GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYONE

John 20 & 21

By

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Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014

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April 20, 2014
Special Easter Message

**Good News for Everyone**
*John 20 & 21*

If you've been a Christian for very long, you've experienced a time when you wondered if the Christian faith is really true. Perhaps your struggle came after some huge disappointment or unanswered prayer. Things just didn't go the way that you had hoped and prayed. Perhaps your doubts came after you heard or read an articulate atheist attack the faith. Or, maybe your Christian experience just didn't measure up to the “abundant” life that others testify to, so you wondered why the abundant life didn't seem to be true for you. You thought, “Maybe it isn’t true at all.”

We live in a time when the concept of “truth” has been squeezed into a relativistic framework. Thus Buddhism may be “true” for some people, Christianity is “true” for others, and Baha’i is “true” for yet others. Even though the teachings of these different faiths contradict each other, they can still all be “true” in a personal, experiential sense. For example, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote (*Who Needs God* [Simon & Schuster], p. 196):

> If religious claims to truth were statements of fact, then when they differed, at most only one of them could be true.... But religious claims can be true at levels other than the factual one. Religious claims can be true the way a great novel is true. It teaches us something valid about the human condition, even though the characters in the novel never really existed and the events never took place....

As an example, Kushner used Jesus’ resurrection (p. 197): “If believing in the resurrection makes my Christian neighbor a better person, more loving and generous, better able to cope with misfortune and disappointment, then that is a true belief, whether historically true or not.”

I agree that believing in Jesus’ resurrection should make us better people. But, does it matter whether it was historically true or not? The apostles would loudly reply, “Yes! It matters greatly! Everything about the Christian faith depends on the historical fact that
Jesus died for our sins and was raised bodily on the third day.” The apostle Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:14, 17), “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain…. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” He concluded (15:19), “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”

The apostle John would agree. He brings his Gospel to a climax by showing multiple evidences of Jesus’ bodily resurrection, along with some practical ways that the truth of His resurrection should impact our lives. Since we’re in the midst of working our way through John’s Gospel, I thought it would be helpful to jump ahead and look at how John treats this watershed fact of all history. We can sum it up:

Because Jesus’ resurrection is a fact of history, there is good news for everyone.

In the middle of John’s treatment of Jesus’ resurrection, he breaks in with his purpose for writing the entire Gospel (John 20:30-31): “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” For John, everything depends on who Jesus is. John wants us to join him in affirming that Jesus is the promised Messiah (the Christ) and the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh (1:1-18). He came as the Lamb of God to die for the sins of all who will believe in Him (1:29; 3:16). But if Jesus did not actually rise from the dead, then He would not be the Christ, the eternal Son of God. That would mean that believing in Him would be to believe in a nice myth. For John that was unthinkable! Thus he labors to show:

1. Jesus’ resurrection is a fact of history.

We can see at least five lines of evidence that John sets forth:

A. The stone rolled away and the empty tomb are evidence for Jesus’ resurrection.

John begins his account (20:1) with Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb early, while it was still dark, where she saw that the stone had been taken away. This was a large stone that was rolled in front of the tomb to secure it from grave robbers. Matthew
(27:63-66) reports how the Jewish leaders feared that someone would come and steal Jesus' body and claim that He was risen. So they went to Pilate and got a Roman guard to secure the tomb. They set a seal on the stone and were there guarding the tomb when an angel came and rolled away the stone (Matt. 28:1-4). The Jewish leaders later gave the guards a large sum of money and told them to tell anyone who asked that the disciples came at night and stole Jesus' body while the guards slept (Matt. 28:11-15).

The problem with that story is that all the disciples were too depressed and fearful to pull off a grave robbery under the noses of a squad of Roman soldiers. And even if they had succeeded, they wouldn't have then endured persecution, hardship, and eventual martyrdom to promote what they knew to be a hoax.

In addition to the stone being rolled away, there was the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene was not expecting the resurrection, but when she saw that the tomb was empty, she assumed that somebody had taken Jesus' body. She immediately ran to the disciples to report (John 20:2), "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." Her report caused Peter and John to run to the tomb and see for themselves. They both went into the tomb and confirmed that Jesus' body was not there. If any of Jesus' enemies had taken His body, they would have produced it the instant that the apostles began proclaiming the resurrection. So the stone rolled away and the empty tomb both bear witness to Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead.

B. The presence and arrangement of the linen wrappings are evidence for Jesus' resurrection.

When Peter and John ran to the tomb, John got there first, stood at the entrance, and saw the linen wrappings, but he did not go in. Peter, in his usual blustery manner, went right in and saw (20:6, Greek = "to gaze upon") the grave clothes. Then John entered, saw (Greek = "to see with understanding") the same thing, and believed (20:8).

The presence of the linen wrappings proves that the body was not stolen. In their haste, grave robbers would have taken the body, grave clothes and all. If for some reason they had wanted to strip the body, they would have left the clothes strewn all over the tomb.
But Peter and John saw them left in an orderly fashion, as if Jesus had passed right through them. Remember, these weren’t men who wished so much for a resurrection that they perhaps saw what they wanted to see. These were men who did not understand or believe at first (20:9). The evidence convinced them, and their testimony of the evidence should convince us.

C. Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances are evidence for the resurrection.

John cites four post-resurrection appearances of Jesus: To Mary Magdalene (20:11-18); to the disciples except Thomas (20:19-23); to the disciples, including Thomas (20:24-31); and, to seven of the disciples, by the Sea of Galilee (21:1-25). Paul mentions several other appearances, including one to over 500 people at one time (1 Cor. 15:6-8). The varied circumstances of the appearances and the different personalities of the witnesses militate against hallucinations or visions. Even Thomas, who at first was skeptical, became convinced when he saw the risen Lord (John 20:27). Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances are a strong evidence of His resurrection.

D. The changed lives of the doubting disciples is evidence for the resurrection.

John shows that none of the witnesses was expecting a resurrection. Mary Magdalene thought that someone had taken Jesus’ body (20:2, 15). Neither John nor Peter at first understood the Scripture that Jesus must rise again from the dead (20:9). All the disciples were fearful and confused. Thomas was depressed and doubting. But all were transformed into the bold witnesses of the Book of Acts because they became convinced that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. They were so convinced that the resurrection was true that many of them went on to die as martyrs.

E. The unique person of Jesus Christ is evidence for His resurrection.

Study the Gospel accounts of who Jesus was, what He taught, His astounding claims, the miracles He performed, and the prophecies He fulfilled. On more than one occasion He predicted His own death and resurrection (Matt. 16:21; Luke 9:22; John 2:19-22; 16:16-20, 28). His encounter with doubting Thomas shows that His purpose was to bring Thomas into a place of full faith in His deity
(20:27). When Thomas answered, “My Lord and my God,” Jesus did not rebuke or correct him for overstating things. Rather, Jesus commended Thomas’ correct perception and faith (20:28-29). A merely good teacher, especially a devout Jewish rabbi, would never accept such worship from a follower.

Everything in the Gospel accounts about Jesus’ person and teaching militates against His being a charlatan or lunatic. The only sensible option is that He is who He claimed to be: the eternal Son of God in human flesh, the Messiah of Israel. He offered Himself for our sins and God raised Him bodily from the dead. He wants those of us who have not seen Him to believe in Him (20:29).

I realize that it is impossible to prove any historical event in an absolute sense. But the evidence for Jesus’ bodily resurrection is strong: (1) The stone rolled away and the empty tomb; (2) the linen wrappings; (3) Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances; (4) the changed lives of the witnesses; and (5) the unique person of Jesus Christ, including His many astounding claims. All these evidences support the historical truth of the resurrection.

Oxford history Professor and author Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) wrote (cited in Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* [Campus Crusade for Christ], 1:198):

The evidence for our Lord’s life and death and resurrection may be, and often has been, shown to be satisfactory; it is good according to the common rules for distinguishing good evidence from bad. Thousands and tens of thousands of persons have gone through it piece by piece, as carefully as every judge summing up on a most important cause. I have myself done it many times over, not to persuade others but to satisfy myself. I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.

J. Gresham Machen (*Christianity and Liberalism* [Eerdmans], pp. 28-29) wrote, “The great weapon with which the disciples of Jesus
set out to conquer the world was not a mere comprehension of eternal principles; it was an historical message, an account of something that had recently happened. It was the message, 'He is risen.'”

So I want to counter Rabbi Kushner’s contention that the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection doesn’t matter, as long as it affects how we live. It matters greatly because it establishes who Jesus is. He is not a fictional character or just a great man whose legend was embellished by His followers. He is the Christ, the Son of God. You should believe in Him even if so doing results in suffering and martyrdom. But, John’s Gospel also shows that the historical resurrection of Jesus does affect how we live:

2. Jesus’ resurrection provides good news for everyone.

A. Jesus’ resurrection is good news for women.

While women generally had a place of honor and respect in Old Testament Israel (Alfred Edersheim, Sketches of Jewish Social Life [Eerdmans, pp. 139-160), in Jesus’ time some Jewish leaders belittled women. They taught that it was at best a waste of time to talk with a woman, even with your own wife, and at worst a diversion from the study of the Torah that could possibly lead one to hell (D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 227)! They thought that it was better to burn the words of the law than to give them to women (William Barclay, The Gospel of John [Westminster], rev. ed., 1:162). To speak with a woman in public, even with your own wife, could lead to gossip and should be avoided. And, the Jews disregarded the testimony of a woman in court.

But Jesus affirmed and elevated women, both during His ministry and by the fact that they were the first witnesses of His resurrection. John (20:11-18) contains the encounter of Jesus with Mary Magdalene in the Garden after His resurrection. She was the first to see the risen Lord and to tell the disciples of her encounter. Contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence that Mary had been an immoral woman prior to her conversion. Scripture states that Jesus had cast seven demons out of her and she apparently had sufficient means to help contribute to the support of Jesus and the disciples (Luke 8:2). But the point is, Jesus chose her as the first witness of His resurrection. Her experience shows that the Lord welcomes women as His followers and He uses them greatly.
B. Jesus’ resurrection is good news for those lacking or weak in faith.

The disciples did not yet understand that Jesus must rise from the dead (20:9), in spite of Jesus’ repeatedly telling them this before His death. They just didn’t get it at first. As I said, this is actually an evidence for Jesus’ resurrection, because they had to be convinced against their fears and doubts. But the Lord graciously worked with them to build their faith.

John is the only Gospel to mention Thomas’ doubts before he saw the risen Lord. John uses that incident as the climax of his Gospel. When Jesus invited Thomas to touch the scars on Jesus’ hands and side, Thomas exclaimed (20:28), “My Lord and my God!” Rather than rebuking Thomas for calling Him “Lord and God,” Jesus affirmed his testimony by replying (20:29), “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see and yet believed.” Then John gives us his purpose for writing: he wants each of us to join Thomas in believing in Jesus as “my Lord and my God.”

The point is, Jesus wants you to move from no faith or weak faith to strong faith. But, note how He did this with Thomas: He appeared to the disciples when He knew that Thomas was absent. For a week, Thomas had to struggle with missing that crucial appearance. Think of how you would have felt! “Everyone else saw the risen Lord, but I missed it!” He probably thought that it was grossly unfair that Jesus appeared to them when he wasn’t there. But when Jesus did meet with the disciples again with Thomas present and showed His omniscience by repeating back to Thomas the doubts that he had expressed earlier, Thomas gave a much deeper confession than he would have a week earlier. The lesson is that the risen Lord doesn’t reject us or cast us off when we’re lacking or weak in faith. Rather, He takes each of us through different trials and difficulties tailored to our doubts to help us grow in faith.

C. Jesus’ resurrection is good news for those who feel aimless or inadequate.

This is one lesson from Jesus’ appearance to the seven disciples by the Sea of Galilee. They had gone fishing, worked all night, but caught nothing. From the shore, Jesus called to them, pointed
out their lack of fish, and directed them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. When they did, they instantly caught a large haul of fish. Then, when they got to the shore, Jesus already had a fire going with fish on it, along with bread. The incident would have reminded them of the miraculous catch of fish early in their relationship with Jesus, when He told them that they would be catching men (Luke 5:1-11). So this incident would have re-focused them on their calling as Jesus’ ambassadors.

And, the bread and fish would have reminded them of the feeding of the 5,000, when the Lord used them to distribute the food to the hungry multitude. The lesson there was that when they yielded their insufficient resources to the Lord, they became sufficient in His hands to meet overwhelming needs. Now, as the risen Lord, He could and would do the same as they took the good news to the world’s spiritually hungry multitudes.

The same lessons apply to us. If you know Christ, you’re His ambassador to lost people in your world. And if you feel inadequate for the task, that’s exactly the kind of people He uses: inadequate people who yield everything they have to Him to bless and use as He pleases! That breakfast on the shore also pictures the fellowship that our Lord wants to have with us. Our daily fellowship with the risen Lord is the foundation for serving Him. The conversation that took place around that breakfast meeting provides a final lesson:

D. Jesus’ resurrection is good news for those who have failed.

The final section of John’s Gospel shows how the Lord restored Peter to ministry after his three denials of Jesus on the night He was betrayed. Three times Jesus asked Peter whether he loved Him. Three times Peter answered, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.” Each time, Jesus replied, “Tend My lambs…. Shepherd My sheep…. Tend My sheep.” The Lord was letting both Peter and the other disciples know that even though Peter had failed miserably, the Lord still had a ministry for him to fulfill.

The final exchange in John’s Gospel (21:20-24) mentions the different futures that the Lord had for Peter and for John. It shows that He is the sovereign Lord who has a unique plan for each of our futures as we serve Him. My focus needs to be on doing what
He has called me to do, not on what He may have called others to do. But the good news is, if you love the Lord, no matter how badly you may have failed Him in the past, He is gracious to restore you and use you in His service. Keep your love for Jesus burning brightly. He loved you enough to die for your sins so that you can spend eternity with Him in the glory of heaven. His resurrection is good news for all who have failed.

**Conclusion**

After Thomas’ confession of Jesus as his Lord and God, Jesus replied (20:29), “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.” Does that include you? Jesus promises to bless you if you will believe in Him as your Lord and God, who died for your sins and was raised from the dead. His resurrection from the dead is historically true, whether you believe it or not. But it’s through believing in Him as the crucified and risen Lord that He blesses you.

His blessing does not mean that you will be spared from struggles and trials. History indicates that almost all of the disciples were persecuted and finally suffered martyrs’ deaths. But when they died, they were welcomed into the eternal joy of their Master in heaven. Because His resurrection is historically true, He offers the same good news to all who will believe in Him.

**Application Questions**

1. Rabbi Kushner argues that the factual truth of the resurrection doesn’t matter if it teaches us to be better people. Why is this both inadequate and fallacious?

2. Can a person believe that Jesus is risen and yet not be born again? What is the difference? Why does it matter?

3. What was the difference between Judas’ betrayal of Christ and Peter’s denials of Christ? Why was Peter restored while Judas was lost?

4. Do certain sins (e.g., sexual sins) disqualify a man from leadership in the church? Support your answer with Scripture.

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