

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

An Unusual Messenger and a New Message

John 20:18

Intro: We're looking at the initial stages of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's early Sunday morning in **John ch20** and a comprehensive reading of the Gospels tells us that a small group of women went to the tomb to complete the burial preparations on the body of Jesus, preparations that were begun by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus but not finished because of the Passover. As they approach the tomb, they realize that the stone has been moved away from the entrance. Fearing the worst, Mary Magdalene runs back to town and alerts Peter and John of the situation. Peter and John race to the tomb and discover that it's not quite empty – the grave clothes that were left behind gave them enough physical evidence to realize that something supernatural had happened, then they went back home.

Last week we saw that Mary stayed behind at the tomb and was weeping because she didn't know where the body of Jesus had been moved to and she was beside herself with grief. Mary even looked into the tomb but she didn't see what Peter and John saw; she saw 2 angels! But, apparently, she wasn't impressed with these angels because after a brief conversation, she turned away from them and literally ran into Jesus, but she didn't recognize Him. John tells us that Mary thought He was just the gardener and right away we may scoff and say, "As if!" I mean, how wrong could she be? This was no grounds-keeper; this was the risen Lord of Glory! But was Mary really wrong?

Obviously, Jesus was not the gardener responsible for the upkeep of that location but there is a motif in the OT that associates kings as gardeners. To begin with, Jesus is often referred to as the 2nd Adam but what was the primary occupation of the 1st Adam? He was the grounds-keeper of the Garden of Eden – a gardener! Many of the kings of the near East were also gardeners: Nebuchadnezzar was famous for creating the hanging gardens of Babylon which are listed as one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. Solomon included the garden motif in his construction of the temple. It was filled with images of palm trees, almond blossoms, pomegranates and other agricultural allusions. He was also known for having his own elaborate gardens as attested by the book of Song of Solomon. Of course, when

Jesus returns and establishes His millennial kingdom on the earth, the earth will be returned to its former glory at the beginning of creation. Then eventually, Jesus will create a new heaven and a new earth and what a place it will be!

Did Mary consider all of this when she thought Jesus was the gardener? Of course not! I'm confident that the concept never entered her mind because she was still under the impression that Jesus was dead and all she wanted to do was locate and retrieve His body for proper burial. But, even though her assessment of Jesus was not accurate, it also wasn't wrong. Sure, Jesus was not the gardener of that particular garden but as the risen Lord and King of Glory – He was and will be a gardener over a garden that will put Nebuchadnezzar and Solomon to shame.

Now, Jesus did reveal Himself to Mary and in doing so, He also revealed a little bit about His new condition, His glorified state. Upon recognizing her Teacher and friend, Mary fell at His feet and clung to Him. Jesus then tells her not to do that, not because He couldn't be touched or didn't want to be touched by her. No, He restrains mainly because He wasn't going to be leaving any time soon; he was going to be around for a little while longer. But also, He restrains her to inform her that, Yes, He is risen but He's not simply returning to way things were before He died on the cross. Mary is acting as though things would now get back to normal, back to the way they used to be. Jesus assures her that her (and every other follower's) relationship to Him cannot and never will be the same. Sure, Lazarus rose from the dead and he went back to his normal, former life, but his wasn't a resurrection. Jesus has been raised to new life, a glorified life with a glorified body and a glorified position. All things have become new.

Now, in dealing with the story of the resurrection in this passage (11-18) and observing the wonder of Jesus in His glorification, it's easy to get lost in discovering the amazing aspect of this new reality; so much so that we miss some other amazing truths being presented in John's account. Last week, in our study of this section, we read vs11-18 and discussed at length vs11-17 but barely mentioned vs18 and that's not good. There's something very unusual and something very wonderful occurring in this verse that we would be the worse for if we failed to point it out and address it. Let's go back and read vs18 and see what the Holy Spirit has in store for us there.

18 – I said there was something very unusual happening in this verse but it's not that noticeable to our modern, illuminated way of thinking. What's unusual about this verse is the person Jesus chooses to be the very first witness and messenger of the Gospel. Sure, He's sending her on a mission to bring the news of the resurrection to the 11 disciples but that is actually the heart of the Gospel: the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The disciples knew He had died and been buried but they hadn't yet fully realized that He was now risen; not just alive but glorified!

Why is this so unusual? Well, as we have discussed on several occasions, Israel was a male-dominated society. Of course, most nations were in that day but Israel took it to an extreme level. Women, for the most part, were regarded as property. That's not to say that love didn't exist in marriages of the time but it was the general attitude of the population that the concerns and opinions of women didn't matter. But, it was actually worse than that. The legal system of Israel did not, as a matter of course, even accept the testimony of a woman because they believed that women could not be trusted to tell the truth. Women were considered second class citizens by virtue of their gender.

That's what makes this verse so unusual. Considering the centuries of tradition and social taboo stacked against women, it's unusual that Jesus would make a woman the first witness of the Resurrection. And not just the first witness! Jesus didn't just grant her the honor of being the first to see Him in His resurrected form; He also graciously granted her the honorable task of being the very first person to carry the news of the Resurrection to others! Mary was made the first ever missionary of the Gospel! There's no reason to think Mary was a particularly important person so why did Jesus choose to reveal Himself to her first? Why did He choose her to deliver this good news 1st?

There are several good reasons and I believe that all of them contributed to our Lord's decision to use Mary in this capacity. 1st) There's a practical reason for choosing a woman as the first witness and messenger of the Gospel.

It's a solid argument for the historical accuracy of the account of the Resurrection. If the Gospel writers had gotten together to fabricate the story of Jesus rising from the dead, they certainly would not have made the first witness to the resurrection be a woman. Because women were commonly

(unfairly) regarded as unreliable witnesses, this would have cancelled out any chance of human writers choosing Mary. The truth is truly stranger than fiction.

2nd) Why did Jesus choose Mary? I think [Prov 8:17](#) provides a logical reason: "I love those who love me and those who seek me diligently will find me." This verse is actually referring to wisdom but Jesus is the personification of wisdom so it also applies to Him. Why did Jesus choose Mary over any of the outstanding leaders of the band of 11 disciples? Why did He appear to her first? Quite simply: because *she was there!* Her love for Jesus brought her to the tomb early in the morning. Her love for Jesus and concern for the proper care of His corpse is what kept her at the tomb even after the rest had gone back to their homes. She stayed, she searched and she found Who she was looking for! Why Mary and not someone else? No one else was there!

3rd) There's also a theological reason why Jesus choose Mary. It's found in [Isa 55:9](#), "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts." From a human perspective, this is a wonderful condescension, the risen and glorified Lord stooping down to grant an amazing blessing upon someone whom many would consider to be the least qualified and the least accepted. Society and tradition requires a different witness, a better witness. But, over and over again, the Bible reminds us that God is not bound by human law or the traditions of men. Neither is God obligated in any way to follow or align His decisions with the acceptable societal or cultural norms of the people He is dealing with. Our ideas of what is right, best or acceptable do not play into God's decision making in the least. They're hardly ever a consideration because His ways are so far above our ways. He already has it all figured out while we're still trying to catch our breath!

This principle is seen throughout the Bible. The societal norm of the ancient near East was that the first born son was to receive the father's blessing and the birthright (double portion of inheritance). This was especially important in the families of the OT patriarchs because not only did they have large earthly possessions, they also had the direct promises of God handed down from Abraham to his descendants. The right of the first born was so important that it was eventually codified in the Mosaic Law and yet, although Abraham's firstborn son was Ishmael, God declared that the promises

would be given to Isaac, his second son. We see the same thing in Isaac's family. Esau was firstborn but God determined the blessings would be passed on through Jacob instead. In Jacob's family, Reuben was firstborn but the promise of the Messiah would come through the tribe of Judah, not Reuben.

We see this principle in the Book of Judges. God chose Gideon to deliver Israel from the oppressive occupation of the Midianites. But, by his own admission, Gideon was from the weakest family in the tribe of Manasseh and he was the least in his father's house. The Lord never disputes Gideon's assessment of himself but He chooses him anyway, for His own reasons and for His own purposes, and accomplishes a great deliverance through him.

Probably the greatest example of this principle is seen in God's selection of a king for Israel. When the leaders of Israel came to Samuel and demanded a king, God gave them the king that they wanted – one that stood head and shoulders above everyone else, one that looked like he fit the part. But Saul wasn't God's choice of king for Israel, he didn't possess the heart or character God desired in the person who would lead His people. That actually turned out to be the runt of the litter from an unknown family in an unpopular town outside of Jerusalem.

David wasn't big and tall and strong like his older brothers were. When Samuel got a look at these boys he said, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him!" But God said, "Not so fast, Bub; Keep looking!" None of these were the 1 He had chosen. In fact, God's choice was so uncharacteristic and unexpected, not even David's father thought to call him in from the field. Samuel had to ask, "Do you have any others?" "Uh...well, there is one other..." Why had God chosen David over all his other, clearly more capable brothers? God chose him because David would become a man after God's own heart? Why is that? Because David had been a child after God's own heart and was a teenager after God's own heart. David wasn't chosen for his external characteristics, he was chosen because of his spiritual ones. This principle is also seen in the NT. [1 Cor 1:26-29](#) reveals God's criteria for choosing His servants. God chooses those individuals that are the least likely to succeed and then He empowers them to do what He has called them to do and the whole purpose for this is so that God will be glorified by the outcome and not the servant. This principle even applied to the greatest

missionary God ever called into service, the Apostle Paul. Even Paul struggled with the difficulties of the flesh; one in particular was a constant problem for him so much so that he called it his thorn in the flesh. We don't know what it was but he was constantly praying that God would take it away. But God didn't and He told Paul why in **II Cor 12:9**. Paul's physical weakness allowed God to receive the glory for all of Paul's success.

Jesus chose Mary because He chose her. We might often disagree with God's decisions but the Bible says His way is perfect (**Ps 18:30**), righteous (**Ps 145:17**), just (**Dan 4:37**), everlasting (**Hab 3:6**) and past finding out (**Rom 11:33**). There is no scenario where our thoughts or decisions will ever be better than His so if He's called us, we must go! God's decision in our text may seem unusual, but it's also wonderful and it's not the only thing that's wonderful here. We must now consider the news Jesus tasked Mary with delivering to the disciples.

Vs18 just tells us that Mary went and did what Jesus told her to do. This is deceptively simple because it's actually a record of the 1st announcement of the best news the world's ever heard: an announcement of the Lord's resurrection.

When World War II ended, the joyful news was flashed across the globe and people everywhere celebrated with joy and relief. But, as great as that news was, it didn't compare with the stupendous news of the resurrection of Jesus. This message was better then, and it's even better today. Why is it the best news the world has ever heard?

1) The resurrection is good news because it's true! The evidence is overwhelming: the moved stone, the grave clothes undisturbed, the changed character of those who saw the risen Jesus, the number of people who saw the risen Jesus. All this has led one individual to declare, "The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the best attested fact in history." Some of the best books on the resurrection have been written by lawyers, some of whom originally set out to disprove it. The resurrection of Jesus is good news because it is true!

2) Its good news because it came after an apparent defeat. His death plunged His friends into sadness and despair. It looked like a crushing defeat. But on the third day, Jesus rose again in victory. He had defeated the enemies of death, hell and sin!

3) Its good news because of what it proves! It proves that there is a God and the God of the Bible is the true God. It proves Jesus' deity. If Jesus is God, then God is like Jesus. It means that God is not distant, arbitrary, or unreal. He is a God who loves us and who came to earth to give Himself a ransom for our sins. It also proves that the believer in Christ can have a supernatural victory over sin in their life. In fact, Jesus lives to provide the power to do it. **Rom 6:4** teaches that by faith, all who believe in Jesus are united to Him so that His power becomes available to them. We may be weak and utterly helpless, unable to resist temptation for a single minute. But He is strong, and He lives to give us help and deliverance. Victory is never about our strength, but His power. His power is what we need. Finally, The resurrection is evidence for our own resurrection and life with Jesus in glory beyond the grave. He told us He is preparing a place for us. Was He telling the truth? How do we know? The resurrection proves Him to be trustworthy!

There's a 4th reason why the resurrection is the best news ever – it demands a life-saving response in faith from each of us. Most “good” news is, by its very nature, restricted; meaning: it applies to some people but not everyone. A job promotion is good for the one who gets it but not so much for the others that missed out on it. The results of an election are good for the winning party but not the losing party. In every sporting event there are winners and losers. Almost all human news is restricted but the news of the resurrection is for everyone and benefits all who accept it!

What is your relationship to the risen Lord? Have you heard the good news? Have you responded to it in faith? Have you trusted in Jesus as your Savior? The resurrection is the heart of Christianity. It's not found in the various liturgies of churches or in the specific doctrines of Christian theology, important as they may be. Christianity is Jesus Christ - the risen Christ. He died and rose again for you. Won't you come to Him?

Believer, if God is calling you to serve Him, He's doing so for a reason – for His reasons and purposes. Don't balk at His call as Moses did – embrace it and trust Him to use you in it. Just as the resurrection provides us supernatural power over sin, so the risen Lord provides us supernatural power to accomplish His will and calling in our lives. Trust His will, obey His call and see Him glorified in your life and by your life. 😊