

“This Day Finally Happened”
(A Dramatic Sermon)
John 20:1–18
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First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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(entering from the back) Well, I had begun to wonder if this day was ever going to happen. Hadn't you? I, of all people — to use the term loosely — had begun to wonder if you would ever be able to get back together again, much less gather to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. I suppose an angel should have known, but it has been a tough year. There has been so much suffering and sadness, so much fear and frustration. What a year! How wonderful it is to have hope on the horizon, to be able to gather together (at least for some of you), to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord! Hallelujah!

Of course, I have known difficult times before — plagues and pandemics, wars of every kind, earthquakes and tsunamis. Why, on this very day fifty-three years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. It took a long time before people could emerge from their grief and find the hope necessary to take up the fight for justice again. And the very reason you are here today is because people knew the most profound kind of grief. This day itself is about joy, it is about resurrection, it is about life conquering death, love casting out all fear. But it comes as a response to suffering and death, hatred and fear.

Everyone close to Jesus grieved at his death, but Mary Magdalene especially grieved bitterly. She had known her share of struggles already, painful struggles that left her an outcast. We don't need to go into the details — such matters are difficult for a delicate angel — but it was not what you may think. Some Pope made that up out of thin air. She just had struggles like many of you and your loved ones, brokenness, and Jesus brought healing and wholeness, and a way back into society. She was very close to Jesus.

Others talked about his accomplishing something special for the nation. She just thought he was special. And then, he died a brutal

death, and it was all gone in a flash, everything she cared about. Can you imagine how she felt? Some of you have known profound grief, surely you can. She was in shock. She was devastated. No wonder she was startled when she came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed. No wonder she started weeping after Simon Peter and the other disciple found that the tomb was indeed empty, as she had feared.

“Why are you weeping?” the other angel and I asked her, like idiots, like we didn’t know. “They have taken away my Lord,” she said, “and I do not know where they have laid him.” She didn’t consider the possibility that he was alive. She didn’t even recognize Jesus when she first saw him, but please don’t blame her for not immediately realizing he had been raised. No one else realized this. Everyone was in shock. They just weren’t ready to embrace this impossible possibility, they were consumed by grief.

My fellow angel would back me up on this, but she has been asked to speak to another group of the faithful today. You might be surprised at how rarely we are invited to speak to churches. I guess inviting an angel to join you is like playing golf with a preacher. Do you have to watch your language when you hit a bad shot? It depends on the preacher, believe me... Some people think being with an angel is even worse, but it isn’t. We’re just messengers of God. Still, we don’t get invited out much — Gabriel always gets called at Christmas, and my co-worker and I get called at Easter, that’s about it. I guess we’re what they call “Chreasters” — you know the type.

And you know what it is like to be so consumed by shock and grief that you can’t see what is right in front of you — you can’t see Jesus even when he is right there. I mean, the Risen Christ is present with us now — maybe you can sense a Holy Presence — but the Risen Christ is with us each and every day. Do you recognize his presence... or do you often weep like Mary, feeling lost and alone in your grief?

The good news is Mary eventually recognized Jesus, when he called her by name. He always had such a personal way about him, an intimate way of connecting with people. Mary’s tears of sadness were transformed into tears of joy, and she exclaimed, “Rabbouni!” She wanted to hold him, hold him close, but he said she could not because he

had not yet ascended. He told her to let others know he was ascending to be with God. So, she went and told them, “I have seen the Lord!”

She was the first to discover the empty tomb, and she was the first to give witness to the Risen Christ. They didn’t believe her at first, but that was their problem. She was a model disciple, and this is how you should remember her, not as some tainted soul. Let me be clear — don’t go talking any trash about Mary or you will have more than one angel to contend with!

Sorry... I get wound up sometimes... especially about matters like this. The forgiven looking down on the forgiven is the height of hubris, and pride does indeed goeth before the fall, especially spiritual pride. It is not an attractive quality.

But the point is Mary’s grief gave way to joy, and so will yours, if it hasn’t already. Just as surely as spring is emerging from winter, vaccines have emerged to help you move past this pandemic, hope is on the horizon. And it is the kind of hope this day is about. If God can bring life out of death, what can’t God do? Love casts out fear, grace overcomes sin, justice will prevail, and Jesus will rise again not just in history but in your hearts and minds, and bring healing when he does.

English poet William Cowper faced his own share of hard times. He struggled with depression throughout his life and nearly committed suicide. But in his worst night, he sensed the presence of God holding him and lifting him up. Knowing this makes the words of one of his hymn texts, published in 1779, even more moving. “Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings,” he wrote, “It is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings.”

The Lord Jesus Christ often surprises us and when he does, he rises and brings healing on his wings, he always brings healing on his wings. That’s why you are here today. That’s why you sing, “Christ the Lord is Risen today!” You had begun to wonder if this day was ever going to happen, but it did, it finally did, and it always will, hope will always prevail because Christ is risen today, alleluia! Amen!