

## Scripture Reading: John 20:1-9 New Living Translation (NLT)

### The Resurrection

**20** Early on Sunday morning,[a] while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. **2** She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She said, “They have taken the Lord’s body out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

**3** Peter and the other disciple started out for the tomb. **4** They were both running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5** He stooped and looked in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he didn’t go in. **6** Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, **7** while the cloth that had covered Jesus’ head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings. **8** Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw and believed— **9** for until then they still hadn’t understood the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead.

### Message: “Never Place a Period where God has Placed a Comma”

Welcome on this Easter Sunday 2020! Even in our current situation we can rest assured of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave. **This is the most important day in the year for Christians.** While I miss seeing you, let’s use this as a time to celebrate the resurrection of Christ Jesus who humbled himself, walked the Earth as a human setting an example for us and died to take away our sins.

One year the Masters, known to most golfers as the most esteemed championships in golf just happened to land on Easter Day. Frank Chirkinian, the head of CBS Sports, discovered that The Masters and Easter Sunday happened on the same day that year. Upset at this conflict, he demanded of his colleagues, "Who sets the date of Easter? Didn't they realize that they scheduled it on The Masters weekend? Let's get to that person and have him change it."

Well, I'm pretty sure they didn't change the date for Easter though if they could, they probably would. Sports are a powerful force in our society.

You know how the drama of Easter unfolds. It begins two days earlier, on Good Friday. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman authorities at the instigation of the religious authorities. He was nailed to a cross and a sword pierced his side. The soldiers affixed a sign above his head which read, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Death came rather swiftly and mercifully, after only about six hours. Some crucified men lingered for days, which has led some writers to propose that Christ died of a broken heart. After a Roman centurion confirmed his death, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect for that territory, granted permission to a man named Joseph of Arimathea to claim his body.

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy and pious man, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who had become a follower of Jesus. Joseph was aided by a wealthy Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. It was Nicodemus, you'll remember, who had come to Christ under the darkness of night to ask him about his teachings.

It was to Nicodemus that Christ said that in order for him to enter the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus would have to be born all over again. Evidently the message took, for when Jesus' closest disciples had fled in fear, there was Nicodemus aiding Joseph of Arimathea in claiming Jesus' body. Carefully and with much effort they removed the nails from the Master's hands and feet and lowered him to the ground. Along with a group of women who had remained close by through it all, Joseph and Nicodemus hastily prepared Christ's body for burial.

They had to act quickly and tend to the body of Jesus. The Jewish Sabbath began on Friday evening and they would need to have him in the tomb with the tomb sealed before the Sabbath began. It most certainly is not how they would have preferred to have treated their Master. They were perhaps risking their lives in performing this act of love and honor. Certainly they were risking their reputations. That showed how much he meant to them. Indeed, he meant everything to them, and now to have to hurry had to be very disparaging to them.

It is significant that they laid him in a borrowed grave. Jesus said on one occasion, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). He owned no property on which to be buried. The tomb belonged to this same Joseph of Arimathea. Probably he had prepared it for his own burial.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us the tomb was "cut out of the rock." This would confirm Joseph's wealth. Only royalty or wealthy individuals could afford to

have their tombs carved out by laborers in the side of a mountain. The poorer were buried in simple graves.

A time-honored piece of humor says that a couple of weeks after the Resurrection, someone asked Joseph of Arimathea, “Why’d you let them bury Jesus in your brand new tomb?” Joseph shrugged his shoulders and answered, “He only needed it for the weekend!” Well, that’s true. He only needed it for the weekend. But the act was done. Christ now lay in the tomb and these devoted friends were back safely in their homes as they grieved and awaited the dawning of the first day of the week when they could take their time and anoint his body in a more appropriate way.

This all happened before Easter Sunday morning. And so we can appreciate the words with which John begins his description of that first Easter. John’s words were: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb . . .”

What beautiful and significant words. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark . . .” I think we can agree that before the resurrection of Jesus, the world was a dark, dark place?

There’s the story of a well respected pastor, Dr. Carlyle Marney who visited the campus of Duke University. A student asked, “Dr. Marney, would you say a word or two about the resurrection of the dead?” Marney answered, “I will not discuss that with people like you.” The student was shocked and wanted to know why. Marney said, “Look at you, in the prime of the life . . . Never have you known honest-to-God failure, heart-burn, solid defeat, brick walls,

mortality. So what can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ is raised?" Harsh, biting, and yet true. It is a dark world which only makes sense if Christ be raised.

And so we read these words: "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb . . ."

The darkness also speaks of the eagerness with which Mary of Magdala hastened to the tomb to perform this one last act of love for her Master. She had waited through the Sabbath and the dark hours before the dawning of Sunday morning. Now she could wait no longer. Remember there were no street lights to guide her feet. Surely she stumbled from time to time. But hers was a desperate journey. They had taken Christ at night. They had flogged him and he had endured a travesty of a trial. Then they hung him hurriedly on a cross. There had been no chance for her to tell him good-bye and then he was gone. Her grief surely was unspeakable.

When she arrived there, she saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance to the tomb. This surely hit her like a punch in the gut. Her first reaction was that someone had stolen Christ's body. Isn't that interesting? Her first thought had not been that he had risen. This thought seems never to have occurred to her. I mean, dead people don't rise from their graves, do they? John tells us, "She came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!'"

Can you hear the panic in her voice? Jesus' body had been sealed in a tomb, but now it was gone. Who could have perpetrated such an act of desecration? Mary's heart sank.

Peter and John were mystified. They began running toward the tomb. John got there first, but did not go in. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but, for some reason, didn't go in. Simon Peter, of course, wasn't so reticent. He went straight into the tomb. He also saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally John also went inside. "Our lesson says, "He saw and believed." But then the writer adds, "They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."

In other words, it was still dark that first Easter morning. The disciples were in the dark just like everyone else. And Mary Magdalene who loved the Master so much was completely in the dark as well, and her heart was breaking.

Friends the truth is that it's a dark world without Easter. No truer statement can be made. Without Easter, what else is there to do when we contemplate the loss of someone we love but to cry? Without Easter, there is no hope of being reunited with them.

You may remember Gracie Allen and George Burns in their tv show. This was before my time but I have seen clips from their show and I came across this story. They were one of America's favorite comedy teams for more than four decades in vaudeville, films, radio and television. They were also deeply in

love. Gracie died in 1964. George Burns, of course, didn't die until 32 years later at the age of 100.

When Gracie died, George was devastated. One of the things that George kept close to him following her death was a love note that always encouraged him. The note said: "Never place a period where God has placed a comma."

"Never place a period where God has placed a comma." This statement makes no sense without Easter. Without Easter there is no evidence of life beyond the grave. This is what most bothers many people who demand scientific evidence. There is no such thing with concern to life beyond the grave. Oh, we can infer evidence.

Dr. Jane McAdams, a medical doctor, was shocked to the core when her 68-year-old mother was diagnosed with progressive lymphoma. Doctors gave her less than a month to live. When Dr. McAdams came to break the news, she found the elderly woman looking through a sales catalogue. Her mother, a legendary penny-pincher, pointed out a very expensive summer purse and announced that she wanted that purse for her birthday.

Dr. McAdams realized that her mother wasn't asking for the purse; she was asking how long she would live. Would she live long enough to use a summer purse?

That day, Dr. McAdams decided not to tell her mother the diagnosis. Instead, she went out and bought the most expensive summer purse she could find. And every year since then, she's bought her mother a fancy purse. At the time of her writing, Dr. McAdams' mother was about to celebrate her 83rd birthday.

(8) There is amazing power in hope, is there not? Hope is what Easter is all

about. Without Easter this is a dark, dark world. With Easter, hope bursts forward with every blossom of springtime.

And this leads me to say one last thing: thank God for Easter. Respected theologian and author, Wolfhart Pannenberg once said, “The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”

He’s right, of course. The testimony of those who experienced Christ’s resurrection is so compelling that the only real reason a person might reject it is that it might require them to make a change in how they are living. There are those who reject it. It is sad, but they are free to reject the Good News of Easter if they so choose. As for me, I will leave this service with “hallelujah!” ringing in my ears and in my heart. Jesus is alive, and because he lives we shall live, too. Easter is God’s light beaming into a dark, dark world. Because Christ lives, the world is brighter than it has ever been before.