn't the work of a grave robber, who would have ripped off the cloth strips in search of jewelry and then left the body. As far as they were concerned there was only one good explanation for what they saw.

John 20

¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Which leaves us to focus on the stories of two individuals at the center of the unfolding story in John 20, both of whom were grappling with what actually happened and what to make of it.

John tells their stories in parallel ways. One is the first and the other is the last he appears to in this story. Jesus suddenly appears to them both in similar ways. One he invites to touch him and the other he asks not to touch him. And they both respond in similar ways.

Both are meant to guide us in our own wrestling as we try to figure out who this Jesus is and what it means to follow Jesus without the benefit of his physical presence.

Mary

The first is Mary Magdalene, one of the better known of Jesus' closest followers.

Unfortunately, her identity has been a source of considerable confusion ever since two things happened.

First, there has been a lot of confusion about Mary in our culture as a result of the gnostic books, written over a hundred years after the gospels, that presented themselves as scripture and told fabricated stories – stories that were passed along in our culture and picked up by the popular imagination in works such as Jesus Christ Superstar and the Da Vinci Code.

On top of that, there has been lots of confusion within the church about Mary's identity ever since around 600AD, when Pope Gregory preached a sermon in which he conflated the story of Mary Magdalene in Luke 8.2 with the sinful woman in Luke 7.36 and Mary Magdalene became known as a scandalous woman, perhaps even a former prostitute.

Mary is actually mentioned 12 times in the gospels, more than many of the disciples. We're told in Mark 15 that she was one of "many" women from Galilee who followed Jesus and cared for his needs (Mark 15.41), and in Luke 8 we're told they "helped to support him out of their own means." (Luke 8.3).

We're also told that several of these women had been healed by Jesus, including Mary. According to Luke 8.2, seven demons had been cast out of her.

In Mark 15 we're told she was among the women standing and watching while the crucifixion took place (15.40), and she and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were there when his body was laid in the tomb (15.47).

Now, two mornings later, after running back to the upper room to tell the disciples that she found the tomb empty, she has eventually made her way back to the tomb. By the time she gets there, Peter and John have already left and gone back to where they were staying.

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb.

¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

John 20.14-16

[At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. . . .] Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

The story of Mary

Who knows what her life was like before she came to know Jesus?

The influence of evil spirits is a dark mystery, but it's real. What we know is that the evil one and those who serve him are the soul's vandals. They seek to rob and kill and destroy, holding us in captivity to sin and despair.

What might her life have been like before she first heard him speak her name? Plagued by depression, despair? Robbed of a sense of her belovedness? Under a constant cloud of mental confusion? Dealing with endless physical disabilities? Held captive by

self-accusation, self-recrimination? Living in isolation and judgment and shame and fear?

Little wonder her heart was so broken to lose him.

But then Jesus comes to her and speaks her name.

In joy she spins around and says, “Rabboni!”

John tells his readers that this Aramaic phrase means, “My teacher,” which is technically true but very misleading because our idea of teaching and theirs are so different.

For us in the Western world, a teacher is an expert on a specific subject who relays information about that subject with little or no relational connection with the student.

For students in the ancient world, your teacher was the friend you lived with, the authority you lived under, and the example you patterned your life after.

Rabboni is a title of great honor and great submission. It literally means, “My great one, my master, my prince.”

Mary immediately believes. He speaks her name and she kneels in joy to her risen master.

Then comes the awkward part.

John 20.17

Jesus said to her, “Touch me not.”

Some paintings of this moment show Jesus in an awkward hip-pivot move, looking like he’s trying to get away from her outstretched hand, like they’re playing tag and she’s it.

But most translations of this say, “Don’t hold onto me” or “don’t cling to me,” and the rest of what Jesus says to her gives more context to what he’s saying.

He’s saying there is one more step in his redemptive work. He will ascend to be enthroned at the right hand of God the Father and then He will send his Spirit to dwell in all believers in places and times.

“Oh, my beloved sister,” He is saying. “We are on the hinge of a new chapter of redemptive history. I will no longer be with you in the flesh, but I will always be with you in the Spirit.”

¹⁷ Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jesus as a Gardener*



As he so often does when he is illustrating events from the gospels, Rembrandt interprets the scene so faithfully and so powerfully.

This day marks the dawn of a new day for all of humanity. The gardener is going out into the day to restore this world to the Eden it was meant to be, planting light and hope and peace in the lives of others, just as he did in hers, and he invites her to join him in his work, to turn her back on the darkness from which she has been delivered, and to walk with him in the light.

And she does. She does in that moment.

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

And she does with the rest of her life. According to the earliest reliable church tradition, not made up gnostic fairy tales, Mary Magdalene accompanied Mary the mother of Jesus and John when they moved to Ephesus, joining them in their ministry, and living out her days there.

Mary was the first Jesus appeared to. And now we come to the last he comes to, at least in this part of the story. Thomas.

Thomas

In the two times he’s mentioned earlier in John’s gospel, we get a glimpse into his earnest, wrestling heart.

In 11.16, after Lazarus has died, and Jesus says he plans to go see his sisters, and the other apostles are reluctant for Jesus to go back out of fear for their lives and his, Thomas says, “Let us go also, that we may die with him.”

And in 14.5, when Jesus says he will go prepare a place for his followers and one day they will join him there, and Thomas says, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Now we hear of his encounter with the risen Jesus:

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

People don’t just stroll out of graves! It’s possible that God raised Jesus from the dead – with God all things are possible – but I have to rule out the alternatives.

It’s possible Jesus never actually died, and was somehow revived after his crucifixion and burial. Or it’s possible that he did actually die, and this was just an vision, a ghost.

So he wanted evidence that this was a physical body and not an apparition, and that this was someone who had really died and not just swooned and been revived.

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked,

John 20.26-28

Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*



Caravaggio captures so beautifully the tenacious curiosity of Thomas and the inviting humility of Jesus.

Thomas had perfectly reasonable doubts. If a friend of yours ran in this morning and said, “I just saw Billy Graham walking down the sidewalk,” no matter how much you trusted your friend, and how much you wanted it to be true, you would have good reason to ask a few follow up questions:

I want to see proof that it was really him, that he actually died, and that having died, he actually rose from the dead.

History has stuck Thomas with the unfortunate name Doubting Thomas. But these are reasonable objections. I think if Jesus were to name him, he’d call him Seeking Thomas, or Curious Thomas, or Reasonable Thomas.

He doesn’t say “I don’t believe it” or “I won’t believe it.” He says, “I’m fully prepared to believe it if there is adequate reason.”

And Jesus was delighted to give him adequate reason.

Jesus appears, goes straight to Thomas, speaks his name, and addresses his specific concerns: “Look, it’s really me, in the flesh – here is the wound in my side, expertly thrust straight into my heart, that proves I died, and here are the wounds in my hands that prove I’m really here and not just some ghostly apparition. Go ahead, touch me.” Thomas sees the evidence, his mind is satisfied, and his soul bows before Jesus in worship.

My Lord and my God! God in human flesh, worthy of the same worship and service I have given to God himself.

Jesus, my Lord and my God, I worship and serve you!

That phrase continued to resound through Thomas’ life and ministry. Transformed by his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus, he ventured out in his name.

Early church tradition tells us that Thomas brought the gospel to Iraq, Iran, and even India, where in 52AD he visited the Kerala region in the southern peninsula and led many to Christ. Today there is a church community that traces its beginnings back to that visit, and still thrives, and they pass on to each new generation the phrase in Aramaic that Thomas first taught them – the first Christian creed: “*Mar Walah!* My Lord and my God!”

Here’s how the chapter ends.

John 20.30

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Do you want to hear the Risen Lord Jesus speak your name, and set your grieving heart at peace?

Do you want to see the Risen Lord Jesus answer your objections, and put your spinning mind to rest?

The resurrection of Jesus means many things.

1. The resurrection validates all the claims Jesus made in his lifetime: and he made a lot of them, huge claims – among them
 that he was divine, if we see him we see the father,
 that he was the way to God, he is the way, and there is no other way to the father
 that he was establishing the kingdom of God
 that he was dying to give us life and to reconcile us to God
 All validated, corroborated, substantiated, authenticated. The resurrection is the stamp of proof, like the seal of a notary public, validating his true identity.

2. The resurrection gives tangible physical evidence that the thing we fear most as human beings, death, has been defeated death, and that Jesus opens the way to eternal and abundant life for all who believe in him, as John 3.16 says.

And 3. The resurrection means Jesus is alive and with us today, and we can experience him and his life-changing power. Today!

Suan

This week I dashed down to Charlotte to meet our newest granddaughter Melody. On my way back to the airport I met Suan, my Uber driver in Charlotte.

I asked him his name, and shared mine, and then asked what his name meant. He said he was from Myanmar, which used to be called Burma. He struggled to communicate, having a hard time trying to tell me what his name meant, he finally gave up and we lapsed into silence. I sort of gave up too and picked up my phone to send a text to my family.

Then I felt God's nudge, and I felt prompted to try again. I've got twenty minutes with this man that I'll never have again, and I'm not going to waste this opportunity, even if it is hard to communicate.

I asked him how long he had been in Charlotte, and then asked him about the unrest I had heard about in Myanmar, where the military had deposed the king and imposed martial law, and if he still had family there.

Then he told me he was from among the Chin people. Myanmar is 99% Buddhist, he said, but the Chin people are a minority, and almost all the Chin people are Christians because of the ministry of a couple of American missionaries in the late 18 and early 1900s. Now, because of their faith, they are a persecuted minority, enduring arrests, attacks, imprisonment, forced labor, even death.

Are you a Christian? I asked, leaning forward in my seat.

Play music underneath my words here

"I am!" he said, his face lighting up. "Jesus changed my life!"

He went on to tell me that Jesus has brought so much joy and peace to his life. Now he writes and records Christian music to tell people about Jesus and the difference he can make in their lives.

The music is called *Va Leng-In*, which means Fly In, because he can't go there in person, so he shares the gospel through music on the internet, flying it in so people can hear it. Another person to whom the Risen Jesus has appeared. Another person who has bowed before him and said, "My master! My Lord! My God!"

Let me share you one more example closer to home. This room is full of people who would say that the risen Lord Jesus has changed their lives, me among them. I wish we could all share our stories this morning. The Stations and Conversations were designed to be a way for some of you to hear some of your stories.

But here's the story of one of your brothers in the Covenant family whose life has been changed by the Risen Lord. Louis . . . ?

Testimony

Louis Tay

There are plenty of compelling historical reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead.

If you want to know more about why so many are so confident in the reliability of the records we have of Jesus' life and death and resurrection, check out Lee Strobel's book *The Case for Christ*. Strobel was an atheist journalist who wrote a book explaining the evidence he discovered that satisfied his doubts and gave him confidence in the accuracy of the gospel accounts.

The change that happened to those who claim to have encountered him.

If you want to know more about this Jesus and what it would mean to follow him, pick up our free copy of Michael Green, *Who is this Jesus?* Or give me a call – I'd love to grab some time with you. As one who was an atheist for years before I became a follower of Christ, I'm guessing I may have wrestled with some of the same questions you're wrestling with.

As I said, there's lots of compelling historical reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. But the most compelling one of all is the life of each of his billions of followers, each one of whom, like Suan, and Louis, and Mary, and Thomas, and me, can say, "He changed my life!"

For each of those whose stories we've heard this morning, there was a moment of recognition, and then a response.

In my own life, when I was an atheist, I came face to face with Jesus through the incredible words at the beginning of John's gospel, and through the love of his followers like Carol and Doug, and then I knelt and said, "My King!"

What about you? What is your response as you discover the Risen Lord Jesus standing by your side, and hear him speak your name? What do you say as you sink to your knees in worship and adoration?

The Moment of Recognition

Mary:	My Master!
Thomas:	My Lord and my God!
Us:	

Prayer

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory,

Song before

The beauty of the cross is that
There's One who has redeemed my soul
Beauty of the cross is that I'm finally free and letting go
Beauty of the cross is that Your grace has found me just as I am
Not by my own works
That I may boast or I may come
But simply through Your son
The sinless and exalted one
Only through the cross that
I'm made clean to draw near to You
Draw near to You, draw near to You
Saved so that You would receive
All glory due Your name
Everlasting God from age to age
You never change