

Homiletics Analysis: John 20

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

John 20 is the resurrection chapter of the Fourth Gospel, narrating the discovery of the empty tomb, the appearances of the risen Jesus, and the climactic confession of Thomas. The chapter moves in four distinct scenes: Mary Magdalene's early-morning discovery and her report to Peter and the Beloved Disciple (vv. 1–2); Peter and the Beloved Disciple's race to the tomb, their inspection of the burial cloths, and the Beloved Disciple's belief (vv. 3–10); Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene in the garden, her recognition of Him, and His commission for her to announce His ascension (vv. 11–18); and Jesus' appearances to the gathered disciples — first without Thomas (vv. 19–23), then with Thomas present, culminating in Thomas's confession "My Lord and my God" (vv. 24–29). The chapter closes with John's explicit statement of purpose for the entire Gospel (vv. 30–31): Jesus did many other signs not recorded here; these are written so that the reader may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they may have life in His name.

The chapter's argument is cumulative and deliberate. Each scene intensifies the evidence for resurrection and advances the question of how faith in the risen Christ is formed. The burial cloths lying undisturbed (the sign that the body had not been moved) become the first trigger for belief. Mary's recognition of Jesus by the sound of her name parallels the Good Shepherd discourse of John 10. Thomas's doubt, far from being a subplot, is carefully staged — his week of absence, his explicit conditions, his encounter — so that his confession becomes the loudest and most theologically precise in the Gospel. John 20:31 confirms that the entire chapter is evangelistic and apologetic in design: the signs are recorded *for the purpose of generating and sustaining faith*.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through John 20 is to confront every reader — whether first-century skeptic, grieving disciple, hardened doubter, or struggling believer — with the bodily risen Christ, and to call them to the faith that recognizes Him as Lord and God, and receives from that recognition the life that His name alone can give. The chapter is not merely reporting what happened on the first Easter; it is *doing* something to the reader. It is inviting, persuading, and compelling. John's explicit statement of purpose in vv. 30–31 makes this unavoidable: every scene, every sign, every tear, every folded linen, every wound-mark is in service of one outcome — that the reader would believe and, believing, live.

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ appears, is recognized, and calls forth the faith that receives His life.

Primary Claim: Jesus rose bodily from the dead, and He is present now — as He was then — seeking the faith of those who encounter Him, offering in that faith nothing less than life itself.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of the Resurrection Body

A foundational interpretive question in John 20 is what kind of body Jesus possesses after resurrection. The text presents a body that is physically real — Thomas is invited to touch the wounds (v. 27), Jesus speaks, He breathes, He appears in a recognizable form — and yet enters locked rooms (v. 19, v. 26) and ascends to the Father (v. 17). Liberal-critical scholarship has frequently treated the appearances as visionary or spiritual experiences rather than bodily events, and has read John's account as theological symbolism rather than historical report. This reading must be *refuted*: the text itself insists on physicality. The invitation to Thomas to handle the wounds is not symbolic; it is evidentiary. The point of the linen cloths lying undisturbed is precisely that the body was not moved or stolen. The risen Jesus is not a ghost or a vision — He is the same Jesus who died, now raised. The Reformed and broadly evangelical reading rightly insists on bodily, historical resurrection as the non-negotiable foundation of the passage's claim.

Thomas: Doubt as Faith, or Doubt as Failure?

Thomas's role generates significant interpretive divergence. Some traditions, particularly in popular preaching, treat Thomas as a model of honest inquiry — “Doubting Thomas” rehabilitated as the patron saint of intellectual faith-seeking. This reading *acknowledges* a genuine insight: Thomas did not walk away, he remained with the community, and when confronted with the risen Christ he produced the Gospel's highest Christological confession. His doubt did not disqualify him. However, this reading *overreaches* if it normalizes doubt as the proper posture before Christ's word. Jesus' word in v. 29 — “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” — is a gentle but clear correction, not an endorsement. Thomas was given extraordinary accommodation; he is not held up as the paradigm. The text neither condemns Thomas nor commends his doubt; it simply shows Jesus meeting him where he was and calling him forward.

John 20:23 — Absolution or Declaration?

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (v. 23) is among the most disputed verses in the chapter. Roman Catholic and some Lutheran traditions read this as the institution of sacramental confession and

priestly absolution, investing the ordained ministry with the authority to pronounce binding forgiveness. This reading must be *refuted* on exegetical grounds: the commission in v. 21 is given in the context of the disciples being *sent as the Father sent the Son*, and the Spirit-empowered ministry that follows is the ministry of gospel proclamation (cf. Matthew 16:19; 18:18, where the same “binding and loosing” language appears in contexts of church discipline and kingdom announcement). The authority in view is declaratory — the church’s Spirit-empowered proclamation of who receives and who does not receive the forgiveness secured by Christ. It is the ministry of the word, not the sacrament of the confessional. Reformed theology is on firm exegetical ground here: the authority is real, it belongs to the church’s gospel mission, and it is declaratory rather than sacerdotal.

John 20:29 — The Priority of Unseen Faith

Some in the Charismatic tradition have read v. 29 as a secondary endorsement of experiential encounter — as if Jesus is merely consoling those who *cannot* have Thomas’s experience. A more careful reading recognizes that v. 29 makes a *blessedness claim* — those who believe without seeing are not consoled as second-class; they are declared blessed. This is consistent with the entire Fourth Gospel’s theology of faith: faith is not generated by overwhelming physical evidence but by the Spirit working through the word (cf. John 6:63; 17:20). The signs recorded in John are not designed to bypass faith but to create it — to function as the word does, generating belief in the reader who was not present. The Reformed reading is preferred: faith comes through hearing the proclaimed word, and the “blessing” of v. 29 is not a lesser gift but the primary mode of all post-resurrection discipleship.

Key Canonical Support

- **1 Corinthians 15:1–8, 17–19** — Paul’s earliest written testimony to the resurrection appearances and the theological stakes: if Christ is not raised, faith is futile, sin remains, and the dead in Christ have perished. The bodily resurrection is not peripheral but load-bearing for the entire gospel.
- **Isaiah 53:10–12** — The suffering servant is not merely executed; he is vindicated — he “shall see his offspring,” “prolong his days,” and “be satisfied.” John 20’s resurrection is the fulfillment of the servant’s promised vindication; the tomb is not the end the Father intended.
- **Psalms 16:9–11** — David’s confidence that God would not abandon his soul to Sheol or let His holy one see corruption — cited by Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2:27) and by Paul in Antioch (Acts 13:35) as directly prophetic of Jesus’ resurrection. The tomb’s emptiness is covenant faithfulness.

- **Romans 4:25** — Jesus “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” The resurrection is not separate from the atonement but its public declaration of completion; John 20’s risen Christ is the Father’s verdict on the cross.
- **John 11:25–26** — Jesus’ prior declaration “I am the resurrection and the life” to Martha before Lazarus’s tomb is fulfilled personally and definitively in chapter 20. The claim made there is now the fact demonstrated here.

Aim: To confront the reader with the risen Christ through the text itself — as John intended — so that every form of doubt, grief, or suspended faith is met by the same Jesus who appeared in that garden, that locked room, and to that scarred disciple, and to call the reader to the confession that receives His life.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
20:1	Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early, while it is still dark; she sees the stone removed	“While it is still dark” — Johannine motif; spiritual as well as temporal darkness; last to leave the cross, first at the tomb
20:2	Mary runs to Peter and the Beloved Disciple; reports the stone rolled away; assumes the body has been taken	“We do not know” — possibly indicating other women present; her interpretation is removal, not resurrection
20:3–5	Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to the tomb; the Beloved Disciple arrives first but does not enter; he sees the linen cloths lying there	Racing motif; the Beloved Disciple’s restraint is notable — he sees but waits
20:6–7	Peter enters first; sees the linen cloths and the face cloth folded separately from the linen cloths	The folded face cloth is significant: a body hastily removed would not produce this; the orderliness signals intentional departure, not theft
20:8–10	The Beloved Disciple enters, sees, and believes; John notes they did not yet	Belief precedes full understanding — a model for faith; “the Scripture”

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	understand the Scripture that He must rise; they return home	likely refers to Ps. 16, Hos. 6, or the whole OT pattern of vindication
20:11–13	Mary remains at the tomb weeping; she stoops to look in; sees two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been; they ask why she weeps	Her grief is profound — she was present at the cross; she is addressed by name by angels, but their question does not satisfy
20:14–15	Mary turns and sees Jesus but does not recognize Him; He asks why she weeps and whom she seeks; she supposes Him to be the gardener and asks where the body is	“Whom are you seeking?” — echoes John 1:38 (“What are you seeking?”); the gardener echo resonates with the Garden of Eden and the new creation; her eyes are “held” (cf. Emmaus road)
20:16	Jesus says “Mary”; she turns and says “Rabboni” (Teacher)	Recognition by name — fulfillment of John 10:3–4 (the shepherd calls his own sheep by name); the personal, particular knowledge of the risen Christ for each of His own
20:17	Jesus tells Mary not to hold on to Him, for He has not yet ascended; He commissions her to go to “My brothers” and announce His ascension to “My Father and your Father, My God and your God”	“Do not cling to Me” — the old mode of relationship (physical presence) is being replaced by a new mode (Spirit-presence after ascension); “my brothers” — remarkable reconciling language after the disciples' failure and flight
20:18	Mary goes and announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; she reports His words	She is the first herald of the resurrection — the apostle to the apostles; her proclamation is the word, not merely an experience
20:19	That evening, the disciples are gathered with the doors locked for fear of the Jews; Jesus comes and stands among them; “Peace be with	Locked doors are no barrier; “Peace” — shalom, not merely calm but the condition of covenant wholeness; the fear is

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
20:20	you” He shows them His hands and His side; the disciples rejoice when they see the Lord	replaced by His presence Identification through wounds — continuity between crucified and risen Christ; joy fulfills John 16:22 (“your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you”)
20:21–22	Jesus commissions them: “As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you”; He breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit”	The shape of the mission is Incarnational — sent as He was sent; the breathing echoes Genesis 2:7 — new creation; this anticipates Pentecost without replacing it; the Spirit empowers the mission
20:23	“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld”	The church’s Spirit-empowered proclamation of the gospel carries genuine authority; declaratory, not sacerdotal (see Interpretive Evaluation)
20:24–25	Thomas, not present, is told “We have seen the Lord”; he declares he will not believe unless he sees and touches the nail marks and the wound in His side	Thomas’s conditions are precise and demanding; he requires personal, physical, verifiable encounter — he will not accept testimony alone
20:26	Eight days later, the disciples are again gathered with the doors locked; Thomas is now with them; Jesus comes again and says “Peace be with you”	The risen Christ returns for the one who doubted; His patience is deliberate; the same greeting — peace — to the doubter as to the believers
20:27	Jesus addresses Thomas directly: “Put your finger here... put out your hand... do not disbelieve, but believe”	He knows Thomas’s conditions without being told; He meets them precisely; “do not be unbelieving but believing” — the call forward is to faith, not to continued

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
20:28	Thomas answers, “My Lord and my God!”	examination The highest Christological confession in the Fourth Gospel; addresses Jesus directly as both Lord (Yahweh/κύριος) and God (θεός) — an identification of Jesus with the God of Israel; the doubt resolves not in verification alone but in worship
20:29	Jesus says, “Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”	The beatitude for unseen faith — the primary mode of all post-resurrection discipleship; blessing is not consolation for the disadvantaged but the declared condition of those who trust the word
20:30–31	John states the purpose of the Gospel: many other signs were done that are not written; these are written so that the reader may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing they may have life in His name	The explicit authorial intent — the entire Gospel, and chapter 20 specifically, is designed as a word-event generating faith; the reader is the target of every sign

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	20:1–10	The Empty Tomb: Evidence Without Understanding
2	20:11–18	The Garden Appearance: The Shepherd Calls His Own
3	20:19–23	The Upper Room: The Risen Lord Commissions His Church
4	20:24–29	Thomas: From Demanding Proof to Confessing Lord
5	20:30–31	The Author’s Intent: Signs Written for Your Faith

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ appears, is recognized, and calls forth the faith that receives His life.

Primary Claim: Jesus rose bodily from the dead, and He is present now — as He was then — seeking the faith of those who encounter Him, offering in that faith nothing less than life itself.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] Resurrect your category of evidence for the resurrection.

Most people who struggle to believe the resurrection are not lacking evidence — they are operating with a prior commitment that physical resurrection is impossible. John 20 does not argue for resurrection abstractly; it presents specific, particular, verifiable details — the placement of linen cloths, the garden setting, the wounds still present on a living body — precisely to dismantle that prior commitment. Examine your own epistemology: are you coming to the resurrection as a possibility to be weighed, or as an impossibility to be explained away? The linen cloths lying folded and undisturbed are not an accident. The orderliness of an empty tomb is not a coincidence. John is asking you to reason honestly from the evidence he records. Bring your doubts to the text — but bring them with intellectual honesty, not with a predetermined verdict.

2. [Affections/Worship] Let Thomas's confession become yours — not as a formula, but as a moment of personal reckoning.

Thomas did not say “I now accept the hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead.” He said “My Lord and my God” — direct, personal, worshipful address to the living Christ in front of him. The movement from intellectual acknowledgment to worship is the movement John 20 is designed to produce. If your relationship with Jesus has settled into accurate theological conviction without worship, without the first-person singular of Thomas's confession, something essential is missing. The risen Christ does not want your doctrinal agreement — He is seeking the faith that falls before Him and says “My Lord and my God.” Where has that worship gone? What has cooled it? Return to the wounds — still present on a living body — and let them do their work.

3. [Will/Behavior] Announce the resurrection to the people God has placed nearest you.

Mary Magdalene is told something, and she goes and announces it: “I have seen the Lord.” She does not strategize, she does not wait for a better opportunity, she does not worry about her credibility — she simply reports what she has encountered. She was not one of the Twelve; she had no formal commission. She had an encounter and a word from Jesus, and she carried it. The risen Christ has placed specific people in your life — your

household, your workplace, your neighborhood — who have not heard what you have heard. The commission of John 20:21 (“as the Father has sent Me, so I send you”) is not addressed to a professional class of ministers; it follows from an encounter with the risen Lord. You have had that encounter — in this text if nowhere else. Whom are you withholding it from?

4. [Mind/Belief] Reckon with the specific identity claim Thomas’s confession makes.

“My Lord and my God” is not enthusiastic religious language; it is a precise theological identification of Jesus with the God of Israel. In a Jewish context, this is the most radical claim possible — and Jesus does not correct Thomas, rebuke him for excess, or redirect him to the Father. He accepts it. John 20 is not asking you to believe that Jesus was a great moral teacher, a spiritually advanced human, or an exalted divine messenger. It is asking you to believe what Thomas confessed — that the man standing before him, with wounds still in his hands and side, is the Lord God. This is either true or it is the most catastrophic blasphemy in human history. John’s Gospel allows no middle position. What do you do with that claim?

5. [Affections/Worship] Receive the peace Jesus speaks over the fearful and failing.

Twice in this chapter Jesus enters a room of frightened, hiding disciples and says “Peace be with you.” The second time, Thomas — who had refused to believe — is in the room. The peace Jesus speaks is not conditional on the quality of faith in the room. It is given to people who locked doors out of fear, who failed to be present the first time, who demanded impossible conditions. If you are hiding behind locked doors — behind the fear of what it would cost to follow fully, behind the failure of the past week, behind the theological conditions you have set before you will trust — the risen Christ is not waiting for you to sort yourself out before He speaks peace to you. He walks through locked doors. He addresses doubters by name. He speaks peace before He presents credentials. Receive it — it is for you, it is real, and it is His to give.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: John 20 is the theological climax toward which the entire Fourth Gospel has been building — the vindication of every claim Jesus made about Himself, the completion of every “I am” declaration, the fulfillment of every promise. The chapter teaches with unmistakable clarity that the resurrection is bodily, historical, and personal — not a spiritual metaphor, not the disciples’ subjective experience of ongoing meaning, but the actual return to life of the crucified Jesus in identifiable, wound-bearing, touchable form. It teaches that the risen Christ’s identity is continuous with the crucified Christ — He is recognized by the same wounds that killed Him, and those wounds are now the marks of triumph rather than defeat. Most significantly, the chapter teaches through Thomas’s confession that the resurrection is the moment when the full weight of Jesus’ identity is made undeniable: He is Lord and God — not merely a messenger from God, not merely

God's chosen servant, but the God of Israel Himself present in human flesh, now risen. The Father's vindication of the Son through resurrection is the Father's public declaration that everything Jesus claimed, everything He suffered, and everything He accomplished at the cross was accepted, complete, and final.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: John 20 is foundational to Reformed soteriology in ways that go beyond simple apologetics for the resurrection. The chapter's structure — moving from empty tomb, to individual appearance, to corporate commissioning, to the beatitude of unseen faith, to John's explicit evangelistic purpose — embodies the Reformed conviction that salvation is received through faith in the proclaimed word, not through the accumulation of overwhelming sensory evidence. The beatitude of v. 29 ("blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed") is the Reformed doctrine of the Word doing evangelistic work: John writes signs as a *word-event*, designed by the Spirit to generate saving faith in readers who were not present. This is why the Reformation placed such theological weight on preaching — the proclaimed word of the risen Christ is not a lesser substitute for personal encounter; it is the Spirit's appointed means of creating the same faith Thomas confessed. The commission of vv. 21–23, read correctly, grounds the church's gospel proclamation in the Incarnational mission of the Son Himself — the church is sent as He was sent, with the Spirit He breathes, to declare on His authority who has been forgiven and who has not. John 20:31 is the Reformed preacher's warrant: God gave us this text not as history alone but as a living instrument — written precisely to produce and sustain the faith by which the dead receive life in the name of the risen Christ.

Main Takeaway

Jesus is not in the tomb. He rose bodily, He appeared specifically, and He is present still — not as memory, not as metaphor, not as a religious idea to be admired, but as the living Lord who calls Mary by name, walks through locked doors to speak peace to the fearful, and meets the hardest doubter's conditions with patient, wound-bearing grace. He is asking you the same question He asked in that garden: "*Whom are you seeking?*" The only answer that gives life is Thomas's: *My Lord and my God*.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the resurrection as apologetic background rather than the sermon's central claim.** Preachers frequently use John 20 as a launchpad to argue *for* resurrection, spending the bulk of exposition defending the historicity of the empty tomb before getting to what the risen Christ is actually doing and saying in the

chapter. The apologetic material matters — but John 20 is not primarily a courtroom brief; it is a personal encounter. The risen Christ's actions and words to Mary, to the gathered disciples, and to Thomas are the homiletical substance. The defense of resurrection enables the encounter; it must not replace it.

- **Rehabilitating “Doubting Thomas” without following the text’s own verdict.** Popular preaching has made Thomas the hero of honest skepticism — a move that resonates culturally but misreads the passage. Jesus does not commend Thomas's doubt; He meets it, overcomes it, and then gently pronounces blessing on those who believe without requiring Thomas's accommodations. Preaching Thomas as a model doubter normalizes the posture the text is trying to move the hearer *out of*. The text honors Thomas's encounter while directing the hearer toward the faith that trusts the word.
- **Misreading “Do not cling to Me” (v. 17) as emotional distance.** This verse is frequently preached as Jesus correcting excessive emotional attachment — “don't be too dependent on Me.” The text means nothing of the sort. The point is eschatological and relational: the old mode of physical presence is being superseded by the new covenant mode of Spirit-presence after the ascension. Jesus is not creating distance; He is preparing Mary — and every believer — for a *better*, not lesser, relationship with Him through the Spirit. Preaching v. 17 as a call to emotional independence from Christ is a serious distortion.
- **Extracting John 20:23 from its missionary context and reading it sacramentally.** The verse is regularly preached or taught in ways that invest a ministerial class with quasi-priestly authority to pronounce individual absolution. The immediate context is Incarnational mission (v. 21) and Spirit-empowered proclamation (v. 22). The authority is real — but it is the church's declaratory authority in gospel proclamation, not a sacerdotal office. Importing this verse into a confessional-absolution framework requires assumptions the text actively resists.
- **Stopping the sermon at v. 29 without preaching vv. 30–31.** John's explicit statement of purpose is not a postscript — it is the interpretive key to the entire chapter and the entire Gospel. Leaving it unpreached leaves the congregation without John's own explanation of why he wrote what he wrote and what he intends it to accomplish. Verse 31 is the moment the author speaks directly to the reader and names the intended effect: *that you may believe, and that believing you may have life*. Preach it. It is John's Primary Claim stated in his own words.
- **Flattening the four resurrection appearances into a single general point about “the resurrection.”** John 20 is architecturally deliberate: each scene does different work. The empty tomb generates evidence; Mary's garden encounter establishes the personal, shepherdly character of the risen Christ's relationship with His own; the upper room appearance commissions the church; Thomas's encounter addresses the condition of sustained unbelief and calls it forward into worship. A

sermon that averages these scenes into “Jesus is risen, believe it” loses the specificity that is the chapter’s greatest expositional gift. Each scene has a different *type of person* in view — the evidence-seeker, the grieving disciple, the fearful community, the committed skeptic — and they deserve to hear themselves in the text.