

# THE INCREDIBLE HOPE

by Ray C. Stedman

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**For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, (1 Cor. 15:3-4)**

That is the good news of the gospel of Jesus, in the words of the Apostle Paul.

Remarkably, however, the very first news of Easter was not good news at all. It was terrible news that Mary Magdalene brought to the Apostles Peter and John when she came running with the announcement that the body of Jesus had disappeared. What a shock that must have been.

When the body of Abraham Lincoln was stolen some years after his death and held for ransom, our entire nation was shocked and dismayed. After the ransom was paid, the body was recovered, and buried again under tons of cement in Springfield, Illinois.

We can only imagine the shock of these disciples of Jesus, smitten and numbed as they already were at the unexpected death of their Lord, when they heard Mary's hysterical announcement.

The Apostle John did not write his account of the events of the resurrection until some fifty years after they had taken place. Yet the narrative, taken from the 20th chapter of his gospel, is as vivid and as fresh as if it had just occurred.

**Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran, and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple out ran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and he went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. The other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes. {John 20:1-10 RSV}**

Outside the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem today, in a beautiful secluded garden at the foot of the hill that is shaped like a skull, there is a tomb called the "Garden Tomb." No one is exactly sure that this is the tomb where the body of Jesus lay, but it fits the picture much better than the tomb that is under the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

I confess I have great struggles with the somber darkness of that cathedral and the squabbling of the priests. All of that is far removed from the simplicity of the events recorded here.

According to the other gospel accounts, other women besides Mary went to the tomb early that morning. When they arrived there, probably around five or five-thirty a.m., just as the sun was beginning to rise, they saw that the great stone, weighing over a thousand pounds, that rolled along a track in front of the tomb had been pushed back. Shocked by this discovery, Mary left the other women there and ran to tell Peter and John that the tomb had been rifled, the guard had left, and the body of Jesus had disappeared.

According to the gospel accounts the other women stayed, and there they met two angels who told them that Jesus had risen. But Mary had not yet received that news when she ran to tell Peter and John about the

disappearance of the body of Jesus.

On hearing this, both Peter and John immediately left for the tomb, running through the streets of Jerusalem and through the Damascus Gate to the tomb. John, the younger of the two, outran Peter and, stooping down, he looked into the tomb.

If this was indeed the Garden Tomb, you do have to stoop to look into it. It is a fairly large chamber, hewed out of the rock, with three rock shelves for bodies.

As he peered in, John observed the burial cloths still lying on the rock shelf where the body of Jesus had lain. He does not tell us what he thought at that moment, but it seems likely there came flashing into his mind the realization that Mary was wrong. It looked as though the body were still there. The cloths were still lying there and from his vantage point, peering into the tomb as he stooped down, it would have looked as though the body were still there. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that he did not enter the tomb immediately. But not Peter. When he arrived at the tomb, puffing and gasping from his early morning run, with characteristic impetuosity he entered the tomb. Inside he saw the burial cloths which John had seen lying there, and he also saw the napkin which had been around the head of Jesus, lying in a place by itself.

At this point I want to answer the question some of you are surely asking, "Was this the 'Shroud of Turin'?" Because of one detail given in this account, I must answer, "No, this was not the Shroud of Turin." We are all familiar with the story of this ancient shroud, which dates from the 13th century at least, which has imprinted upon it the impression of the body of a man. The head, the torso, the limbs, even the beard somehow impregnated the material of that shroud in a reverse image that almost resembles a photograph, so that the features are clearly visible. Some people passionately believe that this was the shroud that lay over the body of Jesus. Somehow, they say, the mystery, the magnificence, the power of the resurrection, left the impression of the features of the body of Jesus on the cloth. But notice the detail John gives which clearly proves that the Shroud of Turin could not have been the cloth that covered the body. Both John and Peter saw that the napkin which covered the head of Jesus was a separate piece of cloth from the wrappings that covered the rest of the body. In fact Matthew's gospel makes clear that when Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea prepared the body for burial they wrapped it in linen strips, not the single piece of cloth which constitutes the Shroud of Turin. Based on these two significant details which Matthew and John include in their accounts we must conclude that the shroud, remarkable and mysterious as it is, is not the shroud that covered the body of Jesus.

At this point John entered the tomb. According to his own account, when he saw these cloths he "believed." We have to ask, "Believed what?" On reading this, most think that John believed that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead. Certain preachers -- and I have to confess I have done this myself -- even supply details that are not given in this account, of the cloths lying there, hollow and sunken in as though the body had come through them and disappeared. They say this was what convinced John that Jesus had risen. But when that point of view is taken, there is no explanation for the verse which John immediately adds: "for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." The New International Version renders that verse: "They still did not understand from the Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead." That suggests that John did not believe that Jesus had risen.

What then did he believe? He clearly believed that Mary, after all, was right. His first glimpse into the tomb had made him feel that Mary, hysterical woman that she was in his eyes, had reported something that wasn't true. He believed the body was there. But when he entered and saw that the body cloths were lying in one place and the head napkin in another he believed that Mary was correct -- the body had been stolen. This would fit with the word that follows: "they still did not understand from the scriptures that Jesus had to rise from the dead." That being the case there was nothing for them to do but go home. And that is what they did: "Then the disciples went back to their homes."

Mary here enters the picture again. She had returned to the tomb, following the apostles, but had remained outside.

**But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at**

the head and one at the feet. 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." Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." [Brave words from a fragile woman, offering to carry away the body of a grown man, wrapped in cloths with 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes.] Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. {John 20:11-18 RSV}

That brief account focuses first upon the sobbing of Mary, standing outside the tomb, still convinced that her Lord was dead and his body had been stolen. Then, looking in, she saw two young men, "angels" we read, sitting inside. "Woman, why are you weeping?" they asked her. In the early light of dawn they seemed to be looking not at her, but at someone behind her. Turning, she saw a man standing there whom she took to be the gardener, who asked her the same question, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

There is a gentle rebuke inherent in that twice-asked question. It is saying, "This is no time for weeping, but for rejoicing, praise and thanksgiving." It implies that she could and should have known that. Jesus had clearly said several times, as the Gospels record, that he would rise again on the third day. One of the striking phenomena of the Gospels is the deafness of the disciples to the consistent revelations of Jesus concerning his resurrection. He had great difficulty convincing them that he was going to die in the first place. It was only as they saw the opposition closing in on him that they realized his words were true. But even then none of them seemed to grasp that every time he mentioned his death he also added that he would rise again on the third day.

But Mary was just like us! Have you ever found yourself in a distressing circumstance, when the sky seemed to come crashing down on you, and Christian that you are, you immediately forgot all the promises of God? You felt sorry for yourself, you became anxious and upset. I have. We so quickly forget the promises of God.

Martin Luther once spent three days in a black depression over something that had gone wrong. On the third day his wife came downstairs dressed in mourning clothes. "Who's dead?" he asked her. "God," she replied. Luther rebuked her, saying, "What do you mean, God is dead? God cannot die." "Well," she replied, "the way you've been acting I was sure He had!"

Many of us have been caught in that trap. This is also what had happened to Mary.

But Jesus has to speak but one word to her to open her eyes. With indescribable tenderness he simply uttered her name -- not Mary, which is what the account here says, but "Miriam," as he reverted to their native Aramaic. Mary instantly recognized his voice, just as any one of us would recognize a loved one's voice on the telephone. Responding in Aramaic, Mary flung herself at his feet and cried, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). She seized him by the feet and began to weep tears of joy.

According to the account, Jesus gently disengaged himself, saying, "Don't cling to me now" (that is a better translation) "for I have not yet ascended unto my Father."

Much theological guesswork has gone into what Jesus meant by this. Some have even suggested that before he made an appearance to anyone else he ascended to the Father at this point and then came back again. That is pure speculation. There is nothing to substantiate that. We know from the other Gospels that forty days would elapse before he ascended to the Father. He would appear several times to the disciples in Jerusalem -- that afternoon to two on the road to Emmaus, that evening in a secluded room to all of the eleven except Thomas. He appeared to Peter several times. He appeared to all of them seventy miles away at the Lake of Galilee. Over five hundred of the brethren saw him on the mountainside there. After the disciples had returned to Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives forty days after his resurrection, they saw Jesus ascend up into the heavens until a

cloud received him out of their sight. It was then he "ascended to the Father."

What does Jesus mean in these words to Mary? "Don't cling to me now, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and their Father, to my God and their God."

Many have noted that he makes a clear distinction between his relationship to the Father and theirs. Neither they, nor we, can say, "My Father" as he could say, "My Father." Neither they, nor we, could say, "My God" as he could say, "My God." Yet it was the same God and the same Father. His relationship as Son is different from our relationship as sons, for he was a Son by nature, but we by adoption.

But why does he not permit Mary to cling to him? He is saying to her, "Mary, a new relationship has come into being. I am no longer going to continue with you in a close physical relationship. Touching me gives you comfort, but it will no longer be that way. I am going to ascend to the Father." As we know from the Upper Room discourse, from there he would send the Spirit who would then make him available in a more wonderful and closer way than ever before. What he is saying is, "When I ascend to the Father, my nearness to you will be complete. Now go and tell my brothers (not "my disciples") that same truth."

I believe this is the first and the chief "good news" of Easter. Most celebrate Easter as a reminder that there is hope on the day when they have to leave this earth -- that Easter means because he lives we shall live also. The hymn says,

Jesus lives, and so shall I,  
Death, thy sting is gone forever.

This is a legitimate part of the message of Easter. It does indeed give us a glorious hope when we face death's door. Ron Ritchie has said there are three questions we all ask of ourselves at one time or another, "Where do I come from?" "Why am I here?" and "Is it really necessary to leave?" Most of us wish we didn't have to say "Yes" to the third. But that is not what comforted Mary or any of the disciples at this point. It never crossed their minds that this event would give them a hope in the hour of death. What brought them delirious gladness of heart was the realization, "Jesus is back again! We haven't lost him! He is here with us, and he will always be with us!"

That is the truly good news of Easter. Through two thousand years of Christian witness what has sustained the hearts of millions is the realization that Jesus can enter one's life and go with you through the trials, pressures, tears and joys of life right here on earth. He will be with you at the hour of death, yes, but not as a stranger just then entering your experience. He will already long have been a trusted Friend, not merely a comforting Companion, but as Lord, Sovereign, authoritative and able to work through the difficulties you face. No one wants to face pressures all alone; it helps to have someone with you. And not only someone like yourself, one who can understand how you feel, but if it can also be someone who has authority and power, one who can work out solutions to your seemingly insoluble problems, what a comfort that is!

Almost fifty years ago, I left the little town in Montana where I had attended high school to go to Chicago. I had never before visited a city as large. Through the intervention of a friend, I had obtained a job there in the days of the Depression, when jobs were as scarce as hens' teeth. I knew only one person in Chicago, my uncle. I didn't want to show it, but I was scared. I was leaving all my friends. The town I came from was so small you could locate it right between the second and third Burma Shave signs! It was a thousand-mile journey by bus to Chicago, but all through that long trip I was strengthened and comforted by the sense that Jesus was with me. Although I was heading into the unknown, I look back on that as one of the most joyful bus rides of my life. When I arrived in Chicago the city was blanketed in a great blizzard that tied everything up for several days so that I had to sit alone in a hotel room for the duration of the storm. Looking back, however, my memory of that period is one of fragrant companionship with One who was with me, strengthening me, and helping me throughout. For fifty years His companionship has never left me. There has never been a moment of pressure and trial that I could not feel his presence with me. That is the great promise of Easter.

Some years ago, when Elvis Presley died, people all over the United States and the world were shocked at the passing of one they called "the King." Following his death, there surfaced a great number of young men who gave evidence that they had idolized Elvis Presley and sought to imitate him. One young man, Dennis Wise, actually had his face surgically lifted and his hair contoured so that he looked exactly like his idol. He had learned to play the guitar and had even made a few dollars by appearing as a Presley look-alike. When he was interviewed by one of the newspapers about his passion to be like Elvis Presley, this is what he said:

Yes, sir, Presley has been an idol of mine ever since I was five years old. I have every record he ever made -- twice over. I have pictures in the thousands. I have books, magazines, pillows -- I even have a couple of books in German and Japanese about him. I even have tree leaves from the front of his house. It was embarrassing to me when I was in school for the kids were always teasing me. When Elvis was wearing white boots I went out and bought white boots. The kids called them "fruit boots." Teachers would always send me to the office because my two top buttons were unbuttoned. I'd button them and then, when no one was looking, I'd unbutton them again.

But I never got to meet Elvis Presley. I saw him on the stage four times. Once I tried to run up to the stage and once I stood on the wall of Graceland [the Presley mansion] and tried to see him. For 12 hours I stood there trying to get a glimpse of him. But he had so many people around him that I could never get close.

Those words describe sheer idolatry, the longing to be intimate with some great person. This is widely contemporary today. Young people are doing the same thing with Michael Jackson, with Prince, and with other figures in the music, the movie and the sports world. But the tragic element in the story of Dennis Wise are the words, "I could never get close to him."

Imagine how difficult it would be to see Jesus if he were on earth today. Think of the press of people you would have to get through to even look at him, let alone talk with him. Millions would be clamoring for his attention so that you wouldn't stand a chance to get close to him. But the good news of Easter is, not only can you know him, but he can be close to you all the time, through every situation. The risen Lord offers to share his victory with you, to take you through whatever you must face as your close and competent Companion who will never, never leave you.

Some of you have to face very serious problems this week. Some confront what looks like the end of their hopes and dreams. Fears and anxieties, loneliness, emptiness, heartache and sorrow are before them. But the good news of Easter is, you don't have to face any of that alone.

Listen to Jesus' exact words,

**"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any one hear my voice, and open the door, I will come into him and will live with him and he with me."**

That is the promise that millions have trusted. They have asked Jesus to enter their lives, to come and dwell with them, to go with them through life, not only through death. To their joy they found that every word was true.

There is a contemporary chorus which it is my prayer you will find to be true today.

Because He lives,  
I can face tomorrow,  
Because He lives,  
all fear is gone.  
Because I know who holds the future,  
that life is worth the living  
Just because He lives.

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