

Session 8



The Ultimate Sign

THE POINT

Jesus's resurrection makes eternal life possible.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

In a speech called “More than Funny,” Christian comedian Michael Jr. discusses finding his purpose as a comedian. There are two parts to telling a joke, he says. There’s the setup, which is the story of the joke that draws you in, and yet it isn’t finished. The next part is where the punchline comes in. It’s the final part of the joke to be delivered that gives the purpose of the joke. He says that in comedy, many focus too much on the setup of a joke instead of the punchline. The same can happen in life, in that we focus very much on the setup of life (getting another degree, getting a promotion, a new house, a different relationship) without ever focusing on why we are doing those things.

For the last several weeks, we’ve explored the signs of who Jesus is and proclaimed to be. Each piece is a nugget of truth that helps us further understand the power, humanity, and divinity of Jesus, all wrapped up in who He is. However, it’s when we come to the resurrection that we get the punchline, meaning the ultimate purpose and sign for why Jesus came.

In today’s passage, we’re going to see those who, when they initially discovered the empty tomb of Jesus, were concerned with the “setup” material. This brought about more confusion at that moment. However, when they finally saw the resurrected Jesus, their understanding of the message and purpose was complete. This passage calls us to see the same today.

QUESTION 1:

Who do you know that really tells a good joke?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

JOHN 20:1-2

¹ On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark. She saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she went running to Simon Peter and to the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said to them, “They’ve taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve put him!”

Just three days earlier, Jesus had experienced excruciating death on the cross, as He voluntarily surrendered His life for the sins of the whole world. For those who witnessed that moment, it was both painful and memorable. The Messiah, Son of God, was dead.

Early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to tend to Jesus’s body at the tomb, as was the custom of that time (v. 1). Yet upon their arrival, the stone had been rolled away from the entrance of the tomb (v. 2), and Jesus’s body wasn’t there. While we want to think that this was a moment of belief for Mary, she actually struggled with what she witnessed.

So much so that in haste, she went and reported what she had discovered: Jesus’s body was no longer in the tomb, and she didn’t know where or how it had been moved (v. 2). Her comments perhaps implied she was blaming the Romans or the Jewish leaders who were responsible for Jesus’s death. Both John (“the one Jesus loved” [v. 2]), and Peter struggled to connect the dots between the empty tomb and the promise of resurrection as well.

There are slight variances in the gospel accounts regarding the discovery of the

resurrection, something skeptics have made much of. For example, while in other gospel accounts, we see that Mary was not alone in attending to Jesus’s body (see Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1), John’s account describes Mary alone. This isn’t as much of a discarding of the other women as it is to highlight Mary’s story in John’s writing. It would be similar to highlighting a quarterback making a game-winning touchdown throw. We recognize the quarterback made the throw, but many others were involved in the play—the linemen who kept him safe and the receiver who caught the ball for example.

Upon Mary’s report of what had happened to Jesus, Peter and John ran to confirm what she was saying, as this would have been significant news to them (John 20:3). Each person had different perspectives of this news. For Peter, he walked into the tomb and saw the clothes lying in an orderly fashion (v. 7). Then John looked in, and upon seeing the empty tomb, he believed that Jesus had arisen (v. 8), but none of them were sure of how it happened and how the Scriptures all came together (v. 9). With their lack of real understanding, the disciples returned to where the group had been meeting (v. 10).

Through all these events and occurrences, the truth that is central and clear across the gospel accounts is that the tomb was indeed empty.

Jesus's death on the cross is significant and affirms so many prophecies of His work in the atonement for sin. It was finished! But it is the resurrection that stands as the central message of Christianity. The truth of the resurrection has been called the capstone of Christianity. The complete gospel is this: Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose from the grave. No other system of religion can share this message or this hope. No other sign is of greater significance for the person and work of

Jesus than Himself as the crucified and risen Savior and Lord.

It is this event that all our preaching and ministry is based upon because, without the empty tomb, all else would be empty!

QUESTION 2:

What do you appreciate about Mary Magdalene from this passage?

JOHN 20:11-16

¹¹ But Mary stood outside the tomb, crying. As she was crying, she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² She saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus's body had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "Because they've taken away my Lord," she told them, "and I don't know where they've put him." ¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus. ¹⁵ "Woman," Jesus said to her, "why are you crying? Who is it that you're seeking?" Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." Turning around, she said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!"—which means "Teacher."

After the disciples left, Mary stood at the tomb perplexed and wept over what had happened (v. 11), most likely trying to figure out what had occurred. The language would have been similar to expressions of grief over the loss of loved ones, as shown earlier in the New Testament. In some ways, Mary may have wept because she couldn't carry out her last act of love for her Master—caring for Jesus's body. Not being able to prepare the body for burial was significant in the Jewish mindset.

Upon looking into the tomb, Mary saw two angels sitting in specific positions (v. 12). While the presence of angels is recorded in each one of the gospel accounts, the messages and interactions vary as far as the audience. For Mary's account, they inquired as to why she was crying (v. 13). In other gospel accounts, it's the angels that proclaim the greatest news, "He is not here. For he has risen" (Matt. 28:6; see also Mark 16:6; Luke 24:6). This statement became a central message for the church, and even a phrase that would be shared among believers

throughout the ages with the response being, "He is risen indeed!"

With great bravery at the appearance of the angels, Mary continued investigating as to what had happened to Jesus. Then she noticed someone standing behind her (John 20:14). We are given the identity of Jesus at this moment, but Mary still didn't know it was Him. Jesus asked the same question as the angels asked regarding why she was crying, but this time, Jesus added the question, "Who is it that you're seeking?" (v. 15) Mary must have surmised she had found the culprit of the crime: "supposing he was the gardener" (v. 15). But Mary offered a solution, saying she would go and get the body if only He would tell her where it was. It's as if Mary was saying, "I won't report your crime if you just tell me where you placed His body."

Then Jesus uttered her name, "Mary" (v. 16). She had heard Him say her name before with the same amount of compassion and understanding. This was a friend speaking to a friend, and in her response a student talking to her teacher: "Rabboni!" (v. 16). This was her Lord! At this moment, Mary's sorrow turned to joy. It was

a joy that wanted to embrace Him and the joy of seeing and knowing that He was alive. All that He had promised had come true. Jesus indeed was and is the risen Christ, the Son of God!

It doesn't go unnoticed that the first person to see and believe in the resurrection was a woman, which was historic. It was from this moment that a radical affirmation of the testimonial witness of Mary (and future women) to the resurrection began to be accepted. The barrier of being a woman in the Jewish system would begin to wane among Christians. Mary's testimony would soon be accepted by many. She knew what she saw and could testify to the resurrection of Jesus. This was yet another affirmation of the special place God has given to women throughout church history, just as Jesus had modeled throughout His earthly ministry.

QUESTION 3:

How do you know that Jesus is alive?

JOHN 20:17-18

¹⁷ "Don't cling to me," Jesus told her, "since I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that 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 she told them what he had said to her.

Upon Mary realizing that the gardener was Jesus, in her joy she reached out to embrace Him. Jesus's telling her, "Don't cling to me"

(v. 17), wasn't meant to be condemning to her or a rejection of being touched in this moment. Instead, it seemed to be more a statement

Engage

ANSWERING THE SKEPTICS

Over the centuries, people have composed many different explanations for Jesus's empty tomb. How would you respond if a friend made one of the following claims? (Choose one.)

“The disciples taught that Jesus lives in our hearts, but over time, that idea of a symbolic resurrection became a belief in a literal resurrection.”

“Some of the disciples must have taken Jesus's body during the night. They hid His corpse and then claimed He had risen.”

“Jesus must have fainted or gone unconscious until He was placed in the tomb. Then He woke up and walked out.”

to turn her direction toward what needed to happen the most at that moment. The uniqueness of this moment was how Mary became not only the first to see Jesus but also one of the first messengers sent by Jesus to proclaim the good news to the disciples (v. 17). There are a few things to notice about Mary's response in verse 18:

- **Mary went and announced Jesus's resurrection to the disciples.** It's important to see that Mary didn't waver in her obedience at this moment. She didn't wait until just the right moment to share. She immediately went to the disciples and shared the good news.
- **Mary shared a simple message, "I have seen the Lord!" (v. 18).** She had the greatest news and the greatest evidence to proclaim. While some doubted her message and even needed proof, we should see that the same message bears true today: He's alive!
- **Mary didn't add or take away from the message of Jesus, as she "told them what he had said to her" (v. 18).** Mary didn't make the words of Jesus her own or change them in any way. She simply shared what was revealed to her. We can see how sharing the clear and simple message has been used by the church to spread the gospel from that day forward.

QUESTION 4:

What are some ways we can share Jesus's good news with others?

Let's recap the simple truths of the good news:

- **God created a perfect world.** A part of His creation was man and woman. They were placed in the garden of Eden with one command: Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see Gen. 2:9). They were in relationship with God to that point.
- **Being tempted and by their own choice, they ate the fruit.** This one act introduced sin into the world for all time. Man's relationship with God was broken. (See Gen. 3.)
- **Since then, man has tried many things to appease God and earn salvation.** But God had a greater plan, and He promised One who would come and provide redemption.
- **Jesus came to earth, the Son of God born of a virgin, God wrapped in flesh, and lived a perfect life.** He never sinned even though He was tempted just like you and me.
- **Jesus died as an innocent man.** He voluntarily surrendered His life on the cross, not to be an example but as the payment for our sins. He took on the wrath of God.
- **Jesus arose three days after His death.** The empty tomb shows us that Jesus is alive. The purpose of God was fulfilled in Jesus's resurrection. He conquered sin and death.

QUESTION 5:

What are some lessons we can learn from this ultimate sign from Jesus?

LIVE IT OUT

Jesus's resurrection makes eternal life possible. Choose one of the following applications:

- **Connect.** Spend some time with a couple of others from the group reflecting upon all the barriers that Jesus took down so that you could hear the gospel message. Consider what barriers still exist today for people, and how you can be a part of taking those misconceptions down.
- **Go.** Reread Mary's message to the disciples. (See John 20:17-18.) Take a moment to write down or memorize how to share the gospel. Begin praying about someone you can share this message with this week.
- **Worship.** Take a moment to read the prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament and how the signs point to Jesus fulfilling them completely. A good study Bible is a great place to start. Spend time in personal worship for who Jesus is.



NOT IN VAIN

By Betty Hassler

Easter Day dawned old and gloomy. A light rain had begun to fall. My pastor husband, Sim, had planned to deliver the Easter message at his church's sunrise service, to be followed later by his regular sermon at 11:00. Instead, he stood beside my hospital bed holding my hand.

In the wee hours of the morning, I'd given birth to a stillborn daughter. We had known for months that my chances of carrying the child full-term were slim. I had a rare, misplaced placenta that had hospitalized me twice during my almost seven months of pregnancy.

I imagine some of you are ready to turn the page. Why read a sad story when you're in the middle of planning for the most joyous occasion in the Christian faith? Why? Because God never wastes a life experience. As Peter proclaimed in 1 Peter 1:7, our trials refine us and reinforce our faith.

What I learned from that ordeal causes me to say with the psalmist, "Weeping may stay overnight, but there is joy in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). A Christian's joy is supernatural. Joy isn't found in our circumstances but in a Person—Jesus Christ.

Jesus volunteered for His assignment to go to the cross because of the "joy that lay before him" (Heb. 12:2). His joy wasn't in suffering but in finishing the work of His life on earth. True, His life was unique—on one day, once and for all, He paid the price for our sins. However, His life offers lessons for the rest of us.

May I share with you some of the truths that have reinforced my faith since my child's death?

DEATH ISN'T THE ENEMY

I would never make light of my daughter's death, as though it didn't leave a permanent hole in my heart. Sim and I had committed the baby to the

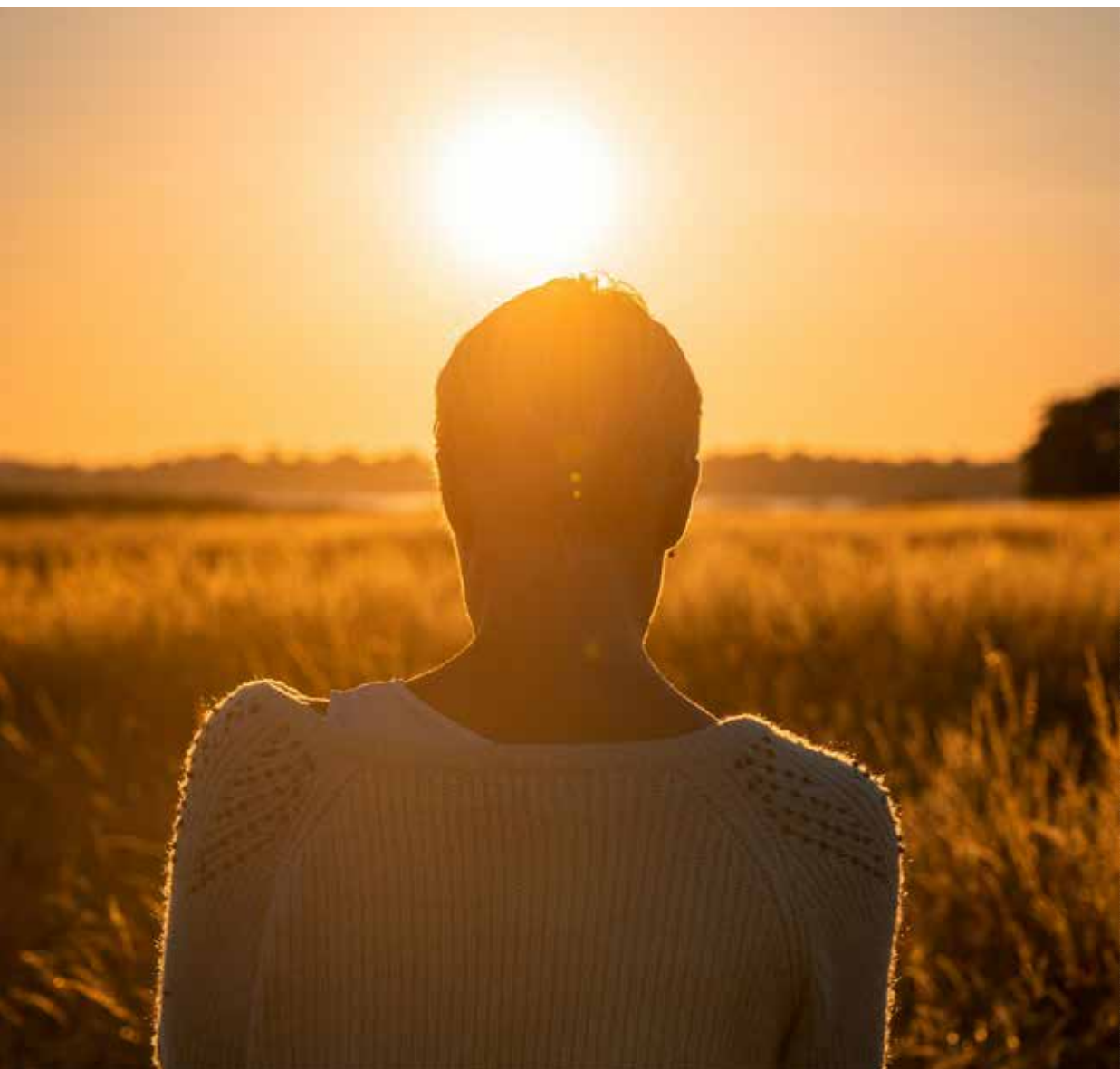
Lord when we first heard about the obstacles that lay ahead for us. Our faith and the undying hope that sustains all life kept us optimistic to the end.

We had tried to prepare ourselves and our 3-year-old son, Scott, for what might happen. Instead of the teasing or questioning most expectant mothers experience, I looked into the concerned faces and sad eyes of friends.

Then our dreams were shattered. Death is the temporal end of life. In the months that followed, I happened across Psalm 56:8, which came to mean a great deal to me: "Put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?"

God is aware of each tear I shed. He collects them in His bottle! Just as He knows every hair on my head, He's present in every trial I face. I'm comforted to know that Jesus cried with Mary and Martha at the death of their brother, Lazarus. He felt their pain and responded in kind (John 11:35).

The Easter celebration must begin with death. Otherwise, there would be no resurrection. We are all grains of wheat, falling to the ground so that new grains will produce more wheat (John 12:24). Paul said death no longer has the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:57). Our enemy is the father of lies and the sting of sin.



BURIAL ISN'T THE END

We buried Shera Lynn Hassler in the family plot in Waco, Texas. I wasn't physically able to attend the graveside service, but my family has visited the grave often as other family members have taken their places alongside her.

We felt blessed by the many people who paid their respects to our family in our loss. One family

kept our son until I was well enough to care for him. Some drove long distances to see us. Others brought food. Still others simply sat with me in silence. These acts of kindness are what Christian friends do.

Just as family and friends gathered to mourn with us, Jesus's closest companions felt the loss of His death. Some prayed in an upper room. Others

Burial pays homage to our Christian loved ones who were at home in the body, but now are at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-9).

walked back to their homes feeling the weight of the injustice done to Him.

If we believed that our decaying bodies were the end of us, that no eternal life awaited us in heaven, we would be as those who grieve with no hope beyond the grave (1 Thess. 4:13).

Burial pays homage to our Christian loved ones who were at home in the body, but now are at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-9).

RESURRECTION IS GUARANTEED

The morning of our daughter's death, Sim preached the morning worship service with my blessing. As only God in His perfect foreknowledge could do, He had given Sim a message that needed little revision considering the early morning tragedy.

The title of the message was "Not in Vain," taken from 1 Corinthians 15:14. Sim pointed out that had Jesus not risen from the grave, He would have died in vain. The word *vain* means "empty" or "worthless." Because Jesus had risen, His death was but a prelude to victory, a victory Christians today can share.

On Easter, our child went to be with the Lord, and Easter was our hope of a blessed eternal reunion. Shortly after Shera Lynn's death, a young couple in our church lost a son at birth. Our son, Scott, stood beside me at the bedside of the mother. "Just think," the little guy said, "our babies are playing together in heaven." Out of the mouths of babes.

The message of Easter is that Christ's resurrection is a guarantor of our resurrection someday (1 Cor. 15:20).

GOD OFFERS ETERNAL HOPE

Two years later, I gave birth to a cute and cuddly baby boy. He's been a delightful son and an answer to his older sibling's prayers for a brother. Scott's hope was rewarded.

In the Bible the word *hope* doesn't mean we're counting on a thing to happen. It means we're assured a certain thing will happen. Heaven is for real. Christ is preparing our place in glory and looking forward to our eternal presence with Him.

God didn't ask of us anything He Himself wasn't willing to endure. My family's painful loss couldn't be compared to His anguish as He watched His only child die on Calvary. Jesus willingly gave His life for sinners—enemies of the cross.

I've come to appreciate the depth of God's sacrificial love—love that is so high, so deep, and all-encompassing that nothing can separate us from it.

Betty Hassler is the author of *A Beam of Hope* and *A Stash of Faith*. She regularly contributes to multiple Lifeway magazines. Betty and her husband, Sim, live in Northwest Florida near their two sons and grandchildren.