

John 20:1-18 I Have Seen the Lord”¹

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

[This exercise is for all class members to do at the same time, or you could call on someone, then assign them the phrase.] I am going to call out some phrases. Without saying a word, use your body to “speak” the message: “Great job!” “Welcome home!” “I’m afraid!” “Don’t be afraid.” “Where in the world is he?” “It’s not my fault!” “How long will this game go on?”

Do you ever go to Easter sunrise services? Did you go to a sunrise service today?

Instruction

“Body language” is the non-verbal language all of us use, often unconsciously. Some social psychologists say that over half of our communication with one another is non-verbal, such as facial expressions. We use gestures to amplify our words. Sometimes the gesture needs no words!

To offer or to refuse eye contact communicates something. Email communication is sometimes difficult because, although we have the words, we don’t hear the tone. (Was she being serious or sarcastic when she wrote, “You obviously know a lot about that”?)

Today’s Bible study has words, but it is also about body language. And, what is communicated when a body has disappeared?

Today, of course, is Easter. Jesus has been celebrated, convicted, and crucified. He died on Friday. His body was entombed that evening because the next day was the Sabbath. Then, something mysterious happens...

- Have a class member read John 20:1-2.

Let’s look at this story through the voice of body language. First of all, what day of the week was this? (the first day, Sunday). From what you know of Jewish law as it was interpreted in those days, why didn’t Mary Magdalene go to the tomb on the day after the crucifixion? (It was the Sabbath when no work was to be done.)

Body language helps us “read between the lines”. What would be your assumptions on seeing a woman walking toward a tomb before the sun rises?

(We have four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The personality of the author and the identity of the author’s audience give each gospel a different “flavor”. We are much more particular in the 21st century that stories must be consistent and that parallel stories must match. That was not as important to the authors of the 1st century AD.

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2025. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

The story was not the end, but a means to an end. The gospel writers wanted people to know about Jesus and to become followers of Jesus.

Even today, however, we might tell the story of the tragic end of a relationship differently to our best friend, our parents, or our child. It is the same story, and it really did happen, but we vary the details and the amount of details depending on our audience and our reason for telling the story. So, we have four gospels with four Resurrection of Jesus stories. It really did happen, but we get different details depending on the author.

Here is one example. How many people come to the tomb before sunrise, according to John's gospel? (one, Mary Magdalene) If we look at the other three gospels, other women joined Mary Magdalene as she visited the tomb. Mary goes directly from the tomb to the disciples and tells them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and _____ don't know..." She does not say, "and *I* don't know", but "*we* don't know".

"The three Synoptic Gospels, the Marcan Appendix (Mk 16:9ff), and 1 Cor 15:4-7 give us five accounts of resurrection appearances that should be carefully studied in relation to the Fourth Gospel. The differing details clearly rule out any organized attempt at inventing the incidents involved. Different apologetic and doctrinal interest in these various compositions seem to guide the choice of appearances and details."²

John wants to tell the story through one voice, though. This is a non-verbal clue to us about John. What is it that John wants to say by telling the story through *Mary* coming to the tomb...and her coming *alone*? [Answers might relate to Mary being a *woman* who first witnesses the empty tomb, a wealthy woman mourning her loss, a devoted follower coming to mourn, grief as an *individual* experience, hope in the darkness, etc. There is no "right answer", as we are guessing what John may have been saying without him saying it.]

In verse 2, we have another non-verbal clue. At what speed did Mary go to find Simon Peter and the other disciple? (She ran.) What do you imagine was going on inside Mary at this time?

As we go deeper into this story, listen again for the non-verbal clues that John offers us.

- Have a class member read John 20:3-8.

Who are the men in this story? (Peter and "the other disciple") Scholars debate the identity of "the other disciple" and we do not have time to get into that debate this morning. But we can continue our conversation about the non-verbal clues about these two men. Describe the personalities of these two individuals based on what we have in this reading.

Do you think the foot race to the tomb gives us any clue about the age of these men? Does it say anything about their faith?

Jesus is dead, as far as Mary, Peter, and the other disciple know. (In a few verses, John states that the disciples "did not understand the scripture, that he must be raised from the dead" (v.9)).

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 96.

If Jesus is “gone” (i.e., dead), what does it matter that his body is present or not? (although the spirit has left the body, we still love their body; it is scandalous that someone would remove a dead body from its grave; disrespect for the person’s life; disrespect for the remaining family; fear that others may defile the body, etc.)

Let’s look in the tomb itself. What are the non-verbal (or body language) clues here?

The linens that wrapped Jesus’ body are present, and they are not tossed in a wad in the corner. It seems to be a minor detail, but John thinks it’s important to include. What do you think this says to us about what happened here?

(For example, if thieves had stolen Jesus’ body, wouldn’t they have taken his wrap as well? If not, would they have folded everything neatly before making their getaway? A tangent – some claim that the Shroud of Turin was the linen wrap for Jesus, but if John’s details are accurate, there would have been two separate cloths, not a single large wrap as the Shroud is. A further question, though, could be, How much does physical evidence of a lost loved one matter to us? How is this also “body language” when the body is absent?)

- Have a class member read John 20:8-11.

The tomb is empty, but we have different reactions to that truth. Compare the reactions of the disciples and Mary Magdalene. Is this a difference of gender, or faith, or what?

- Have a class member read John 20:11-18.

Mary Magdalene is in grief. Can you find the three places in this section of scripture where we read that Mary was weeping? (Vs. 11, 13, 15) But Mary was soon to have a testimony like the psalmist in Psalm 30.

- Have a class member read Psalm 30:11-12.

How do you interpret the body language of Mary as she (apparently) touches or clings to Jesus?

“Jesus’ words may strike some readers as unnecessarily harsh...To read these words as cold and harsh is to misread them, however, and to overlook their import. Jesus’ command, ‘Do not hold on to me,’ is the first post-resurrection teaching. When he speaks these words, Jesus teaches Mary that he cannot and will not be controlled. One cannot hold Jesus to preconceived standards and expectations of who he should be, because to do so is to interfere with Jesus’ work and thereby limit what Jesus has to offer.”³

Our passage concludes with Mary testifying to the gathered disciples that she had seen, held, and talked with the risen Jesus. It concludes, “and she told them that he had said these things to her.” The sentence could have ended with “he had said these things”, but what significance might there be that John added “to her”?

“[Mary’s] announcement of the presence of the risen Jesus is the core of the Easter gospel...Mary is the first Easter witness in both senses of the word ‘witness.’ She is the first to

³ Gail R. O’Day, “John”, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Woman’s Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 301.

see the risen Jesus, and she is the first to tell others what she has seen. She is the first disciple of the risen Jesus.”⁴

The encounter between Jesus and Mary attests to the new situation that obtains after the resurrection. Jesus is alive, but he is departing, ascending to his Father, returning to the glory that he had before the world was made (17:24). Mary is to announce that she has seen the Lord, clarifying that the tomb was empty, not because the body had been stolen, but because Jesus had risen from the dead; he is alive. But he is not returning to his life with them as in the past; he is returning to his Father. She is to interpret the meaning of the empty tomb and of Jesus’ appearance to her to his disciples.”⁵

Transformational exercise

[Note to the teacher: You will be leading your class in a time of guided prayer, having them imagine themselves within a story of Jesus. Give some time to pause between the questions, so that the students have time to use their imaginations. The Holy Spirit can use our imaginations to bring new insights and new expressions of love for us.]

On this Easter Sunday, we celebrate that Jesus Christ is the Lord of life and the conqueror of death. During his walk on earth, we have many stories about Jesus – not nearly all the stories that people of that day knew, but enough stories to help us feel that we can know this man.

For our transformational exercise, I invite you to think about a story of Jesus. Maybe it is his birth, or a miracle, or a time he was in prayer – or maybe it is an Easter story. I will invite you to think of that story as we go into a time of silence and guided prayer.

Close your eyes and think about the story that has come to your mind. (Pause) As you bring this story to mind, I invite you to imagine yourself present. (Pause) Say something to Jesus, but without using any words. Use your body language to say something to Jesus. What touch, or gesture, or facial expression gets your message across to Jesus? (Pause) Now, in your imagination, how does Jesus respond to you? (Pause) What do you do or say in return? (Pause) Amen.

[After this exercise, invite class members to share their Jesus story and any insights they gained.]

Close in a prayer something like this: *God, you thought it necessary to take on flesh, to come to us in the body of Jesus. We thank you that because of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, we have our salvation. We trust you for this life and the next. Amen.*

⁴ O’Day, 302.

⁵ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 413f.