

Gospel of John: Chapters 20–21

A Verse-by-Verse Teaching Commentary

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Chapter 20

John 20:1–10 — The Empty Tomb

Verses 1–2

“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.””

The resurrection narrative opens in darkness — a darkness that is simultaneously temporal (it is early morning, before sunrise) and symbolic. John has consistently used light and darkness as theological categories throughout the Gospel (1:4–5; 3:19–21; 8:12; 9:4–5; 11:9–10; 12:35–36). Mary Magdalene comes while it is still dark. She is the last one at the cross (19:25) and the first one at the tomb. The faithfulness of her love sends her to the place of grief before the world has woken.

Her initial interpretation of the moved stone is entirely natural and heartbreaking: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” She has not thought resurrection; she has thought desecration. The worst that could happen to a buried person — the removal and scattering of the body — seems to have happened to Jesus. Her report to Peter and the Beloved Disciple sets the sequence of events in motion, but she herself has not yet seen what there is to see.

skōtia: darkness — John’s word for the darkness Mary comes in is the same word used throughout the Gospel for the darkness that cannot overcome the light (1:5); she comes in the darkness that is about to end forever

Verses 3–10

“Then the other disciple outran 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... and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth... rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple... saw and believed.”

The race to the tomb has attracted considerable attention. The Beloved Disciple outruns Peter and arrives first, but stops at the entrance. Peter, characteristically, goes straight in. The description of what they see is precise and theologically loaded: the linen cloths (othonia) are lying there, and the face cloth (soudarion) is not strewn about in the disorder of a body-snatching but rolled up

(entylgmenon) in a place by itself. The scene is not one of hasty removal but of ordered, purposeful departure. Someone — or something — left these wrappings behind with intention.

The Beloved Disciple “saw and believed.” This is the first resurrection faith in the Gospel, and it is remarkable: it is formed not by a vision of the risen Christ but by what is absent — the body — and what remains — the grave clothes. He believes before he sees Jesus. John immediately adds the qualification: “for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” The belief is real but incomplete; understanding will come. The pattern of Johannine discipleship is consistent: genuine faith precedes full comprehension.

John 20:11–18 — Mary Magdalene: Rabboni

Verses 11–15

“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, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.””

Mary has returned to the tomb after the disciples went back home. She cannot leave. The weeping (*klaioussa*) is the same word used for the mourning at the tomb of Lazarus (11:31, 33) — a deliberate echo. The scene of the two angels at the head and feet of where Jesus lay has evoked comparison with the cherubim at either end of the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:18–22), the mercy seat where God’s presence was located. Whether or not John intends the specific parallel, the angels mark this as a place of holy, divine significance.

Mary’s response to the angels is the same as her response to Peter: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” She is not yet capable of hearing what would lift her grief; the grief has closed off every other interpretation. When she turns and sees Jesus, she does not recognize him. She takes him for the gardener — a misidentification that John presents with characteristic layered irony. He is not the gardener; but the resurrection begins in a garden, and the risen Christ will tend a different kind of creation.

kēpouros: gardener — Mary’s mistaken identification; the risen Christ is not the gardener, but John’s theology is alive to the resonance: creation began in a garden (Gen. 2), and the new creation begins here, in a garden, with the resurrection

Verses 16–18

“Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for 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.””

Recognition comes through a single word: her name. Jesus had said: “the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out” (10:3). The moment in which Mary recognizes the risen Lord is the moment of the Good Shepherd calling his sheep. Everything she has sought — the body, the place, the Lord she loved — is contained in the one word that is her own name spoken in his voice.

“Do not cling to me” (*mē mou haptou*) has been variously translated and interpreted. The most natural reading is not that Jesus refuses touch entirely (he will explicitly invite Thomas to touch him) but that Mary’s impulse to hold on to the physical presence she has recovered must be redirected.

The relationship she had with Jesus — beautiful and real as it was — is being transformed into something new. He has not yet ascended; the new mode of presence (through the Spirit) has not yet been fully established. The command is not a rejection but a redirection: go and tell.

The message Jesus sends through Mary is one of the most remarkable sentences in the Gospel: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” The relationship between Jesus and the Father, which throughout the Gospel has been uniquely his, is now shared with the disciples. They have become, through the death and resurrection of the Son, participants in the same filial relationship. The Father who is uniquely Jesus’ Father has become their Father too. Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the resurrection and the first messenger of its meaning.

John 20:19–23 — Peace Be With You

Verses 19–21

“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them 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.”

The first day of the week — Sunday — is already in this single chapter establishing itself as the day of resurrection, the Lord’s Day. The disciples are gathered behind locked doors, and the phrase “for fear” (dia ton phobon) is the exact negation of the peace Jesus promised: “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (14:27). The risen Jesus arrives precisely in the space of their fear and stands among them. The locked doors are no obstacle to the risen body; the wall of fear is no obstacle to the one who has overcome the world.

The greeting “Peace be with you” (eirēnē hymin) fulfills the promise of 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” The risen Lord is himself the fulfillment of his own promise. He then shows them his hands and his side — the same wounds that the soldiers inflicted, now the identifying marks of the risen Lord. The resurrection does not erase the cross; it vindicates it. The risen Christ is the crucified Christ, and the wounds are not healed away but transformed into the permanent signs of his self-giving love.

eirēnē: peace — the risen Lord’s first word to the gathered disciples; not merely a greeting but the announcement of a new reality: the cross is finished, the Father is reconciled, the mission can begin; shalom in its fullest sense

Verses 22–23

“And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.””

The breathing of the Spirit is one of the most theologically dense acts in the resurrection narrative. The Greek verb *emphysao* (he breathed on them) appears in the Septuagint only in Genesis 2:7, where God breathes into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life. John is deliberately evoking the creation narrative: the risen Christ is creating a new humanity, breathing into his disciples the life of the new age. The first creation began with a breath of God; the new creation begins with the breath of the risen Son.

The authority to forgive and retain sins has been the subject of significant theological controversy. Whatever ecclesiological structures may be built on it, the primary point is clear: the risen Christ is commissioning his disciples as agents of the new creation’s primary work — the forgiveness of sins.

As the Father sent the Son into the world to bear and remove its sin (1:29), so the Son sends the disciples into the world bearing the announcement of that removal. The mission of the church is constituted by the resurrection and empowered by the Spirit.

John 20:24–31 — My Lord and My God

Verses 24–27

“Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.””

Thomas’s absence on the first resurrection evening and his subsequent demand for physical evidence have made him the patron saint of honest doubt across the centuries. His condition for belief is not unreasonable by the standards of any other claim; the extraordinary nature of the resurrection is precisely what warrants extraordinary evidence. What is striking is the specificity of his demand: not just seeing Jesus but touching the nail-wounds and the spear-wound. He wants to put his hand into the same gash that the soldier’s spear opened (19:34). The wounds are the proof.

Eight days later — the following Sunday — Jesus appears again when Thomas is present. He does not rebuke Thomas’s absence or his condition; he simply arrives and addresses Thomas directly, offering exactly what Thomas had demanded: “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side.” The pastoral precision of the risen Christ is remarkable. He has heard the condition; he meets it without negotiation. The only addition is the command: “Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Verses 28–31

“Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.””

Thomas’s confession — “My Lord and my God!” — is the Christological summit of the Fourth Gospel. The two titles belong to the language of divine address in the Psalms: “O Lord my God” is a recurring phrase of worship in the Hebrew Scriptures (Psalm 30:2; 35:23, 24; 38:15; and others). Thomas is not expressing surprise or exclamation; he is making the most comprehensive statement of faith available within his tradition. The risen Jesus is Lord (*kyrios*, the Greek equivalent of YHWH in the Septuagint) and God (*theos*). The Gospel that began with “the Word was God” ends with a disciple’s testimony to the same reality.

Jesus’ response to Thomas is also the response to every subsequent reader: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” The beatitude crosses the boundary of historical time. Thomas believed because he saw; the readers of the Gospel are invited to believe on the basis of testimony. This is why the Evangelist immediately states the purpose of the Gospel: “These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The Gospel is not an archive; it is an instrument of faith, written for those who were not present and yet are called to the same faith that Thomas reached by the harder road.

kyrios kai theos: Lord and God — the double title is the Christological climax of the Gospel; it answers the Prologue’s “the Word was God” (1:1) with a human witness’s confession after the resurrection; the circle is complete

Chapter 21

John 21:1–14 — The Miraculous Catch of Fish

Verses 1–6

“Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore... He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.””

Chapter 21 is widely regarded as an epilogue appended to the Gospel after its original conclusion at 20:30–31. Whether it was written by the same author as the rest of the Gospel or by a close associate, it is indisputably canonical and carries theological weight that nowhere reduces the significance of the resurrection appearances in chapter 20. It addresses unfinished business: the restoration of Peter, the future of the Beloved Disciple, and the nature of the community’s ongoing mission.

Peter’s announcement “I am going fishing” has been interpreted variously. Some read it as a return to his former vocation, a retreat from the mission after the trauma of the crucifixion and the strangeness of the resurrection appearances. Others read it as a straightforward practical decision: they need to eat. Whatever the motivation, the night of labor catches nothing. The pattern is familiar from Luke’s account of the original call (Luke 5:1–11): professional fishermen, experienced on this lake, come up empty without Jesus. His arrival at dawn changes everything.

halieuō: to fish — Peter’s announcement “I am going fishing” uses the present tense of purpose; the return to the boat is ambiguous — practical, escapist, or simply familiar — but the night of empty nets makes the theological point: apart from Christ, nothing

Verses 7–14

“That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.”

The pattern of recognition repeats: the Beloved Disciple sees and knows first; Peter acts first. When the Beloved Disciple says “It is the Lord!” Peter does not wait for the boat to reach shore. He throws himself into the water. The gesture is characteristically Petrine: extravagant, physical, immediate. The failure of the denial has not broken his basic impulse toward Jesus. Whatever Peter has done wrong, this is who he is — the man who jumps into the lake when he hears that Jesus is on the shore.

The detail of the charcoal fire (*anthrakia*) is one of John’s most precisely placed verbal echoes. The word appears only in 18:18 — the fire at which Peter warmed himself during the denial — and here. The repetition is not accidental. The risen Christ has built a charcoal fire on the beach. He has set the stage for the restoration with deliberate care, using the exact image that marks the place of the fall. The breakfast he offers is not merely food; it is a sacramental anticipation of the conversation that will follow.

The meal itself — Jesus taking the bread and giving it to them, and the fish likewise — echoes the feeding of the five thousand (6:11) and the language of the Last Supper. John notes that none of the disciples dared ask him “Who are you?” because “they knew it was the Lord.” The knowing is

certain but also strange; the risen body is recognizable but different. This is the third time (John notes) that Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection.

John 21:15–19 — Do You Love Me?

Verses 15–17

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”... He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?””

The threefold question is the most carefully structured act of pastoral restoration in the New Testament. Jesus uses Peter’s formal name — “Simon, son of John” — rather than the nickname “Peter” (the Rock), as if to address the man before the commission, the person before the office. The first question adds the comparative clause: “more than these.” The boast of 13:37 — “I will lay down my life for you” — was the expression of a love that claimed superiority. Jesus asks: do you still make that claim? Peter no longer does. He answers simply: “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

The much-discussed interplay between *agapaō* (the love Jesus uses in the first two questions) and *phileō* (the love Peter uses in all three answers, and Jesus uses in the third question) resists definitive resolution. Some scholars press the distinction: *agapaō* as the higher, selfless, covenantal love and *phileō* as the warmer, personal, affectionate love. Others note that John uses the two verbs interchangeably elsewhere in the Gospel (3:35 and 5:20 both describe the Father’s love for the Son, using different verbs). The most pastorally sensitive reading may be this: on the third question, Jesus meets Peter on Peter’s own terms — using the word Peter has used throughout — as an act of grace that accepts rather than presses.

The grief that strikes Peter at the third question is the recognition of the echo: three questions for three denials. The restoration is structured as a deliberate reversal of the fall. Each denial is answered by a confession of love; each confession is answered by a commission. The one who said three times “I am not” now says three times “You know that I love you,” and three times is told to shepherd the flock. The pastoral office is not given to the man who never fell but to the man who fell and was raised up by grace.

agapaō / phileō: two Greek words for love — the interplay in vv. 15–17 is among the most discussed textual features of the Gospel; both describe genuine love; the possible shift marks the emotional texture of a restoration that meets Peter where he is

Verses 18–19

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.””

The prediction of Peter’s martyrdom is an integral part of his restoration. The full cost of the recommission is disclosed: the one who will be shepherd of the flock will eventually lay down his life for the sheep, just as the Good Shepherd did. The outstretched hands are understood by the early church and by John’s own editorial note as a reference to crucifixion. Peter’s death will mirror his

Lord's — not as a coincidence but as the fullest possible expression of the love he has now confessed three times.

The last words Jesus speaks to Peter in the Gospel are the first words he ever spoke to him: "Follow me." The command that called him at the beginning of the ministry calls him again at the end of the resurrection narrative. The circle closes. The disciple who fell is restored not to a different calling but to the same one — the calling to follow the one who goes before him, all the way to the cross.

John 21:20–25 — The Beloved Disciple and the Gospel's Purpose

Verses 20–23

"Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them... When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!"

Peter's question about the Beloved Disciple is the oldest of human impulses: having received the commission and the cost, he immediately looks sideways to see what the terms are for someone else. The question is not hostile; it is natural. The answer is firm but not unkind: "What is that to you? You follow me!" The calling of each disciple is personal and irreducible. The path that Peter must walk — toward martyrdom — is his path, not the universal template. The Beloved Disciple has a different role in the economy of the Gospel. Comparison is not only unhelpful; it is a distraction from the one command: follow me.

The misunderstanding that arose from Jesus' conditional statement — "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" — spread through the community as a prediction that the Beloved Disciple would not die before the parousia. The editorial note that follows corrects the misunderstanding: Jesus did not say "he will not die," but merely "if it is my will that he remain." John's self-correction is a remarkable act of transparency. The Gospel community knows that the tradition it received was garbled; it has the honesty to say so. The Gospel is not propaganda but testimony, and testimony corrects itself when it has been misheard.

Verses 24–25

"This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true... Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

The closing identification of the Beloved Disciple as the one who has written these things — and as the one whose testimony is attested as true by the community ("we know") — is the Gospel's claim to eyewitness authority. The Gospel does not present itself as theological reflection on the memory of Jesus but as the testimony of one who was present: at the Last Supper (13:23), at the cross (19:26–27, 35), at the empty tomb (20:8), and at the lakeside (21:7). Whatever debates surround the precise identity of the Beloved Disciple, the claim of eyewitness foundation is essential to the Gospel's self-presentation.

The closing hyperbole — "were every one of them to be written, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books" — is a literary convention of ancient biography (*oikoumeicheia*). But John's use of it carries a theological weight that exceeds the convention. The life of Jesus exceeds all telling. The Gospel that has been written is sufficient for its purpose — "that you may believe..."

and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31) — but the reality it points to is inexhaustible. Every generation of readers discovers that the Gospel gives more than it can receive in a single reading, or a lifetime of readings. The Word who was in the beginning with God, and through whom all things were made, has entered human history, and the record of that entry will never be complete.

martyrōn: bearing witness — the present participle: the Beloved Disciple is still bearing witness through the text that the community holds in its hands; the Gospel is living testimony, not dead record; it continues to do what it was written to do

End of Commentary: Gospel of John, Chapters 20–21