

# Seeking the One Seeking Us

## John 20:1-18

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 31, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



<sup>1</sup>Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus’s head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup>They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, “Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-18, NRSV)



I hate losing things. In fact, I’m not a very fun person to be around when I can’t find something I need. My wife would tell you that I’m also a little too quick to blame others. When I can’t find my keys, I automatically assume that somebody other than the person who normally handles my keys has misplaced them. Seems logical. The other day it actually was my wife who left my keys in her coat pocket. I marked the date down in my calendar and will make it an annual holiday, celebrating the only time in history that I blamed somebody else for losing something of mine, and was right about it!

Most of us become concerned, if not desperate, when we lose something important, so much so that we look for it everywhere. If you lose your wallet you start by searching in the obvious places – pockets, under car seats, between the couch cushions. If the search comes up empty, however, you start looking in less-than-obvious places. I don’t know why I’m looking in the cookie jar and the shower for my wallet, but I’m desperate enough to leave no stone unturned.

Keys and wallets are one thing. Lots of us are searching for something far more significant in this world. Let me ask you, what is it that *you* are searching for? Inner peace? Validation? Friendship? True love or a soul mate? Meaning and purpose? Belonging and acceptance? Hope? Relief? Rest? I have actually come to believe that ultimately we are all searching for essentially the same thing, even though we might not recognize it. The English writer, G.K. Chesterton, once observed, “Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God.” Such a man might not say he’s looking for God, of course, but the most important things we look for in life, sometimes mistakenly in a brothel, are always things that only God can give us. It’s what led Augustine to famously pray, “Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in You.”

Do you realize what it is you are searching for in this world?

Some of us have identified the object of our longing. Many of us here today are searching for Christ. It’s why we’re here this morning. We have heard the claims. Jesus is risen! Jesus is alive! Jesus has come! Jesus is near! So have you found Jesus in this world? There was a time when he was easier to find. People

claim to have talked with him, shared meals with him, sat and listened to his teaching, watched him do astounding miracles. Back then if you wanted to find Jesus you might go to Galilee and look for him among the poor and the marginalized. Chances are you'd find him there. But where do we go today to find Christ? Would you say Jesus seems more present or more absent in our time? I know there are many here who can bear testimony of times when you have encountered him in this world. And yet, aren't there so many other times when his absence seems conspicuous?

It was very early on a Sunday morning when Mary Magdalene went searching for Jesus.<sup>1</sup> It's not surprising that she was the first one out that morning. Few people adored Jesus more than Mary, because few people had benefitted more from his kindness and grace. So she's out even before daybreak, headed to the tomb where his body lay. Whatever she expected to find, it wasn't this, the tomb wide open and the body of her Lord gone missing. She runs immediately to tell the others, who rush to confirm her story. Their investigation yields no clues, only the assumption that those who killed their Lord must have further dishonored him by dragging his body from the grave. So they go back to their homes, maybe to hide from those who may choose to come after them next.

But Mary can't leave. She's still searching for Jesus, but now far less hopeful that her search will yield its desired results. She is so distraught that she doesn't recognize that it is angels who come to speak to her. They are as surprised by her grief as she is surprised by their joy. And then suddenly there is a stranger there beside her asking her why she is weeping, wanting to know who she is looking for. She mistakes him for the gardener, and says to him, **"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."**<sup>2</sup> It's then that the stranger calls her by name. "Mary!" he says. The tone and the accent are immediately familiar. And all at once he is no longer a stranger. And there, in the early morning hours at a place marked by death and despair, Mary finds, when she least expected it to happen, the one she has been searching for. And then, just as soon as he appeared, Jesus is gone again, at least from sight.

It was later that same day that two of the other disciples went searching for Jesus, though they might not have described their journey that way.<sup>3</sup> As they walked the seven miles from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus, deep in conversation about the events

that had unfolded at the tomb that morning, suddenly a stranger was there beside them, listening into their conversation. Just like the stranger who surprised Mary that morning, he also introduces himself with a question, **"What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"**<sup>4</sup> They are astounded that this man doesn't know who Jesus is, and isn't up-to-date on the incredible events of the past few days.

A conversation ensues as they walk along together. They bring him up to speed on things, even the part about the empty tomb, but in the way they describe it all, it seems clear that their amazement is overshadowed by their doubts and despair. That's when the stranger tips his hand, revealing that perhaps he knows more than he was originally letting on. He reprimands them for being so foolish, and then starting with Genesis, walks them all the way through the Old Testament scriptures, explaining to them why all these things needed to happen for the Messiah to come and save the world. Since it takes a least a couple hours to walk seven miles, it must have been the most extraordinary and comprehensive Old Testament survey ever given. I would have loved to have been there with a tape recorder.

When they arrive in Emmaus, these two can't get enough of this stranger, and so they urge him, almost force him, to stay for dinner, and maybe longer. People often get the sense that they are in the presence of the holy, maybe even the divine, long before they recognize or articulate it. Though they can't verbalize or explain it, there is something this man has, or is, that they have been searching for. As they put it later, their hearts were burning within them. When he accepts their invitation for dinner, they are thrilled. They don't yet know who this man is, but they don't want to be without him. It's only when the guest becomes the host and takes bread at the meal, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, that their eyes are opened. All at once he is no longer a stranger. The way he blessed, broke and shared the bread – how could they have not seen it before! And there in the most ordinary of places, along a road and sitting together at a meal, in places they least expected it to happen, they find the one they have been searching for. And then just as soon as he reveals himself, Jesus is gone again, at least from sight.<sup>5</sup>

It was some days later when Peter and some of the other disciples decide to go fishing.<sup>6</sup> By this time, Jesus has already appeared once to them. I imagine that ever since that time they could think of nothing else. I doubt

<sup>1</sup> Read this account in John 10:1-18

<sup>2</sup> John 20:15. This and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> Read this account in Luke 24:13-35

<sup>4</sup> Luke 24:17

<sup>5</sup> I'm indebted here to James R. Edwards and his reflections on this passage in *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eerdmans, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Read this account in John 21:1-14

they would have said they went out on the lake that evening looking for Jesus, but by this point they were likely looking for him everywhere. All the memories must have flooded back as Peter went out to fish those familiar waters. It was on the shores of that very lake where Jesus had first called Peter to follow him, told him he would from that point forward be catching people instead of fish. It was on that lake where Peter left the boat and tried to walk out to Jesus on the water in the middle of the storm. And it was on that lake where Jesus had once blessed Peter and his fishing buddies with a miraculous catch of fish after a long night of bad luck. People over the years have criticized Peter for going fishing at such a time. How could he return to the things of his former life when clearly a whole new life was about to open up before him? Still, a man has to eat. Plus, Peter was never one to just sit around and wait.

Unfortunately, the fish weren't biting that night. I know they used nets, but you get the point. All night long and nothing to show for it. As the sun begins to rise above the horizon, they notice a stranger standing on the shore. He introduces himself with a question, calling out to them across the water, "No luck today, boys?" They way he frames the question betrays that he already knows the answer. "Why don't you cast your nets on the right side of the boat. I think you'll be pleased with what you'll find there." It's déjà vu all over again. But instead of protesting like they did last time this happened, these seasoned fisherman, humbled by their last three years following a carpenter who taught them how to fish, these men do as he says. The results should not have surprised them. And as they are hauling in another miraculous catch of perch and bass, it's then that Peter's eyes were opened. The stranger is suddenly no stranger at all. The fact that Peter immediately dives into the lake to swim to shore tells us that he was, in fact, searching for Jesus everywhere he went. After breakfast together on the beach, and a conversation that assures Peter he is still on the team, Jesus is gone again, vanished just as quickly as he appeared, at least from sight.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I read these stories of people finding Jesus in the world, I long to experience something similar. There is no guarantee, of course, that meeting Jesus will change your life. Lots of people met Jesus face to face, even heard his teaching and watched his miracles, and walked away forever unchanged. I like to think it would be different with me. What about you? Would your life be changed if you met Jesus? Or maybe it already has been.

The claims remain. Jesus is risen! Jesus is alive! Jesus has come! Jesus is close! As we act on these claims and seek him in this world, there are some common threads woven through these early encounters that might help encourage us in our search. For one, it's striking to me that Jesus meets people after the resurrection in such ordinary places. While it certainly is possible to meet Christ in a church sanctuary or a lonely mountaintop, it seems just as likely that we might meet the risen Christ these days in a cemetery, on a road-trip, at a dinner table, or on the job. It almost seems as if Jesus is less likely to be found in the so-called "holy places" we expect to find him, and more likely to be found in the places few people consider to be holy, but which Christ chooses to inhabit nonetheless. Are you open to finding Jesus in the ordinary times and places of this world?

When we do find Christ, we should not expect to control him. That much is clear from these resurrection accounts. Often times, as the first disciples discovered, he's gone as soon as he appears, at least from sight. In C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver explain to the Pevensie children who are searching for Aslan the lion, the Christ-figure in the book,

He'll be coming and going. One day you'll see him and another you won't. He doesn't like being tied down - and of course he has other countries to attend to. It's quite all right. He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him. He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion.<sup>7</sup>

It's why the church has always declared that God can never be discovered, only revealed. As commentator Jim Edwards put it, "Jesus reveals enough of himself to make faith possible, but only enough to make faith necessary."<sup>8</sup> Yes, Christ could reveal himself to us constantly and in all his glory, in such a way that everybody would be coerced into belief. But clearly, that has never been his way. Faith is never coerced by overpowering revelations to the unprepared or the unseeking. In fact, it seems that God is not even interested in competing for our attention. Every once in a while he does bust down the doors and force his way in - I think of Paul getting knocked on his butt on the road to Damascus - but normally we must come seeking after him, at least open to the possibility that we may find him at some graveside, along some road, around some table, in the middle of some workday. As Dallas Willard once put it, "The reality of God's [presence] does not make seeking it unnecessary."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Harper, 1950).

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, 724.

<sup>9</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (InterVarsity Press, 1984), 91.

When we find Jesus, in whatever unique and fitting way he chooses to allow himself to be revealed, we will never be the same. Read the rest of the story. Mary, Peter, the others, were never the same. I love how writer Dale Bruner describes this in his commentary on Mary's encounter. He writes,

In the one or two seconds this turn took, I imagine the world shifting ever so slightly on its axis and at about this turn's one-second midpoint trajectory, history, too, moved almost imperceptibly from B.C. to A.D. A second *before* this turn there is a woman in the deepest human despair in the agonizing presence of unconquerable death; a second *after* the beginning of this turn there is a woman in the deepest possible human elation – in the presence of the death-conquering Central Figure of history.<sup>10</sup>

Some of you in this room today can bear testimony to this, to the ways your life has forever been changed when your search ended in the presence of Christ, the death-conquering Central Figure of history.

Of course, not everybody is looking. More accurately, some would not say that they are not looking for Jesus even though it's really Jesus they are looking for. And those who have no desire to encounter him, no longing to hear his voice with a humble and ready heart, will likely never find him, or even find that which they think they are looking for. If we refuse to be changed from our chosen and habitual ways, if we really want to persist in living life on our own terms rather than his terms, without any interference from him, we will naturally shut our eyes to his presence and ears to his voice, even when he is right beside us. Even some people who say they are looking for Jesus, are really only looking for what they think Jesus can give to them, and that's not quite the same.

But here's the thing, those who seek, those who persist in looking, not only in the expected places but the unexpected places as well, will in the end not be disappointed. I have bet my life on this. Jesus himself promised as much when he told us, **"Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."**<sup>11</sup> And do you know why I have bet my life on the fact that any genuine search for Christ in this world

will not disappoint? It's because I believe that long before we began our search, Jesus has already gone out in this world searching for us. And Jesus always finds what he is looking for. Imagine if Apple could develop an iPhone that went searching for you when you lost it, or Honda developed car keys that never gave up trying to find you when they got separated from you! Your search would rarely be long, and certainly never in vain!

Jesus once told three parables, all in a row to make a point, about a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, a widow searching for a lost coin, and a father searching for a lost son.<sup>12</sup> In each case it was God who was the one out looking for what was lost. His search for us, every last one of us, led him to leave heaven and travel into the womb of a young peasant girl, through every pain and hardship this world has to offer, into betrayal and shame, onto a cross, into a grave, and down to the pit of hell, all just to find us and be with us. Do you really think that in your search you will not find one like this who is going to such lengths to find you?

If you read through the Bible there are many things you will hear God say to his people over and over again. One of the most prominent is this: "I am with you." This assurance is given by God to us over and over again, and not just as an intellectual proposition to be accepted at face value, or some theological doctrine to be studied and taught, but a reality that unfolds before us in breathtaking detail over the course of human history through individuals, families, tribes, cities, nations and generations.<sup>13</sup> To Jacob at Bethel, **"I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."**<sup>14</sup> To Joshua crossing the Jordan, **"I will be with you as I was with Moses."**<sup>15</sup> To David ascending the throne, **"Do all that you have in mind, for God is with you."**<sup>16</sup> To exiled Israel through the prophet Isaiah, **"Do not fear, for I am with you."**<sup>17</sup> To the people when the kingdom was divided, **"The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save."**<sup>18</sup> To Paul when his life was threatened by those who wanted him dead, **"Do not be afraid, and do not be silent; for I am with you."**<sup>19</sup> Through the risen Christ in the last recorded words he spoke on this earth, **"Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."**<sup>20</sup>

You might say that the Bible is the story of God being with us. He created us to be with him. When we insisted on living without him, he gave everything to be with us again. Though we may rarely see him in the

<sup>10</sup> Fredrick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Eerdmans, 2012), 1152.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 7:7-8

<sup>12</sup> Read them in Luke 15.

<sup>13</sup> I'm indebted here to Richard Foster, *Life With God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation* (Harper/Collins, 2005), 37.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 28:15

<sup>15</sup> Joshua 3:7

<sup>16</sup> 1st Chronicles 17:2

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 41:9

<sup>18</sup> Zephaniah 3:17

<sup>19</sup> Acts 18:9

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 28:20

world today, and sometimes not even sense his presence, his promise is that he has never left us, and will never leave us. Beyond that, he assures us that he is coming back one day to bring us home, or rather bring home to us. And can you guess what will happen at that time? He will be with us, this time for good, and not as a stranger who appears and disappears without rhyme or reason, but as a Father who is ever-present, ever-loving, ever joyful. Revelation 21 paints a stunningly beautiful picture of that day,

**“See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them and be their  
God;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.”<sup>21</sup>**

I am here this morning to declare to you that the claims are indeed true. He is risen! He is alive! He has come! He is near! He is coming again! He is with us! He is with you! Do not give up your search. He did not give up on his.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

*A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. If you had to lose one, would you rather lose your wallet or your phone?
2. Read the passage from John 20:1-18 again. What stands out to you from this resurrection account, especially from Mary's interaction with Jesus?
3. Why do you think Mary didn't recognize Jesus at first? What was it that opened her eyes?
4. How have you encountered the risen Christ in this world today? Has it been in expected or unexpected places?
5. How have you been frustrated when your search for Jesus in the world has seemed to come up empty?

6. What do you think of this oft-repeated promise in scripture from God that he is always with us? Do you live daily with the sense that God is with you? If so, how have you come to that confidence?
7. Do you believe the Jesus has come looking for you? Why would Jesus go to such lengths to find somebody like you?
8. How does the resurrection of Christ give you hope and joy today?

### Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



*When we go out looking for Jesus in this world,  
where do we imagine that we will find him?  
Where have we found him already?*

<sup>21</sup> Revelation 21:3-4