



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – EASTER

JOHN 20:1-18

APRIL 17, 2022

“OF MARYS AND MIRACLES”

The story of the resurrection of Jesus is told with great candor. British theologian N.T. Wright said *“the continued puzzlement of the disciples is a mark of the story’s authenticity. If someone had been making this all up, as many have suggested, they would hardly have had such a muddle going on.”* I think that’s how the British describe “a hot mess.” Anyway, Wright goes on to say the first Christians simply weren’t prepared for what happened. A colleague of Wright’s – a skeptic of Christianity said, *“based on the stories, it looks as though they were struggling to describe something for which they simply didn’t have adequate language.”* You don’t say!

One of my favorite quotes about the incarnation of Jesus – his conception and birth that is, comes from a 13th century monk named Bernard, who said there were three miracles in that event – that a virgin could conceive, that God would inhabit a human womb, and that Mary, the mother of our Lord believed it would happen. The third miracle Bernard said, was the greatest of them – for once Mary believed, she conceived - the virgin birth dwarfed by the virgin’s faith.

The most extraordinary thing about the resurrection is not that God raised Jesus – the resurrection is not for us a scientific question, but a spiritual one – why would God do such a thing – not only come to earth, but come again after the earth’s people rejected him, in order to call those did *“his brothers and sisters.”*

Case in point - Mary Magdalene, the first witness – a woman with and undeserved reputation. Either by a slip of the tongue or for dramatic effect in a sermon, a Pope in the middle-ages hinted she was a woman of the street. Luke 8:2 says only that Jesus had expelled 7 demons from her – so yes, at one point in her life she was in tough shape. And what of it – we all have demons, they go by various names – it matters not which they are, only that we know the demon chaser – someone who can send them out of us.

Yet Mary’s faith had been her eyes - she believed Jesus had healed her and she loved him for that, otherwise she would not have grieved him. I Corinthians 15:19 says however *“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”* Jesus’ resurrection assures those who believe it eternal life – it answers the most important question a person can ask themselves – when I die...what then?

If you are such a person today, listen...Jesus wants you to spend eternity with him He does not want you to confuse Him with other things in this life you are, have or might look to for comfort, happiness, healing, guidance. Yes, *if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are most to be pitied.* But pity the person who expends all of their life not knowing what joy is, what forgiveness is, what freedom from fear is. Pity us if we exchange our years without knowing any of that – without knowing what life lived with Jesus as Lord is like. The gospel of John in particular uses the images of darkness and light to contrast life with God and life without God.

I want you to imagine for a moment that you have a piece of paper in front of you with a line drawn vertically down the center. In the first column imagine writing down all the things in your life you consider good, enjoyable, pleasing, things you might describe as “blessings.” What would go there – children, spouse, job, vacations, a pastime you enjoy, good health, friends, perhaps your church family. In the other column imagine listing things you consider bad, failures, pain, disappointments, fears, grief. What’s on it? Advancing years, declining health, a job you hate, a seemingly never slowing pace of life, fake friends, economic insecurity, world issues like human trafficking or the environment or the war in the Ukraine.

Some of you would have more in the “good column” than the “bad.” Now suppose you could just take all the “bad” and sweep it away, like it never happened or isn’t happening. What would you call that – peace, paradise, even heaven? But what if it was the “good” column that went away. What might you call that – emptiness, a nightmare, even hell? Well as you know, life is not all good or all bad. We call that “reality.”

But now let me ask you this. In what column would you put “death?” That of loved ones of course would go in the “bad” column – even if it was or would be the end of their suffering. But what about yours? Immediately after the resurrection of Jesus, and his ascension to heaven 40 days later, his first followers changed their conception of their own dying. If they could, they would have put it in the “good column.” And though they continued to have plenty in their own “bad column”, they had an entirely new perspective on life. *‘If for this life only we have hope...’*

They had a zest for life because of the resurrection. Author Fleming Rutledge, in her book “Three Hours” said; *“It’s as though knowledge of Jesus presence in our death is exactly what we need to rejoice in the life he gives with fear of its ending.* Poet T.S. Eliot wrote, *“In my end is my beginning.”* That is what we celebrate today – that Jesus will be with us in our death. But we do more. English author C.S. Lewis once said he believed in Christianity just like he believed in the sun – *“not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”* Lewis saw bad only as goodness gone awry, and that Jesus had decisively dealt with that.

Picking up on this, journalist Brandon Ambrosino, who covers modern culture and religion for Vox.com, said *“that’s how I now see the resurrection, not so much an event I look at but an event I look through...For all the death and ugliness of this world, I can’t shake the fact that every last atom of this place is pulsing with the rhythm of resurrection.”*

Tell that to Mary! Our Lord’s first disciples including her didn’t have words to describe what the resurrection meant. They saw the resurrected Jesus, yes, but more importantly their future through it. For them, the resurrection was not mechanical – how’d that happen – but moral – why did Jesus come back for such as us? That God raised Jesus to life is a great thing – indeed the greatest. That you believe that God did so because he loves you is however no small thing. It is in fact, the main thing. May you so believe that till that day your faith will be your sight, your life confirms your faith. He is Risen. AMEN