

RUF Bible Study – John
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John 20 – Resurrection

Have you heard the fairly famous “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming!” sermon? You can find it on youtube if you search for it, and I recommend you do that. It’s stirring. A pastor goes through a litany of woes on the Friday of Jesus’ death, and at the end of every one, he says, “But Sunday’s coming.”

The people were wailing. The disciples were confused. But Sunday’s coming!

They nailed Jesus’ hands to the tree. They nail my king’s feet to the cross. They raised him in the air. But Sunday’s coming!

My daughter Anna first saw this a few years ago when she was four or five years old. She still remembers it, but she has added a few lines to it. She says. “It’s Friday! All the women are cryin’; all the dogs are barkin’; the people will get hypothermia and die! It’s Friday!”

Friends, it is Friday. We looked last time on John 19 and the cross of Christ. This is the beautiful, terrible moment when Jesus hangs upon the tree, crucified for crimes he did not commit.

Let’s take the time to think for a minute about what this Friday means for us.

It means that it looks like the devil has won. Have you seen *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*? Do remember when Aslan was killed, and the white witch and her minions were dancing with glee at the death of the lion? My heart sunk at that moment.

That’s where we are. In despair. The bad guys have taken over. The hope of the world has been defeated. The hero has died.

Your parents have divorced. Your dad has left. Your mom has shot herself. Your grandma has cancer. Your dog died. You failed your class. He doesn’t like you. You can’t get a job. You can’t stop doing that again and again. You find out you’re sick. You can’t sleep.

This is where we live, isn’t it? We live in Friday. We live in death and destruction.

Why do we have hope? Why should we care about what happens?

Two and half years ago, my friend Dustin Salter was out riding a bike in his neighborhood with his two boys, and he fell off, hit his head and instantly went into a coma. He wasn’t wearing a helmet, but he didn’t exactly take a nasty fall. He suffered and died five months later. He was 38 years old and left behind a wife and three kids under 10.

What is that?? Why did that happen? Who is going to fix that? How am I going to process that? Is that really survival of the fittest? If so, then why does it make me so angry, confused and sad? I think John 20 gives us some important answers.

The evidence of the empty tomb

Let’s start at the end of John 19. Verse 42 says, “So they laid him there.” Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were two secret converts and disciples. They spent some good money to lay this man in a tomb, far above his position in life (he was penniless, homeless and disowned by his family).

The Jews would bury their dead in caves instead of burning or embalming the bodies. They wrapped the bodies up around and put 100 pounds of spices on and around the body. They would put a different wrapping around the face, to keep the jaw from opening. Jesus would have been buried in this fashion. The Romans had heard that something fishy might be going down with Jesus, so they posted a guard in front of his tomb.

This is where they’ve laid him after his death.

Now, just to remind ourselves – they didn’t expect him to raise from the dead. These were normal, rational people. Normal, rational people don’t believe people rose from the dead. C’mon. It’s not like they lived “back then” when people were more superstitious and susceptible to those ideas. If anything, the Jews especially were the least likely group to ever believe in an individual bodily resurrection.

That’s why when Mary Magdalene gets to the tomb, she doesn’t assume that Jesus was resurrected, although that would have made at least some sense considering what Jesus had said and done with his message and his miracles. But her first thought was what any rational person would think – they must have taken his body!

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2009, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on John from Boice, Skip Ryan, Gary Burge, D.A. Carson, Hughes, Wright, Calvin and Leon Morris and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Ricky Jones, Fred Harrell and Scott Sherman. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

She runs to Peter and John to tell them something is wrong. He's gone! They take off running to the tomb, and John gets there first to check it out.

Now notice what happens next. They've heard that Jesus is gone. They don't think people rise from the dead. They have seen someone come back from the dead – that was Lazarus back in John 11. And they find Jesus' death wraps in a peculiar position.

The linens weren't gone. If someone had stolen his body, why would they unwrap him and take him naked?

Not only were they not gone, they were lying there, and the text indicates they were lying there as if the body were still in it. It was still wrapped up, but the body was gone. So if they unwrapped him and left the linens, how would they rewind them around an imaginary body?

They sat and considered. The verbs here in the Greek point us to something. On the one hand, they looked. They simply saw. They took in information. On the other hand, they *looked*. The word there is the one we get the word "theory" from. They thought about it. Some pieces fit together in their minds. They saw with their eyes and then they saw with their minds and hearts. The text says that at that moment, *He saw and believed*. Before that moment, they hadn't really believed or understood that Jesus was going to rise from the dead. They'd heard it. But they didn't believe it.

Now they did.

I would say this is the most important chapter in the Bible in many regards. It is the chapter that proves all the rest of the Bible is what it says it is. If this happened, then maybe you can believe in the other things. But if it didn't happen, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then who really cares about the rest? Honestly.

Jesus' teachings aren't that remarkable by themselves. His teachings alone never really changed anyone. They didn't change his own disciples. Look at them cowering at the cross. Mary doesn't believe what he said about himself. They're all cowards. You can't love your neighbor as yourself. Get real.

But what if it did happen? What if Jesus really did conquer death? Then wouldn't that be amazing? Wouldn't that be spectacular? Wouldn't that change things? Wouldn't that give an added importance to what he said and did, and wouldn't it mean something about the cross?

Maybe this isn't all there is after all. Maybe God is real, and he will judge, and things will be set right. Maybe Friday isn't the final answer. Maybe, just maybe Sunday is coming.

Yesterday I watched the trailer for the upcoming *Where the Wild Things Are* movie (it looks great). As we watched scenes from the movie, a few words flashed across the screen.

They were: Inside each of us is hope. Inside each of us is fear. Inside each of us is adventure.

There is fear inside of you. Fear that Friday will win. That the white witch will have her day. That the government will keep the lid on what really happened (X Files), they'll never get off the island (Lost) that justice will never be found out, that the truth will be squelched forever, that death will reign.

But inside each of you is hope. I submit you hope for something else, something more, something greater. You know it can't be true that justice will never win. You cannot live with that. People cannot live with that hopelessness. There must be a purpose, even if we can't figure it all out. I'm trying to tell you that hope is Jesus. Death has been defeated after all. Aslan rises from the dead. Mulder comes back to find the truth with Scully. John Locke returns to lead the people. Things will be set right. Death is not the final answer. Love wins.

And there is an adventure inside each of you. It's the adventure of faith in God, walking with Christ.

The foundation of faith²

Let's look at the faith shown in this passage, because what we find is that people are truly and honestly believing in Jesus' resurrection.

The first thing I want you to see is something Tim Keller points out – the *impossibility* of faith. No one here gets it right off. That's been a theme throughout John's gospel. The work of God goes unnoticed by people unless he reveals it to them. You don't just naturally understand what Jesus is talking about. He has to show you. It's a gift. No one comes to the Father unless he draws you.

Look at Mary. She actually meets Jesus and thinks *he's* one of her enemies, someone who has taken Jesus' body away. She doesn't recognize him and who he is.

That means that you have to admit you don't understand before you can understand. This is always the first step in getting help. You have to admit that you need help. If you can admit to yourself, to someone else, and to God that you don't know God, that you don't understand Jesus, that you aren't near to him, then it very well may be that he is *already* at work in your life. You're waking up when you say that. You're coming to.

It's not surprising that people don't see and believe in Jesus. We all know that dead people don't come back from the dead. But the people in the text believed the impossible, didn't they? Why didn't they just do what was normal? Normally, the followers of the dead messiah would have to anoint the next in line, or the brother, so they could continue.

² Some of these points come from a sermon by Tim Keller.

But that's not what happened. The impossible happened, and then they impossibly actually believed it because it was true. Look at the evidence. Admit your hard heart and neglect to this.

We sing the song Help My Unbelief – My help my come from you. We are admitting that belief is a gift from God, and that we struggle with faith even after being Christians. Can you admit that too?

Okay if faith is impossible, and it is a gift from God, then what is it? Faith is *belief in* something. It's not just something that you believe, but it is belief that involves trust.

Do you believe that a man can walk on a wire? Have you seen the students slacklining on the south oval? They set up a wire spanning two trees about two feet from the ground. It's not that tight, so it bows when you walk on it. With a lot of practice, it is possible to stand on that wire. With even more practice you can take a few steps. And a very few people can walk across backward and forward. It seems fairly impossible to me, but I know it can be done. I've seen it.

I recently watched the documentary *Man on Wire*. It's about Philippe Petit, a tightrope walker. In 1974 he strung a wire and then walked across The World Trade Center Towers, which has been called the "artistic crime of the century."

All fair and good. I saw the movie. I know it can happen. I can believe it, though it sounds impossible. That's still not faith.

Faith would be if Philippe went across a few times and demonstrated he could do it. If he put something on his back, something heavy and bulky. Then he walked back and forth and proved he could do it. Then he looked at me and said, "You. Get on. Come with me." Getting on his back would be faith. I would be personally invested in what I believe. I'm believing in him, trusting in him. It's not intellectual assent, but belief in him to be able to do it.

We all believe in something. It's not true that when you believe in Jesus, you are going from a neutral state of no faith to a positive state of faith. You have something in your life that is the ultimate. It's control. Or career. Or family. Or recognition. You can notice what that ultimate is for you when you get touchy if it's threatened. Look at what makes you irritable or depressed or angry – you're close to your ultimate.

Make Jesus your ultimate. Allow him to hold you. Trust in him alone for your salvation. Everything else will fail. No one else has proved he or she or it can rise from the dead. He has conquered death.

Does this describe your faith? Do you believe in Jesus or just believe Jesus?

Not only is faith impossible, but it's also *personal*. These people aren't believing in a concept, but in a person. They aren't believing in hope or faith or goodness or morality. Those concepts won't change you.

Believing in concepts seems like it will work in the short run. Believing in science gives you a certain motivation to explore and find truth for awhile. Believing in goodness gives you the motivation to help others. But when you see the corruption of people (the 1900s were the most destructive in the history of the world – are we really getting "better"?), and the exposure of your truths turning out to be untrue, you lose that motivation.

Jesus himself didn't want his followers to believe in his teachings as concepts. He rejects the idea that he is to be followed as a Great Moral Teacher. That will not change you.

Look at how he comes to Mary. He comes to her, and she doesn't know him. He talks to her, and she doesn't recognize his voice. She had heard him countless hours. She had listened to his teaching. But finally, he breaks through and says, "*Mary*."

The switch is flipped. She hears. She sees. She knows.

Believing in Jesus' resurrection is believing in him as a person. God actually became a person in time and space. Love became a person in history. That person is Jesus. That person died on the cross. That person rose again from the grave. That person matters, and he personally comes to you to speak to you as a person.

Do you know Jesus as a person or just as a concept? Do you talk to him? Do you read about him and listen to him?

Let's look at one other aspect of faith. Is faith really *evidential*? In some ways yes, but in other ways no. Faith cannot be completely reasoned through, yet it doesn't contradict reason. Look at Thomas.

Thomas wasn't there for the empty tomb. We don't know where Thomas had been hanging out, but it apparently wasn't with the disciples. He seems skeptical and also a bit obstinate. They tell him they'd seen Jesus, but he doesn't believe it. He offers a reasonable explanation – I won't believe it until I see it with my own eyes, until I touch the very wounds I know he had. Then, and only then will I believe.

There's a good part about Thomas here. He's not just going to believe what other people tell him. He wants facts. He wants evidence. He wants hard data.

Eight days later, Thomas gets what he wants. Jesus shows himself to Thomas and the others. He comes in peace, and he goes directly up to Thomas. "Put your hand here, and see my hands," he said. "And put out your hand, and place it by my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

What's interesting is that Thomas immediately knows it is Jesus. He instantly acknowledges and worships him. He doesn't inspect the body like he'd asked. He doesn't put on his safety glasses and his white coat to touch Jesus' wounds. He is convinced without doing all he wanted.

He has evidence enough to believe. He believes.

Do you put conditions on God? Are you saying, Well, God I'll believe in you if you do X Y or Z? Are you wanting more and more evidence?

That's not a crazy thing to want. But you have to realize that God isn't bound to follow your conditions. You may be putting up too many barriers to him. He's not unreasonable at all, but would you *really* be convinced if you had the evidence you wanted? If you read the gospels, you see that time and time again people saw amazing things Jesus said and did – they were there! – and they came up with some other interpretation for who Jesus was. Do you think you would do any differently?

Maybe it's time for you to look at Jesus through the eyes of faith. Maybe you've grown up in church all your life, and these stories have grown cold and dry for you. Look again at the wonder of the cross. Feel the weight of your sin there, the agony of bearing your transgressions. The pain and shame of the cross.

And you should consider the empty tomb this Easter. Look again at the wonder of the resurrection. See the hope that it brings for you. For the situation you're in with death and suffering all around you. For your broken relationships. For the dashed hopes you have. For the bitterness in your heart. For the abuse you've endured. Look to the empty tomb and believe.

Jesus says you are blessed if you don't have the direct evidence of Thomas (who found out he didn't need it like he thought). Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have believed. Let the Holy Spirit fill you today. Let peace guide you to all hope and blessedness. Believe in the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ for you.

If you are a skeptic, I'd like to ask you to be skeptical about your skepticism. If you are a cynic, please be more cynical about your cynicism itself. If you are rational, be more rational and reasonable about your rationalism.

Inside each of us is hope. Inside each of us is fear. Inside each of us is adventure. Jesus transforms people. He did it to Thomas, the skeptic who became a great leader of the church. He did it to cowardly Peter, who became a great leader of the church. He did it to others who seemed to weak to serve. He can do it with you. He can change you.

Leo Tolstoy questioned everything. This happens to us sometimes. It can happen when we get older, but it can also come earlier, for instance when our parents divorce, or someone close to us dies.

His whole life was under review, and it wasn't a very encouraging question. In fact, it was a rather crushing question. "My question – that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide – was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man... a question without an answer to which one cannot live. It was: 'What will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?'" It can also be expressed thus: Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?³

I submit to you that there is an answer to that question, an answer to the destruction of inevitable death. CS Lewis writes of it in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He's discussing when Aslan is dead. The hopes of the people have been dashed. All that was good has been crushed. The wicked white which appears to have won the day. Lewis writes, "...[T]hrough the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward..."

I think I'm going to see my friend Dustin again. It's because of this text. Because of the resurrection, I think I will see him and rejoice. Not too long after his death, I was in my car and my iPod shuffled over to a cheesy 80s Christian song by Don Francisco called *He's Alive*. I remember listening to it because my dad had all of Don Francisco's records. He's famous for putting Bible stories to music, telling the story as he goes along. In my early days of iTunes, I downloaded some of those nostalgic songs. *He's Alive* was at the top of the list. I have listened to it countless times over the past 30 years now.

But this one time it came on, and I started singing along. And I started crying. Weeping. I was crying so hard I had to pull over because I couldn't see. It was because I was thinking about Jesus and I was thinking about Dustin. Jesus rose from the dead! There is death and sadness but that is not the final answer! Death has been and will be conquered! Because of this I have a real sadness as I enter the world and embrace its brokenness. But I have a real hope that all will be made right, all the bad will become untrue (as Tolkien says) and someday God's children in Christ will live in glory.

Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands, Martin Luther

1. Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands,
For our offenses given;
But now at God's right hand He stands
And brings us life from heaven;
Therefore let us joyful be
And sing to God right thankfully
Loud songs of hallelujah! Hallelujah!

³ Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession* (1879)

2. No son of man could conquer Death,
Such mischief sin had wrought us,
For innocence dwelt not on earth,
And therefore Death had brought us
Into thralldom from of old
And ever grew more strong and bold
And kept us in his bondage. Hallelujah!

3. But Jesus Christ, God's only Son,
To our low state descended,
The cause of Death He has undone,
His power forever ended,
Ruined all his right and claim
And left him nothing but the name,--
His sting is lost forever. Hallelujah!

4. It was a strange and dreadful strife
When Life and Death contended;
The victory remained with Life,
The reign of Death was ended;
Holy Scripture plainly saith
That Death is swallowed up by Death,
His sting is lost forever. Hallelujah!

5. Here the true Paschal Lamb we see,
Whom God so freely gave us;
He died on the accursed tree--
So strong His love!--to save us.
See, His blood doth mark our door;
Faith points to it, Death passes o'er,
And Satan cannot harm us. Hallelujah!

6. So let us keep the festival
Whereto the Lord invites us;
Christ is himself the Joy of all,
The Sun that warms and lights us.
By His grace He doth impart
Eternal sunshine to the heart;
The night of sin is ended. Hallelujah!

7. Then let us feast this Easter Day
On Christ, the Bread of heaven;
The Word of Grace hath purged away
The old and evil leaven.
Christ alone our souls will feed,
He is our meat and drink indeed;
Faith lives upon no other. Hallelujah!