

Tears, baggage, doubts and nothing spectacular

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- [0 : 00] Well, as I said today, we are continuing our study in John's Gospel. We're nearly finished it. We've just got a couple more sermons after this one. We've reached chapter 20.
- We're going to read again at verse one, but we're going to look at the whole chapter together. Now, on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early while it was still dark and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.
- This chapter records for us the resurrection of Jesus, which is the most important event of all of history, and it's the event that lies at the very heart of the Christian faith.
- Christianity is completely grounded in the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christianity is untrue and the whole thing falls apart. But we are certain that the historical evidence, that the testimony of Scripture and the difference that Jesus has made in so many people's lives proves to us that this, in fact, happened.
- This is what Christianity is grounded on. And there's so much massive theology connected to that. There is so much that we could talk about. But what's really interesting about John's Gospel and this chapter that we've read is that as he talks about the resurrection, he doesn't actually focus on the big theology that lies behind it as important and as fascinating as that is.
- [1 : 22] Instead, John focuses on how people responded. And that actually makes perfect sense when we think about John's Gospel as a whole because at the very end of the chapter that Grant read, John tells us why he wrote this book.
- He said, these things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.
- In other words, John is looking for a response from everyone who reads his Gospel, and that, of course, applies to the people he wrote to. Originally, it applies to us as well.
- So if anyone here is not yet a believer or not sure where they stand in terms of faith in Jesus, John is calling you to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- And for those of us who are believers, whatever stage we're at on that journey, then John's desire for us in reading his Gospel is that we would grow in our faith.
- [2 : 23] And so as we've been studying John's Gospel over these past few months, our great goal is that people would come to faith and that people would grow in faith. And it's been amazing because in the period that we've been looking at John's Gospel, we have seen both of these things happen.
- We have seen people come to faith in our congregation, which has been amazing. And we've seen people grow in faith as well. So that's the goal, that people would come to faith, people would grow in faith.
- But how does that happen? Or to put it another way, what should your journey of faith look like?
- And that's such an important question to ask because it's a question that can plague us because so often we can feel like our journey to faith is inadequate.

We can feel like our story isn't good enough. And I'm sure that, you know, as I'm trying to encourage people to share this story in the wee booklet that we're going to produce, I'm sure for so many people, the reason you don't want to do it is you think, oh, my story is just not really good enough.

[3 : 29] I don't really have much to say. And that can leave the Christian feeling insecure because we think, well, what do I even have? What do I need to have?

And it can leave the seeker feeling inadequate because you think, well, something major needs to happen and it's not happened to me yet and you feel like you're stuck and you can't take a next step of faith even though you really want to.

And so it's a really important question to think about. It affects all of us. And John 20 is such a helpful and fascinating chapter to look at because it describes four people who believe in Jesus, who believe in his resurrection.

And for these four people, their journeys are very different. And that's what we're going to look at today. We're going to look at each one and we've got four headings which serve as the title for our sermon, tears, baggage, doubts and nothing spectacular.

And each one of these corresponds to a person in this chapter. And I am pretty certain that each one will correspond to people here today or listening online.

[4 : 43] So first of all, tears, this is the story of Mary Magdalene. She had been at the cross when Jesus died.

We see that in chapter 19. We know from Luke's Gospel that earlier in Jesus's ministry, she had been among those who had followed Jesus as he traveled around.

Here in John 20, we see that Mary comes early on the first day of the week on the Sunday and her intention is to anoint Jesus' body. But she finds that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb.

She goes and tells Peter and John. But after they return to their homes, she stands outside the tomb, weeping.

And you can imagine what's going through her mind. She's come expecting to find Jesus in the tomb. She wants to anoint his body with spices. She's come to do just this one final act for the man who had healed her and the man whom she had followed and the man from whom she had learned so much.

[5 : 51] But now he's been killed. So she comes in her sorrow and her grief crushed by a massive sense of loss.

And you can see in the chapter that there's this repeated sense that she doesn't know what to do. You see her going to Peter and John. She says, they've taken him away. We don't know where they've laid him.

And then when she speaks to Jesus without recognizing him, she says, they've taken him away. I don't know where he is. And she says, if you've taken him away, tell me so that I can go and get him.

That sense of loss, that sense of disorientation is leaving her standing there in tears. And maybe that's exactly how you feel.

Maybe today you might not have physical tears on your face as you're listening, but maybe there is exactly the same sense of pain in your heart.

[6 : 48] Maybe like Mary, things in your life have turned out completely different to how you thought they were going to. Maybe things have gone wrong. Maybe things have happened that you were dreading and that you wish so much were different.

And maybe life's left you thinking, I just don't know what to do. I don't know where to turn. And maybe you're here today and you're thinking, well, I know I need Jesus, but I have no idea where he is.

I don't know where to find him. And maybe everybody around you looks like they're smiling and all you feel like doing is weeping.

That is exactly how Mary felt. Her journey to belief in the resurrection was a journey of tears.

But what happened to her? Well, verse 14 to 18 described the moment when Jesus appeared to her, but she didn't realize it was him. Grant read that for us.

[7 : 56] She thinks that he's the gardener. And then when he says, Mary, she turns and realizes just who it was. And I love these verses because it's showing us that in the midst of Mary's tears, Jesus was right there.

She couldn't see it at first, but he was right there. And he came to meet her while the tears were still in her eyes, while the tears made it hard for her to see that it was actually him.

He calls her name, she realizes who it is, and everything changes. And there's a massive theological lesson here.

It's telling us that the gospel is so much simpler and so much better than Mary expected. She was crushed by questions and uncertainty and all the time Jesus is right there, calling her name.

And when she realizes that he's there, she discovers an amazing truth about the gospel. She discovers that Jesus is risen, that he has conquered death and that in him we can have eternal life.

[9 : 14] And it's all so simple. It's all so beautiful. Death ruins everything.

The resurrection of Jesus means that we can have hope. The gospel is as simple and as magnificent as that.

And all of us today need to understand this lesson that we learned from Mary, the lesson that the gospel is so much simpler and so much better than we expect.

Because very often we make two massive mistakes. We make the gospel complicated. And so we think, you know, you've got to know this, you've got to understand this, you've got to piece all this together, you've got to have some dramatic experience, you've got to make sure you sort everything out in your life, you've got to conform to this kind of cultural expectation of what a Christian looks like.

And we had this massive list of requirements and expectations to the gospel that are nowhere near the Bible, and we make it so complicated.

[10 : 20] And yet it's just so simple. Jesus died for our sins. He rose again to conquer death. And all he asks of you and me is to believe in him.

We make the massive mistake of making the gospel complicated. We also make the massive mistake of making the gospel a bit rubbish. In other words, we tend to think that it's just a bit rubbish.

It's going to kind of spoil our lives. It'll restrict me. It'll alienate me from people I respect. It'll erode my freedoms.

It'll force me to commit intellectual suicide. Honestly, all of that is absolutely rubbish. It's nonsense. None of that is true.

And if you are rejecting the gospel because you think it's going to cause you to have to make intellectual sacrifices, it's going to restrict your life, it's going to alienate you from people, it's going to make your life boring, if you're rejecting the gospel for those reasons, then you're rejecting something that's not the gospel.

[11 : 30] You're rejecting something that's not the gospel. Because the gospel is so, so good. It's so good for our personal sense of esteem and well-being.

It's so good for the sense of purpose it gives us in life. It's so good intellectually. It's so good in terms of friendships. It's just so good philosophically.

It's so good in every way. And as we battle the tears that life can so often bring, we need to remember that the gospel is so much simpler and so much better than we realize.

Mary's journey was a journey of tears. Your journey might be the same. And sometimes it's only through trusting in Jesus that the tears get wiped away and we can see clearly.

Our second heading is baggage. This is the story of Peter. In order to understand this, we need to remember what's happened in the last couple of chapters.

[12 : 33] In many ways, Peter was the leading figure among the disciples of Jesus. In so many ways, he seemed like the most committed. You see that earlier in John's Gospel, when Jesus was washing the feet of the disciples, Peter was like, you need to wash my hands and my head as well.

Later on in that chapter 13, Peter said, I'll lay down my life for you. And then when Jesus was arrested, it was Peter who drew his sword and tried to fight off those who'd come to condemn Jesus.

In all of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Peter is the one who comes across as eager and committed and wholehearted in his loyalty to Jesus. And all of that is completely overshadowed by what happens in chapter 18.

Because in chapter 18, we saw a few weeks ago, Peter had followed Jesus after he had been arrested. He was confronted by people who were there saying, are you one of his followers as well?

And three times he said, I don't know him. Peter denied Jesus three times. You can see that in the verses on the screen.

[13 : 41] In so many ways, Peter was a bit all or nothing, either ready to die for Jesus or denying that he even knew him. And you can even see the all or nothingness in this chapter because John reaches the tomb first.

Peter eventually catches up. John hadn't quite gone into the tomb. Peter's straight in there and he's just all or nothing. He comes to the tomb with eagerness.

But the fact that he denied Jesus means that he also came with baggage. And maybe you feel exactly the same.

Maybe you feel eager to know Jesus. Maybe you are aware that you need him more than anything else. Maybe you know that there is something missing in your life and maybe you can see in Christians that you know and love that they have something that you wish that you had as well.

But at the same time, you are so conscious that you come with baggage. Maybe it's regrets about how your life has turned out. Maybe it's mistakes you know you've made.

[14 : 47] Maybe you feel like you missed your chance with the gospel. Maybe you've even denied Jesus like Peter did.

I did that in school. I became a Christian when I was about 14 and it was the best thing that had ever happened in my life. I had a wee badge on my jacket, a wee fish symbol and somebody in my class said to me, does that mean that you've got the kurum?

For those of you who don't know that's island slang for becoming a Christian. I was like, I don't know.

I think I've preached a thousand sermons in my life. I still feel the pain of the fact that I did that.

A thousand sermons doesn't cancel the fact that I said that in school. What does cancel it amazingly is the forgiveness of Jesus and his grace.

[15 : 56] Maybe you can relate to that. Maybe there's times when you've felt that you've denied him as well either with your words or your actions. Maybe you're here with baggage and you feel like it's stopping you from coming to faith or stopping you from taking the next step in your journey of faith, whatever that next step might be.

Well, if that's the case, I want you to see something so crucial and so beautiful. Jesus deals with Peter's baggage, but he does it after Peter comes to believe in the resurrection.

And so the baggage arrives in chapter 18 when Peter denies Jesus. In chapter 20, Peter meets the risen Jesus and believes in him. It's in chapter 21 that the baggage gets dealt with.

You can go and we'll be studying that in a couple of weeks time, but you can go and read it. Jesus comes and asks Peter three times, do you love me? Each one just echoing in a positive way the three denials.

And the key point is that Jesus does it later on. He does it later on. In other words, Jesus doesn't say to Peter, you need to sort out your baggage and then believe.

[17 : 10] No, he says, believe in me and I'll sort out the baggage later. And that's so, so important for us to recognize because so often we feel like we have baggage that's stopping us from coming to follow Jesus.

Maybe it's a sense that we don't know enough. Maybe it's a feeling that we're unworthy. Maybe it's a fear of failure. Maybe it's worry about what other people will think. Maybe it's a sense of guilt.

And the amazing thing about Jesus is that he sorts it out later. And that makes perfect theological sense because the truth is we all have far, far more baggage than we would ever realize.

And if Jesus waited for people to sort out their baggage before coming to faith, nobody would become a Christian. Instead, he calls us as we are baggage and all.

This is maybe an obviously simple illustration, but I actually think it hits the nail right on the head. I was away in America over the holidays. I had to take six flights.

[18 : 17] One of the things that I discovered is that you land the plane, but it can take a long time for the baggage to be sorted out after that. And that's exactly what it can be like as a Christian.

We land the plane as we trust in Jesus and might take ages for the baggage to be sorted out. That's okay. That's exactly how Jesus intends it to be.

We need to remember that as individuals. We also need to remember that as a church because as a church family, we want to see people come to faith and we want to see our church grow.

We want to see more and more new people coming each week. All of them will come with baggage.

And if you look at this chapter, you will see that there's something amazing that John didn't say. John ran to the tomb first. He got there ahead of Peter.

[19 : 17] Peter eventually catches up. And do you know what John doesn't say to the man who denied Jesus two days beforehand? Do you know what John doesn't say?

He doesn't say, what the heck are you doing here? John had seen Peter deny Jesus and yet he doesn't say, what are you doing here after what you said the other night?

And that's such a wise and crucial lesson for us all as we seek to welcome one another, new and old, into our community, into our church family.

We're not here to highlight the mistakes and faults or the baggage that people bring because we've all got it. Peter's journey was a journey with baggage.

You might feel like yours is the same. The truth is it's only by trusting in Jesus that we'll ever deal with our baggage. Number three is doubts.

[20 : 20] And this is the story of Thomas. That's really what Thomas has remembered for most of all. In this chapter we see that Jesus appeared to the disciples but Thomas isn't there.

And so even though they're telling him what's happened, he says, unless I see in his hands the marks of the nails and place my finger in the marks of the nails and place my hand in his side, I will never believe.

And it's really interesting actually if you compare 20 and 24 to 25 because when Jesus appeared to the disciples without Thomas, he shows them his hands and his side. And they clearly told Thomas this because he says, well, unless I see his hands and his side, I am not going to believe.

And in doing that, Thomas is making the mistake that so many of us make and that can so easily leave us plagued by doubts. We look at other Christians and we think, I need to have what you've had.

I need to experience what you've experienced. What happened to you has to happen to me. And then if it doesn't happen to us, if our story doesn't match up to somebody else's story, then it leaves us plagued with doubts.

[21 : 31] And I see this all the time. This is so common in our community. It's true, I think, of people even here today.

We compare our story with other people's story and we think ours isn't good enough. Mine's not good enough. And because of that, we struggle to believe.

And Jesus responds to that by doing something just magnificent. As we see in 26 to 28, he appears eight days later. This time, Thomas is there and he says to Thomas, look, here's my hands, here's my side.

But then Jesus does something brilliant in verse 28. He shows him what Thomas wanted, shows Thomas what he wanted, but then he actually explains to him you didn't actually need it.

He says, have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

[22 : 26] It's interesting, often Thomas is known as doubting Thomas and I guess that's a good description, but I think an even better description would be stubborn Thomas. Maybe you know what I'm saying, no, that's you, Thomas, not him.

But stubborn Thomas, I think, is an even better description of the disciple Thomas because it's interesting and ironic that he actually had a lot of confidence in his own judgment, unless I see, I'm not believing.

And so yes, he doubted, but he responded to those doubts by being stubborn. And the key thing he did was that he drew a line that he didn't need to draw.

And that's so important for us to recognize because sometimes we'll ask the question, are you doubting Thomas? That's actually a pointless question. Everybody is doubting Thomas.

Everybody has doubts. The crucial question is not, are you a doubting Thomas? The crucial question is, are you responding to your doubts by being stubborn?

[23 : 31] Have you drawn a line that you didn't need to draw? And are you saying to God, this has to happen, this has to happen, this has to happen, and then I'll believe. It's so easy to use our doubts to draw a line that doesn't need to be there.

Please don't do that. Thomas's journey was a journey with doubts. Yours will probably be the same. We all come to Jesus with doubts.

Our doubts are one of the many things that we just lay at Jesus's feet. So we've seen tears, baggage, doubts. Last one, nothing spectacular. This is John's story.

I love how unspectacular John's story is in this chapter. We don't read anything about John weeping like Mary. He doesn't have the massive baggage that Peter had, and he didn't have the doubts and the stubbornness and the great reassurance that Thomas had.

John's journey is so much less spectacular. And there's two key things we learn about John from this chapter. Well, there's actually three things we learn.

[24 : 36] We also learn that he's a faster runner than Peter. But that's not the important thing. The two important things we learn about this from John are, first of all, he believed even though he didn't understand everything.

And you see that in verses 8 to 9. I love the order of these verses. The other disciples, this is John referring to himself when he talks about that other disciple, that's himself, John. He'd reached the tomb first, went in, and he saw and believed.

But as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead. I love the order of those verses. You would so easily think it said, he went in, he understood, he believed.

We think that has to be the order. I need to understand everything. Then I can believe. And you look, it's the opposite. He believed even though he knew he didn't understand everything. And that's such an important lesson.

And so yes, we believe that Jesus rose from the dead. We believe that he died for our sins. We believe that only he can save us. But there is so much that we are still learning. And that's what part of what makes me an Christian so good.

[25 : 40] It's such an amazing journey of learning and discovery. So John knew that he didn't know everything. But there was one thing he did know. And this is the second big lesson we learn from John.

There's one thing that he did know. He knew that Jesus loved him. And we see that from the beautiful description that he uses of himself.

He refers to himself in this chapter and in other parts of this Gospel as the one whom Jesus loved, the disciple whom Jesus loved. Now when you first read that, you think, oh man, that sounds a bit big headed John.

You sound like you're kind of elevating yourself above others. But that's not what he means. That's not what he's trying to do. Really these words are simply John's testimony.

So he didn't have the healing and the tears of Amiri Magdalene. He didn't have the massive highs and the crushing lows of a Peter. He didn't have the doubts and the assurance of a Thomas. John's journey contains nothing particularly spectacular, but he knew that Jesus loved him.

[26 : 44] And that's all he needed. And that is all you need as well. Now of course Jesus also loved Mary. He loved Peter.

He loved Thomas. But he also loves the unspectacular. And you might be here today thinking, you know, my journey is not adequate because there is nothing spectacular in it.

Well in order for someone to be a Christian, there is actually only one spectacular thing that's needed. You just need Jesus to love you.

And the amazing truth of the Gospel is that he already does. The cross and the resurrection prove that. And no amount of your doubts or fears or uncertainties can ever change that.

Your testimony might have nothing more to say than simply, I'm a disciple whom Jesus loved. That's all a testimony ever needs. So here in John 20 we've got four fascinating examples of people coming to believe in the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

[27 : 58] They're all different. Not everyone has tears. Not everyone has baggage. Not everyone has doubts. Not everyone has nothing spectacular, but they all believed we all have different journeys.

Some of us might be tears. Some of us might be baggage. Some doubts. Some nothing spectacular. Some maybe something different all again. I want to give you, as we close, I want to give you a don't and a do.

Your don't is don't compare journeys.

Don't think that your journey has to match somebody else's. If you've got baggage and no tears, that's okay. That's totally okay.

Don't compare and don't think that, you know, if mine's different then, oh, it's not. Do not worry about that. Do not worry. Don't compare journeys. But do compare saviours.

[29 : 00] What do I mean by that? Well, if you're not trusting in Jesus, who are you trusting? If you're not following Jesus, who are you following?

And if you're not in His hands for life and death, whose hands are you in? And that's a comparison that all of us have to think about.

Amen.