

Message #62

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John

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THE CHALLENGE OF THE RESURRECTION

JOHN 20:1-10

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Louis Zamperini is a WW II hero worthy of remembrance on this Memorial Day weekend. He was a track star in California in the 1930s. (ZAMPERINI 1) His athletic ability was such that he won a scholarship to USC. Then in 1936 he qualified for the Summer Olympics. That year the Olympics were held in Berlin, Germany. Zamperini qualified for the finals in the 5000 meter race. He was not fast enough to place among the top three, but his time in the last lap was so fast that it caught the attention of a watching German official who insisted on meeting Zamperini. So it was that Louis Zamperini met and shook hands with Adolph Hitler.

When WW II broke out, Louis enlisted in the Army Air Corps. (ZAMPERINI 2) He was commissioned as a second lieutenant. He was trained to serve as the bombardier on a B-24 bomber. (B-24 BOMBER) His crew was sent to the Pacific theater of operations. After several bombing missions, the crew was assigned to do search and rescue. (PROJECTOR OFF) On May 27, 1943, seventy-six years ago tomorrow, their plane crashed while conducting a search and rescue operation. Planes were sent to find them, but no trace of wreckage or survivors was found. Louis Zamperini's parents in southern California were informed that their son was missing in action. A year later, he was officially ruled as killed in action. His parents and extended family mourned.

The reality, however, was that Louis and two of the other members of the eleven man crew had survived the crash. They managed to climb into a small rubber raft. Then they floated on the ocean for 46 days. One of the members of the trio died before they were rescued by the Japanese navy. Louis was imprisoned in a series of prisoner of war camps. Life was extremely difficult. His exploits are described in a movie called "Unbroken," which was released just a few years ago.

In November of 1944 Louis was brought to Tokyo to record a message to be aired by radio to describe his captivity. If prisoners did not want worse abuse for themselves and their fellow inmates, they had to

be positive about what they said. Louis complied, because he rightly assumed that his parents thought that he was dead. These broadcasts were monitored by a US government agency. Ironically, the woman in San Francisco who picked up the broadcast and transcribed it was a friend and fellow classmate of Zamperini from USC. The message soon got to his parents. They were shocked and excited to learn that their son was alive.

Louis Zamperini survived the war. He was treated as a hero upon his return to the States. Through the influence of a young evangelist (ZAMPERINI 3), he learned about how to deal with the anger that he felt for his captors. Louis was converted to Christ and later spoke at Billy Graham Crusades. He maintained a lifelong friendship with the famous evangelist. Louis died in 2014 at age 97. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If you can imagine the shock and the excitement that the family and friends of Louis Zamperini had when they discovered that this loved one who was officially dead was found to be alive, you can imagine at least a little of the shock and the excitement that the family and friends of Jesus had when they discovered that He was alive. There is one important difference with the story of Jesus. As we saw last week, there is considerable historical evidence that Jesus truly was dead. His return to life is an essential part of the Christian story. It involves a claim to the miraculous. There is no scientific explanation for His resurrection. We are going to consider this challenge to belief this morning and what difference it should make in our lives.

I.

In v. 1 of John #20, which is p. 906 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that THE RESURRECTION HAS DIFFERENT ACCOUNTS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE RESURRECTION HAS...) Because the resurrection story of Jesus is so important, all four Gospels in the New Testament describe it. The fact that the four Gospel writers give differing accounts presents certain challenges. Skeptics use the differences to undermine the veracity of the story. A reasonable look at the information, however, makes harmonization of the different strands of information possible.

Verse 1, then, of #20 tells us, **“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.”** We saw last week that Jesus died on Friday before sunset. Sunday, which began on Saturday at sunset in Jewish figuring, was when Jesus rose from the dead. That makes three days. Sunday is the first day of the week.

Mary Magdalene is a key individual in John's version of the story. Jesus will appear to Mary Magdalene in our next passage. We saw two weeks ago from #19 that Mary Magdalene was one of four women who were present at the crucifixion of Jesus. Her last name was probably a reference to her hometown, Magdala, which was a town on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. Mary was also part of a larger group of women which was following Jesus around in the latter part of His public ministry.

In Luke #8 we have an additional bit of information about Mary Magdalene. (LUKE 8:1) Beginning in v. 1 we are told, **"Soon afterward he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him... (LUKE 8:2) and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out..."** Luke goes on to mention other women. Mary, then, was a product of the exorcism ministry of Jesus.

One of the key differences in the four accounts is the description of the women who were present at the tomb. (CHART OF FOUR GOSPELS) John mentions only Mary Magdalene. The Apostle John was writing several decades after the other Gospels were written. So he must have been aware of these accounts. For his own purposes, he singled out the testimony of Mary Magdalene.

Matthew mentions Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." "The other Mary" is probably the same as Mary, the mother of James, who is mentioned by Mark and Luke. Mark also mentions Salome. Luke includes Joanna and a general reference to "others." I don't see any of this as being contradictory. The writers are simply singling out the women who seemed worthy of note for their purposes and their audiences.

Mark #15 v. 47 tells us how these women knew where to find the body of Jesus. (MARK 15:47) The author here is talking about Good Friday. **"Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid."** These women were at the site of the crucifixion. They apparently stayed around when Jesus' body was removed from the cross. They saw that Joseph and Nicodemus hurriedly prepared the body to get it into the tomb before sunset. They saw that the body was placed in the nearby tomb owned by Joseph. Perhaps they stayed to see the large stone placed in front of the entrance.

Perhaps because Mary Magdalene and other women saw that the burial job was rushed, they wanted to make additional preparations. Perhaps they also knew that us guys never quite get such things just right. No doubt they did also want to honor their Lord. So Mary Magdalene and these other women showed up at the break of day at the tomb of Jesus.

They were aware of the custom that a large stone was placed at the entrance of the tomb of the deceased. Perhaps they watched as the stone was placed there. Matthew's Gospel gives us important information about what had transpired since the burial on Friday. (MATTHEW 27:62) Beginning in v. 62 of #27 we are told, **"The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate (MATTHEW 27:63) and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' (MATTHEW 27:64) Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." (MATTHEW 27:65) Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." (MATTHEW 27:66) So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard."**

It would seem that sometime before sunrise on Sunday morning Jesus rose from the dead and left the tomb. Matthew goes on to tell what happened at the same time, or perhaps a bit later. (MATTHEW 28:2) He writes, beginning in v. 2 of #28, **"And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it." (MATTHEW 28:3-4) His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men."** After this, the guards ran off to the chief priests to tell them what happened. Some time after this the women showed up.

It is remarkable that the witnesses to these events were women. It was not male Jesus followers who showed up on the scene. It was women. In early Judaism the testimony of women was not usually allowed in legal situations. But Jesus honors women by allowing them to be first on the scene. Next week we will see that they are also the first ones to whom He revealed Himself. This also lends authenticity to the story. Any Jewish person in the first century who made up the story of the resurrection would not be inclined to have women be the first people to verify the story that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead.

II.

In vv. 2-8 of #20 we find that THE RESURRECTION WAS A SHOCK. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE RESURRECTION WAS A SHOCK) Verse 2 says, **"So she [Mary Magdalene] 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 not know where they have laid him.'"** Despite Peter's denial about knowing Jesus, he still is treated as the leader of this band of Jesus followers.

Note also that the plural pronoun “we” is used by Mary in v. 2. She implies that others were with her at the tomb. My guess is that the others remained at the tomb, while she went to get Peter and John. The Apostle John, remember, is the one who describes himself in this Gospel as the one whom Jesus loved.

Grave robbery was something of a problem in the first century. Tombs of rich people would sometimes be broken open in order to take valuable items that were left with corpses. Claudius would be the next emperor who arrived on the scene. He made it a capital offense for anyone anywhere in the empire to destroy tombs, rob graves, remove bodies or to break the seal on a tomb. The additional issue here, according to Matthew’s account, was that Pontius Pilate had given orders for the tomb of Jesus to be guarded by Roman soldiers. The women who arrived at the tomb on Sunday morning were probably not aware of that.

The “they” whom Mary accuses of taking the body out of the tomb was probably the religious leaders. Mary has not had time to digest what she has seen. She only knows that it is the religious leaders who have been opposing Jesus and wanting bad things to happen to Him. Perhaps her initial thought is that they didn’t want Jesus to have a decent burial. Maybe they have taken Him off to the criminals’ grave. Clearly she is unaware of any plot among the Jesus followers to take His body. The resurrection of Jesus does not appear to be an option in her mind.

Verses 3-5: **“So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in.”** John is the other disciple. He is hesitant to enter the tomb. It was ceremonially defiling for Jews to deal with dead bodies. Also John may be uncertain if there is trouble lurking nearby. Maybe there are grave robbers around. Something is clearly out of order.

(TOMB) First century tombs in Judea have been thoroughly studied by archaeologists. There are many natural caves in Israel. The limestone rock is relatively easy to carve out. So typically there was an open space in such tombs with ledges carved out along the side. Wrapped bodies were left on these ledges for about a year. Loved ones would then return and put the bones in bone boxes, usually made of soft limestone. These were placed in smaller niches that were carved out from the stone walls. Large stones were placed at the entrance of these tombs to keep out animals and grave robbers. They were too large for one person to move, intentionally making it difficult for any one or two grave robbers to move by themselves. Sometimes these stones were round. But archaeologists have found that the majority of blocking stones were square, perhaps making it more difficult for people to move.

(PROJECTOR OFF) According to vv. 6 & 7, **“Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.”** Peter by nature was not as hesitant as John. When he arrived, he went storming into the tomb.

Back in #11 John described the incident where Jesus called his friend Lazarus from Bethany to come out of the tomb. (JOHN 11:44) This is how John described what happened then: **“The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’”** Lazarus was still wrapped up. He couldn’t see. He probably could barely walk. He had to be unwrapped. This was actually a resuscitation rather than a resurrection. For Lazarus was back in his natural body. He would later have to suffer physical death again.

The resurrection of Jesus is different. There was no one to unwrap Him. Yet the cloth covering His head was rolled up in a place by itself. The other linen wrappings still remain. Perhaps with the weight of all the spices, they had collapsed upon themselves. It is as if the body of Jesus had dematerialized.

It is difficult to understand how any grave robbers would have left these linen wrappings behind. It would be much easier to take the body of Jesus as it was. It would be a lot of work to unwrap the body. Then why would anyone wanting to steal the body take the smelly, decomposing corpse as it was without the linen wrappings? It would be harder to transport. It would be much easier to take the whole thing. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If there was some kind of dematerialization of the body of Jesus that took place, there was no need for the stone to be removed. The only purpose it would serve would be to show to everyone that the tomb was empty. It would provide the opportunity for witnesses to see inside that the body of Jesus was gone.

Verse 8: **“Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed...”** Exactly what did John believe? Was it that he believed Mary Magdalene’s story? Was it that he had some greater amount of faith in Jesus because of what he saw? I suspect that it means that he believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. I suspect that it was at this moment that he remembered Jesus’ multiple statements that something bad was going to happen to Him, that He was going to be killed, but that He would rise from the dead. John did not have it all put together in his mind yet. But his initial thought may have been that Jesus had come back to life. If Jesus could bring Lazarus out of the tomb, perhaps He could bring Himself back to life.

What was going on in Peter's mind we are not told. But John is describing what was going on in his head. The resurrection was a shock to both of them.

III.

In vv. 9 & 10 we learn that THE RESURRECTION WAS A FULFILLMENT OF SCRIPTURAL PROMISES. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE RESURRECTION WAS A....) According to v. 9, **"...for as yet they [Peter and John] did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead."** All of these quickly unfolding developments were a shock to the systems of the Jesus followers. It took some time for them to digest and determine the significance of these events. Eventually, with the help of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, they would relate them to Old Testament prophecies.

Which verse or verses did John have in mind which related to the resurrection of Jesus? One obvious one was Psalm 16 v. 10. Seven weeks later Peter would quote this verse on the Day of Pentecost in a sermon that he preached to religious pilgrims who were gathered in Jerusalem for one of the required annual feasts. (PSALM 16:10) That verse says, **"For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption."** Peter sees that statement fulfilled in Jesus, the descendant of David, who authored that Psalm.

Isaiah 53 describes the suffering servant of God. The whole chapter seems to find fulfillment in the life of Jesus. (ISAIAH 53:10) In v. 10 the author writes, **"Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief, when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand."** The suffering servant is crushed, yet his days are prolonged. He sees his offspring. If this indeed is speaking about the resurrection of Christ, the offspring must be spiritual offspring.

In Leviticus #23 the Lord tells Moses about the responsibility of the priest on the day after the Sabbath in Passover week. (LEVITICUS 23:11) He says in v. 11, **"And he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it."** Jesus turns out to be the sheaf who is waved before God the Father to make His followers acceptable to Him. He is the one who is cut down, but then raised from the dead. We will have more on this in a moment. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then in v. 10 in our passage John writes, **“Then the disciples went back to their homes.”** Literally, the text says, **“Then the disciples went back to their own.”** The reference is probably to the places where they were staying, or perhaps to their friends or their hosts. Perhaps some of the disciples were still staying in the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary in Bethany.

IV..

Consider finally that THE RESURRECTION IS AN ASSURANCE OF OUR FUTURE BODILY RESURRECTION. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE RESURRECTION IS...) The relevance of the story of the resurrection is described in 1 Corinthians #15. The death of Jesus accomplished the payment of the penalty for our sins. The wrath of God against sin was satisfied by the sacrifice of His Son. Because Jesus was a human being, He qualified to serve as our representative. Because He was God, His sacrifice had universal benefit. To enter into that benefit, our responsibility is to put our faith in Jesus.

The resurrection served as the demonstration that Jesus really was God. From the earliest times the resurrection was part of the gospel message. In the last section, I pointed out that Psalm 16 v. 10 was one of the Scriptures that John probably had in mind as being fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus. Peter cited that text in his first public sermon given after the death and resurrection of Jesus. (ACTS 2:31-32) In that message Peter proclaimed, **“...[David] foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.”** The followers of Jesus were all convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. The Jewish religious leaders could have stopped this movement in its tracks if they could produce the body of Jesus. But there was no body to be found.

The story of the resurrection was also an essential part of the message of the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians #15 the Apostle Paul described the message that he gave out. (1 CORINTHIANS 15:1) Beginning in v. 1 he wrote, **“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, (1 CORINTHIANS 15:2) and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. (1 CORINTHIANS 15:3) For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, (1 CORINTHIANS 15:4) that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures--- there is the resurrection--- (1 CORINTHIANS 15:5-6) and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time...”**

The resurrection provides historical evidence that the claims of Jesus are true. He really was God, and His death on the cross provides the means by which we humans can get to heaven some day. The

resurrection is an essential part of this story. Thus it is that Paul writes (1 CORINTHIANS 15:17) in the seventeenth verse of this same chapter, **“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”**

There is another important aspect to this story. In v. 20 (1 CORINTHIANS 15:20) Paul writes, **“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”** The reference here is to the waving of the sheaf of the firstfruits. In the previous section I read to you the passage from Leviticus that describes this ceremony.

On the first day after the Sabbath in Passover week the priest went outside of Jerusalem to cut down a sheaf of barley grain. This would have happened on Easter morning when Jesus rose from the dead. Barley was the first crop to ripen in the spring. The priest took that sheaf inside of the temple and waved it before the Lord. The crop was thus dedicated and the harvest of barley could begin. The Apostle Paul is indicating that the symbolism of the waving of the sheaf in this ceremony finds its fulfillment in the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection signifies that the harvest of Christians can now begin. The way is established for Jesus followers also to experience a physical resurrection from the dead.

When does this happen? Paul goes on to tell us in vv. 50-53. (1 CORINTHIANS 15:50). He writes, **“I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (1 CORINTHIANS 15:51) Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, (1 CORINTHIANS 15:52) in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. (1 CORINTHIANS 15:53) For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”** Paul is describing the rapture of the church. When Jesus returns to earth to claim His bride, the church, both living and dead Christians will be raised up and will receive their resurrection bodies.

What will these new bodies be like? By definition and description they are imperishable. They can't be destroyed. They cannot wear out. They are described as spiritual bodies. The only model and example that we have is the resurrection body of Jesus. As we shall see next week, Jesus in His resurrection body was able to eat. His body had physicality. It could be seen and touched. Yet He seemingly could appear and disappear. He suddenly appeared in a locked room. This is the limited information that we have. The Scriptures present the coming of these resurrection bodies as a confident hope and assurance for all Christians.

That is especially relevant to our congregation. In the last couple of weeks we have had several surgeries. We have several people dealing with cancer. A little over a week ago we had a funeral for one of our brothers who had been born with muscular dystrophy. The good news is that a resurrection body awaits all of us. In this body we will never have to deal with the physical infirmities that we have now. Our future resurrection is based upon the resurrection of Jesus. If that resurrection really happened, then ours is sure to happen.

What is the takeaway from this? How should this hope of the resurrection affect our lives? We probably cannot find any better statement of the application than the words of the Apostle Paul. (1 CORINTHIANS 15:58) In v. 58 of this same chapter he writes, **“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”**