

Explore the Bible: I Have Seen

March 28, 2023

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 9 focuses on John 20:1-18.*

We often speak of the empty tomb as a symbol of great joy—*Jesus has risen!* However, the Gospel narratives offer a picture of the empty tomb that was not originally a symbol of joy. Rather, it was a symbol of confusion, dread, fear, and a cause for great anxiety: *What have they done with the body of Jesus?*

When John mentions the time of day Mary comes to visit the tomb, it is by no accident he includes the detail, “while it was still dark” (John 20:1). John often uses light and dark symbolism to describe the state of mind of those in the text. Darkness indicates the characters of the story are lacking clarity about Jesus’ mission of salvation. Light indicates the characters have a clearer understanding about Jesus’ mission.

As Mary approaches the empty tomb in the dark, that detail is used by John to signal to the reader the characters still lack clarity about what truly has happened. Furthermore, the darkness sets the overall tone of despair felt by the characters who cannot fathom Jesus has risen. Instead, the assumption is that Jesus’ body was stolen (John 20:2).

He Saw and Believed (John 20:8)

Peter and John (“the disciple Jesus loved,” a title John uses to reference himself; John 20:1) quickly make their way to the empty tomb, seemingly to witness with their own eyes if Mary’s claim is true. There before them was the evidence of what Mary described—an empty tomb.

However, there was more to the story than just an empty tomb. They also

“saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head” (John 20:6-7). There were details pointing to something further that had taken place than a robbed body. They could see Jesus’ burial clothes were removed, but they did not pause to wonder why a grave robber would have done such a thing.

Here, the reader notices a theme emerge of seeing and believing. While the empty tomb narrative begins in darkness, this notion of seeing unto belief will go through states of progression leading to the eventual understanding of Jesus’ resurrection.

However, at this point in the story, the seeing unto belief of John only confirms Mary’s testimony of an empty tomb is true. They still failed to see Jesus had risen from the dead, much less that Jesus had accomplished his mission to overcome death for the world.

Their perception of Jesus’ power over death remains shrouded in darkness at this time in the narrative, but the light is soon to break through.

Mary (John 20:16)

To further depict the darkness of the situation, Mary is distraught and weeping as she waits by the empty tomb. Again, it is important to note the progression of the seeing-unto-believing motif used by John. Mary starts to take in a lot of images—“...she bent over to *look* into the tomb and *saw* two angels in white...” (John 20:11b-12a; emphasis mine). Then, “she turned around and *saw* Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus” (John 20:14; emphasis mine).

Even in seeing—even in witnessing two angels and Jesus himself—her heart is incapable of welcoming the truth of Jesus’ resurrection. Even while all the necessary evidence lays right before her eyes, she cannot even recognize that Jesus is standing there before her.

What changes everything is one simple word: “Mary” (John 20:16). Even with the greatest evidence of Jesus’ resurrection literally standing right there before her eyes, the factor that led to her understanding what had happened and to recognize her Lord was with her was Jesus calling out her name. This personal encounter changes her perspective entirely. The light swarmed in all at once and led her to comprehend beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was alive.

Instead of staying put, Jesus immediately sets Mary off on an evangelistic mission—“Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (John 20:17). Mary’s seeing-onto-believing story is complete as she goes to the disciples to bring the good news: “I have seen the Lord!” (John 20:18).

Mary’s and the disciples’ experience of the empty tomb has a lot to teach us about the nature of our faith. Coming to a state of seeing-onto-believing is not just about taking in the necessary pieces of evidence to formulate a logical conclusion of who Jesus is and what he accomplished. Rather, our faith comes alive through a personal encounter with Jesus—a realization Jesus embraces us and calls out our name to trust him, and he calls upon us specifically to participate in his gospel-mission.

Furthermore, beyond the seeing-onto-believing motif that continues to build with the disciples later in this chapter, John also relays a notion that transcends seeing unto believing: “Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’” (John 20:29).

May we embrace this blessing today as ones who experience the personal encounter of Jesus unto believing without seeing.

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