

Easter

Lesson 8 | April 20, 2025 Empty Tomb, Living Savior

Study Text

John 20:1–31

Central Truth

The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of Christian faith and practice.

Key Verse: Mark 16:6

He saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him (KJV).

The angel said, “Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn’t here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body” (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will be able to explain why the Resurrection is the foundation of the Christian faith.
- Students will appreciate the blessings that come from serving Jesus, our risen Savior.
- Students will be challenged to fulfill their role in the Great Commission.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: In the Gospel that bears his name, the apostle John recorded his own detailed experience of seeing the empty tomb and the resurrected Savior. Then in his letters and the Book of Revelation, John used vivid terminology to describe both Jesus’ earthly ministry and His heavenly glory (1 John 1:1–4; Revelation 1:9–20). His reason for writing was not to boast but to lead others to believe in Jesus—the only One who could give them eternal life.

Discussion Starter—One Detail

Say: If you were asked to describe the one detail about Jesus’ resurrection that is most significant to you, what would you say? Why would you choose this detail?

Say: Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, “If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins . . . But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead . . . Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life” (1 Corinthians 15:17, 20, 22). Jesus has risen from the dead! This simple fact makes the Church’s mission both necessary and possible.

After His resurrection, Jesus showed himself to hundreds of His followers. Today's lesson tells the story of the first disciples who encountered the risen Christ and how He sent them to begin the work of evangelism we continue today.

Part 1—An Empty Tomb

Looking for the Lord

John 20:1–2

Say: Jesus had been tortured, killed, and placed in a tomb late Friday afternoon, just before Sabbath began. After resting on the Sabbath as Jewish law required, Mary Magdalene and some other women set out for Jesus' tomb early Sunday morning, intending to anoint His body with burial spices. As they walked in the darkness, they wondered who would move the stone from the entrance of the tomb so they could go inside (Mark 16:1–3).

Although other women went to Jesus' tomb with Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:1), John's Gospel focuses on her. Mary had been delivered from the grip of seven demons. She was one of several women who had been supernaturally impacted by Jesus to the extent that they followed Him and financially supported His ministry (Luke 8:1–3). Mary's commitment to Jesus was ongoing, indicated by her presence at the Crucifixion and Resurrection accounts in all four Gospels.

When they arrived at Jesus' tomb, Mary and her companions discovered that the stone had already been removed from the entrance (John 20:1). John later makes it clear that Jesus was not limited by physical barriers after His resurrection (verse 19)—no stone could have stood in His way. But apparently, part of God's plan was to provide ample proof that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead (Acts 1:3). Allowing Jesus' followers access to His empty tomb would be one of many ways God would show them the reality of the Resurrection.

Mary would soon learn that Jesus was alive. But when she first saw the open tomb, she assumed His body had been taken. She ran to tell Peter and John (John 20:2).

Discuss

? Mary Magdalene followed Jesus because He had completely transformed her life.

How has your life been transformed by Jesus?

? Why do you think Mary did not immediately realize Jesus had risen from the dead?

Seeing and Believing

John 20:3–9

Say: When Mary saw the empty tomb, she thought someone must have moved Jesus' body to an unknown location. When Simon Peter saw the empty tomb and the linen wrappings lying there, he left the tomb "wondering what had happened" (Luke 24:12). John seemed to have more insight, since "he saw and believed" (John 20:8).

In John 20:2, Mary Magdalene ran to tell the disciples that Jesus' body was missing. In verse 3, Peter and John ran to the tomb to see for themselves. John arrived first and saw the linen that had been wrapped around Jesus' body, but he didn't enter the tomb. When Peter caught up with John, he went right inside. He saw not just the linen wrappings, but also the cloth that had been around Jesus' head. This was not the chaotic scene that would have resulted from a grave robbery, as the Jewish leaders insinuated had happened (Matthew 28:11–15). When John entered the tomb, he saw the evidence of Christ's resurrection and believed (John 20:8).

Only later, with Jesus' help, would John and the rest of the disciples grasp the Scriptures that had said Jesus would die and then rise again (verse 9; Luke 24:45–47). Until that time, His followers' faith would rest on the evidence before them—including an empty tomb.

What increased the disciples' ability to understand the biblical prophecies concerning Jesus' death and resurrection? Of course, Jesus' post-Resurrection work miraculously helped them understand everything written about Him "in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms" (verses 44–45). After the Day of Pentecost (ten days after Jesus' ascension), the Holy Spirit was at work in a new way, guiding the believers into all truth (John 14:26; 16:13). On that day, Peter preached with the Spirit's anointing, explaining how David prophetically spoke in Psalm 16 about the Messiah's resurrection (Acts 2:25–31). Peter could confidently proclaim that God raised Jesus from the dead, fulfilling the Scriptures (verse 32) and "has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah" (verse 36).

Resource Packet Item 1: The Necessity of the Resurrection

In 1 Corinthians 15:14–19, Paul explains the necessity of the Resurrection, reminding us that Jesus changed everything by triumphing over death. Students will read the passage and reflect on the significance of the Resurrection.

Although nearly two thousand years have passed since the miracle of Jesus' resurrection, it continues to hold the central place in our faith. To better understand the significance of the Resurrection, we should study the Old Testament prophecies related to it, the testimonies in the Gospels of those who encountered Jesus afterward, and the importance of the Resurrection as taught in the Scriptures (for example, 1 Corinthians 15).

Discuss

? How do you think you would have reacted to the empty tomb if you had been there that Sunday morning with Mary and the other women? Explain.

Part 2—The Risen Lord

Mary's Sorrow

John 20:10–14

Say: After Peter and John went home, Mary remained outside the tomb (John 20:10–11). John uses the same word here to describe Mary’s weeping that he used in John 11:33 when Lazarus’s sister was mourning his death. In both cases, the women were not only grieving the death of someone they loved, but they were likely disappointed and uncertain of Jesus’ intentions.

When the angels asked why Mary was crying, she said, “Because they have taken away my Lord . . . and I don’t know where they have put him” (John 20:13). She mistakenly believed the situation had been orchestrated by some human power. But Jesus himself, under trial days earlier, had told Pilate, “You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above” (19:11). These events were unfolding according to God’s purpose, not because of any human authority.

As she wept, Mary turned and saw Jesus—but did not realize that it was Him (20:14). Mary was not the only one who did not immediately recognize Jesus after His resurrection. Later, even after they had already seen Him in person, Jesus’ closest disciples did not recognize Him on the Galilee shore (21:4). And two other disciples spent considerable time walking and talking with Jesus before He revealed His identity to them (Luke 24:13–35).

Discuss

- ? Why do you think Mary grieved Jesus’ death so deeply?
- ? What might keep you from clearly recognizing Jesus today?

Jesus Reveals His Identity

John 20:15–16

Say: Jesus had completely changed Mary Magdalene’s life, delivering her from demonic control, redeeming her, and welcoming her to participate in His ministry. Standing outside His empty tomb, Mary was beside herself with grief and desperation. Where had her Savior gone?

When He appeared to Mary, Jesus asked her the same questions the angels had: “Dear woman, why are you crying? . . . Who are you looking for?” (John 20:15). Thinking Jesus was a gardener, Mary suspected He might have taken away the Lord’s body. She begged Him to confess where Jesus was, so she could retrieve and care for His body.

But then Jesus broke through her grief with one word: “Mary” (verse 16). Suddenly, she recognized Him and cried out, “Rabboni!” This was a form of the word *rabbi* (meaning “teacher”) that often referred to religious leaders and educators. In one moment, Mary’s confusion, disappointment, and sorrow were swept away by the joy of seeing Jesus, victoriously risen from the dead.

Resource Packet Item 2: Evidences of the Resurrection

God provided an abundance of evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. Students will consider three types of evidence to strengthen their faith and witness.

When we share the good news about Jesus, we are not telling a story about a hero or philosopher who has been dead for centuries. We're talking about the living Son of God who conquered death once and for all. He will completely transform anyone who surrenders to Him, preparing them to live forever in unbroken communion with Him.

Discuss

? The miracle of Jesus' resurrection was a vital part of the message spread by the Early Church. Why is it still important to talk about the Resurrection when sharing the gospel today?

? Share about a time when God's presence turned your confusion into peace, your disappointment into hope, or your sorrow into joy.

Part 3—The Great Commission

The Resurrection Announced

John 20:17–18

Say: After appearing to Mary outside the empty tomb, Jesus immediately sent her to spread the message to the other disciples that He was alive. The next phase of God's redemption plan was about to begin.

Mary clung to Jesus (also see Matthew 28:9), not ready to let her Savior go anytime soon. It's not too difficult to imagine the intense emotional swing anyone would go through in Mary's situation. She went from believing the most important Person in her life was dead to seeing Him standing right in front of her, alive and well. Regardless of emotions, Jesus had a more pressing mission for Mary. He gave her the responsibility of telling the disciples that He was alive and would be ascending to "my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17). His phrasing reflects the relationship with God that Jesus has made possible for all of us. He is the One who gives believers "the right to become children of God" (1:12). This supernatural second birth is made possible only by God's power (1:13; 3:5–8).

Jesus' return to the Father would begin a new phase in the disciples' lives. No longer would Jesus be physically present with them; instead, He would send the Holy Spirit in His place (14:16–18). "In fact, it is best for you that I go away," Jesus had told the disciples before His death, "because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment" (16:7–8).

Discuss

? Why do you think Jesus chose to appear first to Mary Magdalene after His resurrection?

? In what ways is it "best" for Jesus' followers that He has ascended and the Holy Spirit has come (John 16:7)?

Sent into the World

John 20:19–23

Say: Mary Magdalene told the disciples about her early morning encounter with Jesus, and that evening they saw Him for themselves. The fact that they were fearfully gathered in a locked room didn't stop Jesus from suddenly appearing among them!

Jesus' first words to the disciples—"Peace be with you" (John 20:19)—were especially necessary. Not only were the disciples paralyzed with fear of the Jewish leaders, but they were likely consumed with guilt after deserting Jesus at His crucifixion. He had foretold how the disciples would react to His arrest and execution (Mark 14:27), but they all insisted they would not leave Him (verse 31). Having been proven correct, Jesus did not rebuke them. Instead, He showed them His hands and side, confirming that He was the One who had been crucified and was now alive again (John 20:20).

Jesus' followers were filled with joy when they saw Him. But instead of pausing to celebrate and reflect on what had happened, Jesus immediately called the disciples to action. Repeating His blessing of peace, He said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (verse 21). He did not expect them to undertake the mission without the presence of the Holy Spirit, so "he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (verse 22). Some commentators believe His actions anticipate the full outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). Others believe this was the beginning of the Holy Spirit's indwelling once the disciples put their faith in the risen Jesus—the same indwelling every believer since then has experienced at salvation.

A key element of the disciples' message would be the forgiveness of sins (John 20:23). Jesus' followers could offer new believers the assurance of God's forgiveness, and so can we. What a wonderful message we have been given: When people accept Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf, their sins are completely forgiven! On the other hand, if they refuse to accept the gospel, their sins remain unforgiven.

Resource Packet Item 3: Forgiveness Facts

This information sheet reminds students of some of the key facts about receiving forgiveness from God and extending forgiveness to others.

"By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life" (2 Peter 1:3). We have forgiveness of sins, a new relationship with the Father, and the power of the Holy Spirit. We also have the responsibility to tell people that they can become God's children too. Fulfilling this mission is not always easy, but in every situation, we can remember Jesus' promise: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Discuss

? Instead of rebuking the disciples for their failure, Jesus spoke peace to them. How might this help us approach God when we have failed Him?

? Sharing the good news of Jesus is one of the most important things Christians can do. How would you respond to someone who believes God can't (or won't) forgive them?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Mary Magdalene and the other disciples experienced instant joy when Jesus appeared to them, victoriously risen from the dead. As Jesus' followers, we can experience the same joy and then share it with others. Jesus—our Savior who miraculously conquered the grave about two thousand years ago—is still offering the gift of forgiveness and everlasting life to anyone who will follow Him.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Consider how much joy you experience in serving Jesus. Pray David's words from Psalm 51:12: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you."
- Think of one person who needs to hear about God's forgiveness. Pray for an opportunity to share the gospel with him or her this week.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Living Redeemer.

Job 19:23–27

Tuesday:

Resurrection Hope.

Psalm 16:1–11

Wednesday:

Jesus Christ Lives.

Luke 24:36–48

Thursday:

Promise of Resurrection.

John 5:19–20

Friday:

Resurrection Body.

1 Corinthians 15:49–58

Saturday:

Newness of Life.

Colossians 3:1–10