

ECF 12th July 2020 John 20:1-9 Look And Believe

This year we've all become much more aware of the importance of hand hygiene. Most of have watched videos or read information about the need to wash our hands and the best way to do it.

But it is not just good hand hygiene we need. Experts are also calling us to practice information hygiene.

This is because throughout this year, misinformation, bad health advice and conspiracy theories about this pandemic have flooded the internet. And these have led to tragic consequences across the world such as:

- Mob attacks in India
- Attacks on telecommunications engineers and equipment in the UK
- Mass alcohol poisonings in Iran
- People overdosing on anti-malarial drugs in Nigeria and Vietnam,
- A couple poisoning themselves with a fish tank cleaner in Arizona
- And many others catching COVID-19 because they believed that the virus was a government hoax!

And so in order to stop the spread of bad information, people have been encouraged to stop and think before forwarding on that message, to check their sources, and to refuse to share if they're not sure.

And even Facebook have got in on the act. They've been under pressure from their advertisers about this issue. And so in the last couple of weeks they've launched a campaign to stamp out false news.

Now, I'm not convinced that this will stop fake news online, but it is useful advice. None of us want to be taken in by a fake news story or an elaborate hoax.

And that was the same with the disciples on the Sunday after Jesus had been crucified. When they heard stories about an empty tomb and angel appearances, they didn't immediately believe it and share it with the world.

Instead, they checked it out for themselves, to see if it was really true. But when they looked at the evidence, they came to the certain belief that Jesus really was alive. John 20:1-9: "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. ² 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!"

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)"

1. Mary's Commitment

Mary Magdalene was an incredibly committed follower of Jesus. When so many others were hiding in fear, she and a couple of other women went to where Jesus had been buried. "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb." John 20:1

a) At the Cross

A couple of day earlier she'd stood at Golgotha when Jesus was crucified. When most of the disciples were nowhere to be seen, "Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." John 19:25 We can only imagine the intensity of emotions as Mary watched her Lord die in agony.

b) At the Tomb

And last week we thought about how Joseph and Nicodemus took down the body of Jesus, wrapped it in linen and placed it in Joseph's new tomb, rolling a big stone in front of it. But while they did this, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb." Matthew 27:61 They were watching, weeping for their Lord.

They didn't understand what was happening. They, like the other disciples, didn't know that this was all part of God's plan. They'd soon look back and realise that this was an amazing triumph and not a tragedy. But at that moment, their hopes had died with Jesus!

But amazingly, their dedication to Jesus had not. These brave women wouldn't give up on their commitment to the one

they believed was the Messiah. And so [“They went home and prepared spices and perfumes.”](#) Luke 23:56. They did not know why Jesus had died, but they were going to do all they could to honour his memory by anointing his body.

Saturday was the Sabbath and so [“They rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.”](#) Luke 23:56. Despite their emotional state, they still obeyed God.

And so they went to the tomb, [“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...”](#) John 20:1. This was probably between 3 and 6 am. It was the first time that Mary could get to the tomb, to mourn and to express her undying dedication to the Lord.

c) In Galilee

So why was Mary Magdalene so dedicated to Jesus when others stumbled? Well maybe it was because she was just so grateful for what Jesus had done for her. Luke mentions [“Mary \(called Magdalene\) from whom seven demons had come out.”](#) Luke 8:2. Jesus had released her from the incredible torment of demonic possession. He had set her free, completely transforming her life.

And as a result she had become a faithful follower of Jesus, and a financial supporter of his mission. [“In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs.”](#) Mark 15:41

So Mary had decided to follow Jesus with everything she was and everything that she had. And so, even although she didn't understand what was happening, she wasn't about to give up on the one who had set her free!

I think this is such an important lesson for us today. Faith in Jesus is not about having all the answers. It is not about understanding everything that is happening. It is certainly not about going through life without any problems or struggles.

It is about committing our lives to Jesus because we know who he is and what he has done in dying for us and setting us free from our sins.

So we might be here this morning confused about what God is doing in our lives. There may be things that we've been through that we're struggling to understand and accept

But today we can still stand in faith and worship the Lord. We don't have all the answers but we can say with Paul, [“I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.”](#) 2 Timothy 1:12

2. Mary's Confusion

Mary visited that tomb out of commitment to her Lord. But when she got there, she was confused.

On Friday, she'd watched Joseph place Jesus in his tomb. She saw that [“He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away.”](#) Matthew 27:60

This was a common way to secure a tomb in those days. These disk-shaped stones were so heavy that they required several men to roll them away.

a) A Huge Problem

So that morning, when she and the other women were on their way, their biggest concern was [“Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb.”](#) Mark 16:3 They knew that they didn't have the physical strength themselves to do it.

They didn't know it at the time, but their problem was even greater than this. At the request of the chief priest and Pharisees, Pilate had given orders to make the tomb even more secure. [“They went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.”](#) Matthew 27:66 So even if the women could have found someone to help, nobody would have been permitted to break that seal.

b) A Huge Surprise

So it is not surprising that Mary was so shocked when she [“saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.”](#) John 20:1

This was not what she expected. It confused her. And so she ran back to tell Peter and John: [“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!”](#) John 20:2

In a way, it was a logical deduction to make. The stone was rolled away. The body was no longer in the tomb. She knew that the disciples wouldn't have desecrated Jesus' grave, so it must have been his enemies – either the Jewish leaders or the Roman soldiers.

c) A Huge Misunderstanding

But she was wrong. She didn't know that this was God's doing. Matthew 28:2 says [“There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.”](#)

So, what she saw as a disaster, was actually evidence of the most amazing event in world history! She thought the stone had been moved to take her Lord from her. Whereas, it had been moved, so she could see that he would always be with her.

I think we often make a similar mistake. In our lives, when things happen that we don't expect, when our plans don't work out as we hoped, when circumstances are different from what we imagined God would do, then it is easy for us to be confused and to jump to the wrong conclusion.

We try to make sense of things. We try to work it out. We use our logic, reasoning and experience. Sometimes we imagine the worst case scenario. We might listen to what other people think. And we come up with an explanation that fits.

d) A Huge Issue

But often we can be so wrong. That's because God's ways are different from ours.

[“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.](#)

[“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”](#) Isaiah 55:8-9

God often does things that are greater than we can understand. He works in ways that we don't expect and that from our perspective often don't make sense.

So if we don't want to continually get it wrong and jump to the wrong conclusions, then we mustn't just rely on ourselves. Instead, we need to learn to rely on the Lord. As Proverbs 3:5-6 says: [“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”](#)

And so instead of working things out for ourselves, we need to spend time in prayer, asking God for his guidance. James tells us: [“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”](#) James 1:5

And instead of relying on human logic and reasoning, we need to open the Bible and seek God's purpose and plan for our lives. If Mary or the other disciples had done that they would have been able to [“understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.”](#) John 20:9

3. Peter and John's Concern

So Mary was confused, but the good thing was, she did not keep her confusion to herself. Instead she ran to Peter and John and shared her problem with them. And Peter and John responded immediately. [“So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.”](#) John 20:3

a) They Didn't Believe

They didn't yet understand what had happened that morning. They couldn't explain away Mary's misunderstanding. And when the other women arrived with the news of a message from two angels, [“They did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.”](#) Luke 24:11

Peter and John did not expect anything good to happen that morning. They were not waiting in expectation for news of Jesus' resurrection.

Neither were they naïve and gullible. They were not conspiracy theorists, eager to believe anything that they heard.

They didn't know what all of this was pointing to! They didn't know what to believe. But crucially, they knew that it was important enough to check it out for themselves. If Jesus' tomb was empty, they had to find out why?

And so despite the fact that they were still in hiding for fear of the Jews, they ran as fast as they could to the tomb.

b) They Didn't Ignore

And this is still true today. The question of the empty tomb is of vital importance. Either it is the biggest fake news story this world has ever heard and we should have nothing to do with it. Or it is the most important truth that has ever been shared, and it should completely transform our lives!

As C S Lewis said, "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important."

And so, like Peter and John, we need to check this out for ourselves. Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, about how we should respond when we hear prophecy: "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil." 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22

If we need to do this about prophecies today, how much more should we do this for the most important claim ever made?

4. John's Conviction

John was a faster runner and so he got to the tomb first. "He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in." John 20:5. Maybe out of fear or respect, John initially just had a quick look in!

a) Clear Evidence

But when he arrived, Peter had no hesitation. He went straight into the tomb: "He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen." John 20:6-7

Peter thoroughly investigated the scene. Just as Mary had said, the stone was rolled away. The tomb was empty, apart from the grave clothes.

- This ruled out a grave robbing. The only thing of value in the tomb was the grave clothes. But they were still there.
- And if the authorities had taken Jesus, they would not have taken the time to carefully remove and fold these.
- In fact, the way John wrote this, seems to say that those strips of linen and burial cloth looked undisturbed, as though Jesus' body had simply passed through them.

This was completely different from what happened to Lazarus in John 11. When Jesus restored him back to life after death, he, "Came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face." John 11:44 He had to be freed from his grave clothes.

But Jesus left his grave clothes behind. That's because he was raised to a completely new kind of life. Lazarus' body was restored to what it was before. Jesus' body was transformed into an indestructibly glorious body! The same kind of body we will be given when Jesus returns to take us to be with him forever.

b) Clear Faith

And this is the evidence that convinced John. When he finally went inside, "He saw and believed." John 20:8 Like Peter, he still didn't understand that what he was seeing that day was the fulfilment of Scripture. But for him, it was enough to convince him that Jesus had been raised to life.

Peter still didn't get it. Luke records that "he went away, wondering to himself what had happened." Luke 24:12 He still had many questions and needed more convincing. And as we'll see next week, this evidence was provided.

Luke wrote about Jesus: "After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive." Acts 1:3 The early disciples didn't rush to believe in the resurrection. Instead they were convinced by the evidence that they saw!

5. Our Conclusion

And John wants us to be convinced too. This is why John wrote his gospel. "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." John 20:31

And so, if you're here this morning and you haven't yet put your trust in Jesus. Don't put it off any longer. Run to tomb, examine the evidence and see it for yourself. Look and believe.

But this is also important for those of us who have put our trust in Jesus. The truth of the resurrection is continually under attack in this world. And so we need to regularly go back to- the empty tomb, check out the evidence again and deepen our conviction that Jesus really is alive. [“As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of.”](#) 2 Timothy 3:14

But we also need to do this so that we can share this good news with others. Peter challenges us to [“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”](#) 1 Peter 3:15

In a world full of fake news and elaborate hoaxes, people need to know why we believe that Jesus is alive. We need to encourage them to ask us questions about our hope of eternal life. And we need to present to them the evidence that can help them to move from doubt to faith, from darkness to light, from death to life!

So of course, we shouldn't share things if we're not sure that they are true. But if we know that Jesus is alive, let's share that with all those around us, so that they can look and believe.

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