

Easter Sunday Sermon
April 5, 2026
St. John's Tappahannock
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
John 20:1-18

Welcome to St. John's this happy Easter morning!

Those of you who have been here on Sundays during Lent know that many of our gospel readings came from the gospel of John. So I want to start with a brief summary of this beloved disciples testimony.

John the evangelist takes us behind the scenes of Jesus ministry giving us a glimpse into his eternal origin and divine nature. John places Jesus in the beginning with God, active in creation, and the source of light and life. Therefore when he became Incarnate in human flesh, he made known the eternal God whom no one has ever seen.

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke preserve the sayings of Jesus in words closer to their original form, the John uses his own modes of thought and language in reporting and interpreting the signs of Jesus.

John uses a number of terms drawn from common experience: bread, water, light, life, and word, shepherd, door, and way to make the image and meaning of Christ both clear and gripping. The first half the gospel contains accounts of seven miracles of Jesus. The author knows that Jesus had performed many others as well, however this narrative sequence provides a journey to the last sign, the Resurrection.

John's word for these miracles are signs because they are here regarded as symbols of Jesus' teaching or as a revelation of his glory. Their purpose is to invoke faith on the part of those who witnessed them, beginning with the disciples.

The seven signs are selected to demonstrate Jesus's divinity and inspire faith. They serve a cumulative purpose to prove that Jesus is the Son of God, leading

to eternal life so that readers may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the son of God and thus have life in his name.

Let's review the signs.

1. The changing of water to wine was the first of the 'signs' by which Jesus revealed his glory. (John 2:1-11) Jesus transforms water into quality wine at a wedding in Cana, symbolizing the replacement of old ceremonial laws with the grace of the new covenant.
2. The second was the healing of the nobleman's son at Capernaum (4:46-54). Jesus heals a dying boy from a distance with a phrase, showing his authority over life and sickness, even without his physical presence. He said, "Go, your son will live!"
3. The third 'sign' is the healing of the paralyzed man at the pool (5:1-9). Jesus heals a man paralyzed for four decades on the Sabbath, demonstrating his authority over the Law.
4. The fourth is the multiplication of loaves and fishes (6:1-14). Jesus feeds a crowd with five loaves and two fish, revealing himself as the "Bread of Life" who sustains spiritual life.
5. The fifth is the healing of the man born blind (9:1-12). Jesus gives sight to a man blind from birth, symbolizing that he is the "Light of the World" who brings spiritual illumination and overcomes the darkness of evil with the Light of God's love.
6. And the sixth is the raising of Lazarus (11:1-44). Jesus raises a dear friend who had been dead for four days, demonstrating his power over death and identifying in no uncertain terms as himself as "Resurrection and Life".

We are going to look at Jesus' Resurrection from the dead is the 7th sign. (If we were to include the other sign in the first half of the Bible, it would be Jesus walking on water during a storm on the sea of Galilee (John 16:6-21).

N. T. Wright comments on why he sees the Resurrection as the 7th sign, undoubtedly connecting to the 7 days of creation alluded to in the first verses of the gospel of John. He is an English New Testament scholar, Pauline

theologian and Anglican bishop (2003-2010). He writes, “[...]. *With Genesis 1 in the back of his mind from the very start [of his gospel], “In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”, the sequence of seven signs, completing the accomplishment of the new creation, has an inevitability about it. Now here we are, at the foot of the cross. John has told us throughout his gospel that when Jesus is ‘lifted up’, this will be the moment of God’s glory shining through him in full strength. And the ‘signs’ are the things that reveal God’s glory. I regard it as more or less certain that he intends the crucifixion itself to function as the seventh ‘sign’.*”

“As though to confirm this, Jesus gives one last cry. ‘It’s finished!’ ‘It’s all done!’ ‘It’s complete!’ He has finished the work that the father had given him to do (17:4). He has loved ‘to the very end’ his own who were in the world (13:1). He has accomplished the full and final task...”

“It is upon this finished, complete work that his people from that day to this can stake their lives.” **1 (repeat)**

We, God’s people, are worshipping here today on Easter Sunday, because as God’s people, we stake our lives on the promises of the Resurrection for both this life and the next.

Our gospel today has Jesus talking to Mary about the Ascension in the garden outside the tomb. Matthew Myers Boulton of Harvard Divinity School speaks of three dynamics of this journey for Jesus: his Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension. I would combine the Ascension with Pentecost. We usually do not talk about the Ascension at all until the 6th week of the season of Easter, and Pentecost until about 2 weeks later. Let’s find out why, but first, let’s review the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

We have just discussed the Resurrection, as the final conclusive sign, that Jesus, the Son of God, was sent to earth to teach us how to live and how to love, to help us know the unconditional love and grace of God, to hope for eternal life with Him, and to glorify God.

What about the Crucifixion? Why was Jesus crucified? Each year we need to be reminded of this. He was killed because those in imperial power were afraid of the power Jesus had over the people. To ensure that the oppressive Roman regime maintained its power over a whole people, their theory was it was best, at first anyway, to scapegoat one or a few people and keep the larger public in its place *with fear of the same*.

He was also killed by religious leaders who collaborated with the Roman imperialists, Pharisees and Sadducees, who expected a different Messiah, one who would have ridden into Jerusalem on a white horse with armor and a shield, not a humble donkey. *This spiritual Messiah offered a different kingdom, one that was not of this world, but through his followers would break into this world every time we love others the way he loves us*. And yet he had the audacity to say he was the Messiah, which is apostasy (in this case the Jews felt he was renouncing their beliefs), and a sin worthy of crucifixion, the state's most popular form of capital punishment at the time. Put simply, for the Romans only the emperor was God; for the Jews, Jesus did not fit their expectation for their prophesied Messiah.

So what about the Ascension?

In John, Jesus completes his final long teaching to his disciples at the Last Supper (chapters 13-17). One important message is that they are not to fear when he is no longer here, (not that they know what he means by that yet), because the Advocate will come and give them the insight they need. The advocate refers to the Holy Spirit. And so the inference is that Jesus has to leave, for the Holy Spirit to more fully arrive on their consciousness, i.e, for the disciples to be more present to the Spirit of God. For we know from Genesis 1:1-2 that the Holy Spirit was already here – with God at the creation – “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the deep.” What is meant by all this is that disciples will now depend on the Holy Spirit as they did on Jesus before he ascended. The Holy Spirit will empower them to go out into the world and make disciples of all people.

Of course this will be a huge change for the disciples! This Son of God came into their lives, brought them from the quiet life of fishermen to become

engaged in nothing less than a radical movement to bring social justice into their world through love and not violence, and then only three years later, leave them to take on the work without him. He was their inspiration, their leader, their teacher, their spiritual guide, and he was about to be ripped out of their lives. But again, Jesus calmed their fears at the Last Supper. He said these comforting words to them:

⁷⁸I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:18)

And in John 14:25-26

⁸⁰I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ⁸⁰But the Advocate,^[a] the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

And in John 16:7-15

⁷⁸ I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ⁷⁹ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ⁷⁰ He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ⁷⁰ All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

So what is made possible by the Jesus ascending to heaven and the Holy Spirit becoming more present to the world? The Church. The Ascension is the gateway to the presence of the third person of the Trinity helping humankind to establish the church on earth. And that event is celebrated at Pentecost, when the disciples were given the spiritual power to follow the great commission of Jesus to go out and baptize and make disciples of people. That effort in the next 400 years will lead to the Christian church becoming the state religion of Rome under Constantine. The relationship between Constantine and Christianity is a great story for another time!

So the Crucifixion leads to the Resurrection which leads to Ascension Day which is important because it celebrates the Holy Spirit's role in building the church which we celebrate at Pentecost. As it says in John 14:12-14. ⁷⁸ Very

truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ⁷⁹ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ⁷⁰ If in my name you ask me^[a] for anything, I will do it.

Finally the disciples must have been comforted by the fact that Jesus also says some of my favorite words in John:

Jesus said to them, “...and I will call you friends.” What an honor, to be called a friend by the Son of God. They know that good friends are always together in heart and soul even when they are physically apart.

So having looked at the larger trajectory from Resurrection to the establishment of the church, let’s focus on what we celebrate *this day*.

Let’s take a look at the painting on the front cover of the bulletin. Based on the Bible reading, I am sure you would agree this painting captures the wonderfully hopeful faces of the two competitive disciples, (in the way brothers would be!), Peter and John, racing to see if what Mary claimed was true – that the tomb was empty.

First, a word about Eugene Burnand. He was a prolific Swiss artist (1850-1921) who was famous for his pastoral landscapes and country scenes and portraits. He sketched many of the parables of Jesus as well, bringing them to life, and capturing the realism and message of each situation presented in these stories. Another painting called *The High Priestly Prayer* which echoes a scene much like the Last Supper by de Vinci, has equally compelling portraits of Jesus and his disciples poised along a portico. He became equally renowned for his ability to render the character of his subjects in his portraits as he was for his ability to depict the dramatic rural and mountainous landscapes of Switzerland and France.

Back to *The Disciples Peter and John running to the Sepulchre on the morning of the Resurrection*, 1889 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), it is important to remember that they did not yet fully understand the meaning of the empty tomb for them – that Jesus had risen. Yet it was the first important step of inwardly integrating

all that Jesus told his disciples in his loving address at the Last Supper and during the previous three years.

That it was Mary to whom the angels and Jesus revealed themselves is such a great affirmation of women, especially at this time in history about 2000 years ago. Jesus was accompanied by women and men in his 3 year ministry, and both were considered able to perceive the meaning of His words and actions, and to be entrusted with sharing the deepest mysteries of these Easter events with others.

Just imagine this wonderful rhythm of Mary seeing, Mary telling, Peter and John running and seeing, Peter and John anticipating, Mary seeing, Mary running, Mary telling...it must have been was a happy chaos of getting the word out of the Resurrection among his loving friends.

When Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said...for her and for them all, it was the beginning of a new world. The post-resurrection world which after Jesus appearances and ascension, would necessitate the retelling of his life Jesus and message of unconditional love, grace and restoration.

This amazing story that promises new life in those who believe in Him, that will ultimately lead to personal transformation from our false selves to our true selves, and bring our broken world into a renewed tapestry of humanity that looks more like the kingdom of God. That is a big plan. God's plan. It is ongoing. It happens here and there and everywhere if we continue to be faithful workers in the vineyard.

Like the expressions revealed on the faces of Peter and John, we can live into this hope for renewal of God's creation with confidence and anticipation, knowing that the Holy Spirit will guide us in all things. The first morning of new creation has broken into awareness once again! So let's let go of fear, and bring a renewed spirit to all we do in His Name.

The sun has risen! The Son has risen!

Alleluia! Alleluia!

For no one can imagine what God has in store for those who love him. (1 Cor. 2:9)

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Let it be so!

References

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3. Burnand, Eugene;
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