

JOHN — WEEK 28

DIDN'T SEE THAT COMING



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Joseph and Nicodemus laid Jesus in a new tomb. He's alone, which simplifies things. Peter and John see the empty tomb and the folded handkerchief, and they figure out what happened. Mary doesn't, but Jesus shows up and sends her on "The Little Commission" to tell the disciples that He's ascending to the Father.

The disciples gather and Jesus gives them The Great Commission, with a clear command to peace/unity.

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1 John 19:38–42

After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews' Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby.

This is a perfect portrait of saints in action. Joseph and Nicodemus have a holy goal, they develop a strategy to make it happen, and they implement it precisely.

And they risk their necks to do it. You can almost hear the *Mission Impossible* theme song in the background as you read this passage. Joseph goes to Pilate secretly and gets permission to execute his bold plan. Then he and Nicodemus get the body, bring the spices and the linen, and perform a proper burial in a brand-new tomb.

But there's a twist. Joseph and Nicodemus think they're just preparing Jesus for burial. Little do they know, they're also preparing Him for resurrection.

The key is that they bury Him in *a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid*. They don't do this to set the stage for the resurrection; they do it because the tomb is right there handy.

But set the stage they do. This means that Jesus is alone in the tomb, which proves useful.

Jesus being alone in the tomb isn't absolutely necessary, but it helps. Things would have been "messier" if there had been another body in there. The resurrection wouldn't have totally emptied the tomb. The people who came there later might have struggled to sort things out. It wouldn't have been as obvious that Jesus wasn't there.

And for people who wanted to deny the resurrection, the other body would have fueled all kinds of nonsense.

So, the dots all connect at the precise moment they need to.

Let this be a lesson to you. Take bold, decisive, well-planned action in service to the King, and interesting things will happen.

But note there's a crucial element to this not mentioned in this passage—prayer. It's a safe bet that these two didn't cook up this grand scheme on their own; they prayed. That's essential.

Not all bold, decisive, well-planned action is in service of God's agenda.

2 John 20:1–2

Now the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.”

The resurrection is the *sine qua non* of Christianity. Everything being true depends on this being true.

But the amazing thing is that, as of this moment in the narrative, Mary doesn't believe in the resurrection.

This is also true of the disciples. They will be puzzled by the events at first.

Thus, in a sense, the light bulb coming on for these folks is the moment of conversion. Even the disciples lack a key element of faith.

Consider the events of chapter 20 of John in that light. This is the dawn of Christianity. Everything is choreographed to convert these people. It's the ultimate example of the fields being white for harvest.

And the thing that makes the fields so white is confusion and grief. Their brains are going a hundred miles an hour and not getting anywhere. They're totally frustrated and confused.

This is true even though Mary refers to Jesus as, “*the Lord.*” Her concept of Jesus's lordship is still too small.

There's something complex going on here and the only way to explain it is by describing the opposite. Suppose that, after the resurrection, everyone had said, or felt like saying, “I told you so. I knew He would rise.”

That would have ruined everything. Those cocky Christians couldn't have turned the world upside down the way the real ones did. They would have been too busy being glad they were right.

Instead, the disciples had a terrible, faithless weekend that set them up for His lordship being seared into their brains like a giant branding iron coming down on their foreheads.

After that, their courage was bullet-proof.

This same concept often plays out wondrously in our day. Many of the most fervent and useful Christians came to Christ from the farthest distance. It's as if you can't really appreciate food unless you've been starving.

Remember this when evangelizing or praying for a loved one to find faith.

Some of the best candidates look like the worst candidates.

3 John 20:3–10

Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again to their own homes.

Blam; *he saw and believed*. The passage doesn't even say what he believed. It doesn't need to.

They did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead, but Jesus had mentioned it plenty. Suddenly the light bulb comes on.

So, why were they running? And why did John, having outsprinted Peter, freeze and not go in?

Given that *they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead*, it's likely they ran because they were just taking Mary's words literally and they were worried.

Grave robbing was common back then. As D.A. Carson notes, "*The robbing of graves was a crime so sufficiently common that the Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54) eventually ordered capital punishment to be meted out to those convicted of destroying tombs, removing bodies or even displacing the sealing stones.*"

But that doesn't explain John's freeze-up. He looks in and can see enough to know that Jesus isn't there, but something stops him from entering. The presence of the cloths also shows that it was not grave robbers. The cloths have value, a body not so much. Robbers who took the time to unwrap everything would surely take the cloths and the spices and leave the body.

Maybe that's why John stopped. He has learned what he came to learn, and entering a tomb is creepy.

Then Peter shows up and acts just like Peter always acts, barging on in. Once inside Peter sees something striking— *the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself*. Then John went in also; and he saw and believed. Saw what? What did he see that suddenly made him believe?

There's only one possible answer—*the handkerchief*. Seeing the folded-up handkerchief converts John.

Only one person would have taken the time to fold that handkerchief—Jesus.

The light bulb is on. John and Peter know that the greatest miracle of all time has happened. So, what do they do? They go home. That seems nuts. Shouldn't they go running down the street shouting, "Eureka!"

No. They're doing the right thing. The Christian thing to do is to pray and wait for instructions. Just jumping up and doing whatever you feel like doing is exactly the wrong thing to do.

4 John 20:11–17

But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. Then they said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.”

Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”

She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, “Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary!”

She turned and said to Him, “Rabboni!” (which is to say, Teacher).

Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.’”

What’s wrong with clinging to Jesus? What’s His point here?

The answer may be in the next words, *“but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.’”*

This isn’t The Great Commission; it’s more like The Little Commission.

Mary is to spread the good news to a specific group, and Jesus needs her to do it right away.

Just as in many other interactions with the risen Lord, Jesus isn’t immediately recognized. Mary thinks He’s the gardener. He might even have been the one who moved the body. So, in her confusion and her grief, she asks Him about it.

But the “gardener” says her name, “Mary!” and that opens her eyes. Now she gets it and is prepared to carry out The Little Commission.

We’re all part of The Great Commission, but it’s useful to think of our roles as little commissioners. That’s the point of recognizing our personal mission field. I’m not bringing the gospel to the whole world; I’m bringing it to the people I’m called to bring it to.

Thus, my little commission doesn’t match yours. Each person’s task is unique and the right methods for you might not be the right methods for me. Obviously, there are some common elements, but prayer that asks for direction is critical to being useful to the kingdom.

No two Christians have exactly the same job.

5 John 20:18–23

Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her.

Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Mary’s Little Commission is completed in verse 18. Given that Jesus shows up later *the same day*, what’s so important about Mary’s Little Commission? Do the disciples need to be prepared for His showing up, so they won’t die of shock or something?

More likely, Mary’s news is why they’re assembled. Remember, Peter and John had returned to *their own homes* after discovering that He rose. Now they’re all together—a situation which necessitates security measures *for fear of the Jews*. Mary’s message is the only thing mentioned that could have triggered this.

And Mary’s message is that Jesus is *ascending*, not just that He rose. They don’t have much time.

So, Jesus shows up, seemingly without coming in through the door, and they don’t die of shock. Then He says, “*Peace be with you.*” This is no simple colloquial greeting. The risen Lord says very little here, so every word is crucial. Thus, it’d be useful to know exactly what Jesus means here. Specifically, is it in the imperative in the Greek? Is He giving a command?

The Greek is simply two words—*eiraynay humin* (εἰρηνη ὑμῖν). *Eiraynay* is simply “peace,” (or “harmony”) and *humin* is you, in the plural dative. So, a literal word-for-word translation could be just, “Peace to y’all.” That doesn’t help. Jesus is saying something important, but what?

The answer comes in the next verse, when He repeats, “*eiraynay humin,*” and adds, “*As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.*” Then Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them.

The peace (or harmony), which merits a double mention, is to accompany them on their mission.

The lesson for us is striking. The Great Commission must be carried out in peace and harmony.

We mess this up big time. We divide over things that aren’t worth dividing over. Frankly, our egos get in the way. We need to get back to kingdom priorities and put doctrinal nuances on the back burner.

Division among Christians is harmful. Jesus gave this double emphasis for a reason.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What's the boldest thing you've done for Christ?
2. Who's the "worst candidate" you've seen come to Christ?
3. When have you acted too quickly and emotionally, instead of waiting on the Lord?
4. When has prayer caused you to completely change your plans?
5. Which divisions in the Church break your heart the most?

Items for prayer: