

“My Lord and My God!” (John 20)

April 1, 2018 (Easter Sunday)

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I don't know about you, but I'm glad that it's April. Only in the past few days has it started to feel like spring. It was a long winter, and we still have about three, small, stubborn mounds of snow at the edge of the parking lot. But the rest of the snow has melted, and the temperature is getting a bit warmer. And before too long things will start to get greener.

I love it when spring arrives, because it gives us a feeling of hope. We see signs of life after a long period of dead leaves and bare branches. The seasons of nature remind us of the seasons of life, and we can see signs of both new life and death all around us. Five weeks ago, we got a new dog, a puppy who was about twelve weeks old at the time. She's already grown quite a bit, and she can be very playful. On the other hand, we look at our older dog, who at twelve years old is slowing down and sometimes walks with a limp.

But our lives—or the lives of our pets—aren't like the seasons. The seasons come and go in cycles. Our lives aren't cyclical; they only move in one direction. While we all were young at one point (if we're not young now), we know that we're getting older, and that eventually our bodies will decay and die. Even this past week, I saw evidence of that. Last Sunday night, I found out that the wife of a family friend died. She was probably only in her mid-thirties. She had a rare disease that caused her body to create way too many of one protein and not enough of the corresponding protein. And though she had some experimental treatments with stem cells, she couldn't be healed. I only met her on two occasions, but I was very sad to hear about her death. She left behind a husband and two young children.

Someone else I know this week died. He was in his late sixties and had multiple health problems, including a major stroke several years ago. I saw him the day before he died. He was having trouble breathing and he wasn't very responsive, in part because he was on morphine and was tired. He couldn't talk. But with a bit of effort he could open his eyes and nod his head. Viewed from one perspective, it was sad to see him in the shape he was in. He was in his bed, leaning to one side, a tube bringing oxygen to his gaping mouth. He had lost quite a bit of weight, his breathing was labored, and his skin was very pale and unhealthy looking.

But viewed from another perspective, his situation wasn't sad. And neither was his death. That's because trusted that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God. He trusted that Jesus'

perfect, righteous life was credited to his account and that Jesus' death on the cross paid for all his sins. He trusted that Jesus rose from the grave on the third day, the first day being the day when Jesus was killed by crucifixion. He believed that Jesus' resurrection was a vindication of who Jesus is and what his death accomplished. He believed that Jesus "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:25).¹ And because he believed that, and because he embraced Jesus as his Savior, Lord, and God, I knew that this was not the end of his story. I looked at him and said, "One day, you'll get a resurrected body, a perfect body that won't have all these problems, a body that will never die."

The great claim of Christianity is that there is eternal life for those who are united to Jesus. Those who trust Jesus will die. But as Jesus once said, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). Those who belong to Jesus will one day be raised from the dead and their bodies will be transformed, or glorified, so that they will be immortal. This will happen when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead and to make all things new. And the reason we trust that this will happen is because almost two thousand years ago, Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is the first installment of a new creation, a world that is made perfect, a world in which there is no more evil, disease, war, or death.

This sounds almost too good to be true. Everything in life seems to head towards a fall and the long death of winter. Can there really be an ultimate spring and an endless summer? Can there really be eternal life after death?

Well, that is the claim of Christianity. And I believe it is true. The reason I believe that Christianity is true is because it makes the most sense of life, because it provides us great hope, and because there is evidence that supports its claims.

Today, I want us to see three things about Jesus and his resurrection. One, no one would have fabricated this story. Two, I want us to see why Jesus lived, died, and rose again. And, three, I want us to see what a right response to Jesus looks like. We'll do that by taking a look at what the Gospel of John says about Jesus' resurrection.

We're going to read John 20 today. We'll start by reading verses 1–13:

¹ 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.

² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

not know where they have laid him.”³ So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb.⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.⁵ And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in.⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there,⁷ and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.⁸ Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;⁹ for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.¹³ They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

It’s Sunday, and Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb of Jesus. In the other Gospels, we’re told that Mary was with some other women, and that they went to the tomb to put spices on Jesus’ body. This was a form of embalming a body; the spices would help cover the smell of the decomposing body. Because Jesus was hastily buried, they didn’t have the opportunity to do this before he was put in the tomb.

It’s quite clear that Mary wasn’t expecting Jesus to be resurrected from the grave. She thinks some people have taken Jesus’ body from the tomb. She says this to Peter and John (“the other disciple”) and to the angels. And it seems like the disciples weren’t really expecting this. In Luke’s Gospel, we’re told, “Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:10–11). Mark says that the women were afraid after they saw the empty tomb (Mark 16:8). Matthew says that even after they saw the risen Jesus, some of the disciples doubted (Matt. 28:17).

The point is that no one seemed to believe that Jesus would rise from the dead. People in Jesus’ day knew dead people stayed dead. British theologian N. T. Wright says that Gentiles weren’t expecting this sort of thing.² He also says that Jewish people “never imagined that ‘resurrection’ would happen to one person in the middle of time; they believed it would happen to all people at the end of time [Dan. 12:2; John 11:23-24]. The Easter stories are very strange,

² “Nobody in the pagan world of Jesus’ day and thereafter actually claimed that somebody had been truly dead and had then come to be truly, and bodily, alive once more.” N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 76.

but they are not projections of what people ‘always hoped would happen.’”³ The apostles weren’t expecting that a man would come back from the grave in an indestructible body in the middle of history.

If no one was expecting Jesus’ resurrection, we shouldn’t think that people simply made this story up. There is simply no evidence that a group of people fabricated this story. The details of the story would be too unbelievable to make up. After all, if a Jewish person were to make this story up, they wouldn’t have women being the first witnesses of the empty tomb. In the first century in Palestine, a woman’s testimony was almost useless. In that male-dominated society, a woman’s testimony would be heard in court only in rare cases.⁴ Now, that’s not a biblical or Christian view of women, but that was what people believed in that day. If you were making up a story, you wouldn’t have women as the first witnesses. You would likely have rich men or priests see the empty tomb first.

Also, the apostles would have nothing to gain by making up this story. Christianity put them at odds with the Roman Empire, the superpower of the day that controlled the whole area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. This area included good portions of the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Europe. Christians occasionally died because of their faith. The earliest Christians were Jews, and the Roman Empire tolerated the Jewish religion. But it did not tolerate Christianity for almost three hundred years. Who would make up a story that would lead to their own death?

There are many other reasons to believe that the resurrection is true. You can read about them in the article that was included with your bulletin.⁵ If you read that article, you’ll see that it points you to some online resources if you want to learn more.

The second thing I want us to see is why Jesus’ death and resurrection matter. Let’s read verses 14–23:

¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take

³ N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 192.

⁴ Flavius Josephus the Jewish historian, writes in his *Antiquities* 4.8.15, “But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex.”

⁵ Brian Watson, “Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” <https://wbcommunity.org/evidence-resurrection-jesus-christ>.

him away.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

It was early in the morning and still dark when Mary went to the tomb. And she was now weeping. So, it’s understandable that she wouldn’t recognize Jesus. She assumes this man who is now talking to her is a gardener. That’s a reasonable guess, since Jesus was crucified and buried in a garden (John 19:41). When Mary hears her own name called by Jesus, she recognizes who is talking to her. Perhaps that’s an echo of what Jesus said earlier in John’s Gospel. He called himself the good shepherd who leads and lays down his life for his people, his sheep. He said, “The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:3).

But perhaps Mary wasn’t so mistaken. Maybe Jesus is a bit of a gardener. Bear with me for a moment. The big story of the Bible says that God created human beings in his image and after his likeness (Gen. 1:26), to reflect his glory, to serve him and to obey him. Essentially, we were made to know and love God, to live all of life under God’s authority, and to let others know about God, too. At the beginning of the Bible, God made the first two human beings and he put them in a garden. I think this is a literal event that also has symbolic meaning. The first human beings were supposed to keep the garden (Gen. 2:15) and they were supposed to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). And if you think about it, you start to get this image: Outside the garden is wilderness, a wild, undeveloped area. And as God’s image bearers worshiped and obeyed God and as they were fruitful and multiplied, having children who also worshiped God, they would be able to expand the garden until it filled the whole earth so that it became a paradise, full of the glory of God.

Now, that sounds like a beautiful thing. But there’s a problem. The first human beings didn’t trust God and obey him. They doubted his goodness. They wanted to be like God. In

effect, they tried to remove God from his throne. As a result, God kicked them out of the garden, into the wilderness. And as a partial punishment for sin, God put his creation under a curse. Now, life would be hard; people would die. God did this to limit the rebellion of human beings. God loves his creation and doesn't want evil—particularly the evil of rebellious human beings—to ruin it.

Now, if you're reading the Bible thoughtfully and you read the first three chapters of the Bible, you may wonder, "How can we get back to the garden? How can we get back into God's presence? How can we have a right relationship with him? How can go to a place where we will never die?"

As you read the Old Testament, you see how all human beings are rebellious. And, frankly, you don't have to read the Bible to see that. Just look around. Look at how rebellious even little children can be. We can't make our lives into a garden. We can't remove all the weeds from our lives, let alone the whole world. People have tried, and they have failed, again and again.

The only solution comes from God. God the Father sent his Son, Jesus, into the world. He did that in part so that Jesus could fulfill God's plans for humanity. Jesus is the only person who perfectly loved, obeyed, worshiped, and served God. He is the ultimate image bearer of God, the true image and likeness of God. He is the perfect human being, the only one who has any right to live in the garden of God.

But how can Jesus bring people like us into the garden? We are made unclean by our sin, our disobedience to God, our rebellion against him, our ignoring him. God is a perfect judge who must make sure that the guilty receive the appropriate sentence for their crimes. God cannot allow rebels to live in his garden, so the appropriate sentence is death. Really, when we choose to turn away from God, we turn away from the source of life, and we find a world of death. No one forces us to do this. We choose this willingly, because we don't love God.

The only way that Jesus can bring us into the garden is to take that sentence of death on himself. That's what he did on the cross. He died to pay the penalty for our sin. He endured God's punishment against sinners on the cross. "For our sake he [God the Father] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

And when Jesus rose from the grave, he was the first fruits of a new garden. Quite literally, the resurrected Jesus came out of the garden tomb as an immortal being, the second Adam planted in a garden. And he later ascended to heaven, where he is now with God the Father, praying and pleading for his people, serving as their great high priest. But someday he will come again, to judge everyone who has ever lived. Those who have turned to Jesus in faith, trusting that he is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he has done, will live in a garden paradise forever (Rev. 22:1–5 echoes the garden imagery of Gen. 2).

Jesus told his disciples, “Peace be with you.” The only way to have real peace in this life, the only way to have peace with God, is to know Jesus. Jesus said to the Father, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). That doesn’t mean that knowing facts about God gives us eternal life. No, it means we must know God because we have a relationship with him. That is what brings us peace. We don’t earn a relationship with God. We don’t make ourselves acceptable to God. No, we must simply receive salvation as a gift.

Now, I want us to see what a right relationship with God looks like. Let’s read verses 24–31:

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these 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.

When Jesus appeared to the other disciples, Thomas wasn’t there. Thomas gets a bad rap. He’s known as “doubting Thomas.” For him, seeing is believing. But earlier in John’s Gospel, Thomas said he was willing to die with Jesus (John 11:16). So, Thomas was a person who followed Jesus and trusted him. Still, he couldn’t believe that Jesus had risen.

Jesus doesn't rebuke Thomas. Instead, he appears to him and to the rest of the disciples on the following Sunday. And Jesus invites Thomas to see him and to touch him.

When Thomas sees Jesus, he cannot help but say, "My Lord and my God!" One of John's goals in writing his Gospel is to make it clear that Jesus is God. He begins his Gospel that way (John 1:1) and here at the end he records Thomas' confession of faith.

People who truly believe in Jesus know that he is Lord and God. I think we generally understand what the word "God" means, but it's hard for us to understand what "Lord" means. When we hear that word, we may think of the House of Lords in London. The word sounds antiquated. But John's initial readers would have known what was being said. During this time, the superpower of the world was the Roman Empire, and its leader was the emperor, also known as Caesar. And Caesar was known as Lord. According to one dictionary, Lord means "one having power and authority over others."⁶ Caesar was the most powerful man in the world.

He wasn't just known as Lord, but he was also known as "the son of God" and a "savior." There is an inscription of a decree made in 9 BC by an official in the eastern part of the Roman Empire that says the birthday of Augustus—the emperor reigning over the Roman Empire at the time Jesus was born—should be celebrated. This official wanted the calendar to be reset to the emperor's birthday, in 63 BC.⁷ The inscription claims that Augustus was a "savior"⁸ and "our god."⁹ Coins in the Roman Empire had titles of the emperor on them: *divi filius* ("son of God") and *pontifex maximus* ("greatest priest"). In the Roman Empire, the Caesar was worshiped as a god.

So, when Thomas says, "My Lord and my God!" he's saying that Jesus is the true God, the true Lord, the true King, the world's true ruler and ultimate authority. Thomas swears his allegiance to Jesus, not to Caesar.

The earliest Christians were willing to die rather than compromise that allegiance to Jesus. They would rather die than bow before the emperor and worship him. One of John's students was a man named Polycarp (69–155), who became the bishop of Smyrna, which is now known as Izmir, a city in Turkey. He became a martyr, a Christian who died for his faith. At the

⁶ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003).

⁷ John Dickson, *A Doubter's Guide to the Bible: Inside History's Bestseller for Believers and Skeptics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 133.

⁸ M. Eugene Boring, "Gospel, Message," ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009), 2:630.

⁹ *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones*, 2:458, quoted in Dickson, *A Doubter's Guide to the Bible*, 133.

time of his execution, some people tried to convince him to worship the emperor and therefore be saved from death. They said, “Why, what harm is there in saying, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ and offering incense” (and other words to this effect) “and thereby saving yourself?”¹⁰ But Polycarp refused. Then, “the magistrate persisted and said, ‘Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ,’ Polycarp replied, ‘For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’”¹¹ When Polycarp was told he would be burned by fire, he said, “You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish.”¹²

True Christians recognize that Jesus is not only Savior, but also Lord and God. I don’t think we have proper categories to understand what “Lord” really means. The most powerful man on earth is probably the president of our country, yet no matter who is in the White House, it seems like at least half the country hates him and doesn’t recognize his authority. And the president’s authority is limited, of course. But Jesus is Lord over everything. And when we come to him as Savior, he becomes Lord over all of our lives, not just our Sunday mornings or whenever we feel like being religious.

I think the reason many people don’t embrace Jesus is that issue of authority. We simply don’t want someone else to be Lord over our lives. That is why people reject Christianity. It’s not because Christianity is irrational or illogical. It’s not because there is no evidence to support the claims of Christianity. We have eyewitness testimony from several different witnesses, and the basic claims of Christianity are supported by philosophy and science. I think people often ignore that evidence because they don’t want a Lord.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel, an atheist, wrote these words several years ago: “I want atheism to be true and am uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t

¹⁰ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8, in Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 233.

¹¹ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9, in *ibid.*, 235.

¹² *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 11, in *ibid.*

want the universe to be like that.”¹³ He then says, “My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition.”¹⁴

We don’t want there to be a Lord God because we don’t want someone telling us what we can and can’t do, particularly in important areas of our lives like sex, marriage, money, how we use our time, and how we treat people who are different from us. I think people know that the Christian life isn’t an easy one, and they don’t want to take what they think is the hard road. As G. K. Chesterton put it, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”¹⁵

Yet if we reject Jesus because we reject his authority, we also reject his blessings. He said that those who believe—even when they haven’t seen him in the flesh—are blessed. John says he wrote his Gospel so that people would believe and have eternal life in Jesus. If you know Jesus, you know God and have eternal life. But if there’s no Lord Jesus in and over your life, there’s no eternal life for you. So many people say, “Rest in peace,” after someone has died. I’m here to tell you the truth: the only way to rest in peace is to have a right relationship with Jesus, the kind of relationship that Thomas and Mary Magdalene had. We will all have that moment when our bodies will fail. We all will die, whether in a sudden accident or slowly on a bed, tubes connected to our bodies, morphine in our veins. What happens next? Will you have eternal peace? You will if Jesus is your Lord and God.

We will all come under some authority. Something will rule over us, whether it’s something that we treasure the most or even our own desires. Entertainment, pleasure, money, politics, and almost anything else can function as our lord and god. But Jesus is the only God who would sacrifice his life for you. He’s the only Lord who can die for your sins and make you right with God. No one else, and nothing else will do that for you. I urge you to put your trust in him. And if you don’t know Jesus, please talk to me. I would love to help you know him and follow him.

¹³ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (1997), 130.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World?* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1912), 48.