

The Power of the Resurrection From Faith to Understanding

John 20:1-18

I've decided that if God had asked me to organise the resurrection appearances, I would have done things a little differently. After all, a Resurrection is hardly an everyday event. We're talking major cosmic implications here; total triumph over evil, the offer of forgiveness to mankind. This is a major event. So I would have gone for a big splash. Lots of colour and drama.

I would have sent out invitations in gold copperplate on that nice parchment paper to those priests and Pharisees that had yelled their insults at the Cross: 'You are cordially invited (or commanded) to attend the appearance of Jesus, once dead, now alive, so there!

And then of course, some really decent music. I would have hired the best Orchestra available...imagine the string section sawing away at the empty tomb, perhaps a bit of Handel's Messiah (perhaps not, it hadn't been written). Fireworks, cannons, bouquets of rainbows in the sky. And of course, loads of angel's tap dancing on the clouds yelling 'Jesus is the Champion'.

But God didn't do it like that at all. The Resurrection was so ordinary. Mary meets the risen Jesus in the Garden, and thinks that He's the odd job man who takes care of the place. The disciples see a stranger standing on the beach, and initially have no idea who he is.

But maybe it was deliberately ordinary, purposefully so. Yes, the Resurrection was a dynamic cosmic happening, the greatest moment in human history. But more than that it was about people. He died and was raised for His friends and for His enemies, for ordinary people like you and me. And He refuses to be flashy, but rather quietly offers us His love.

You see - Jesus is alive - and that means absolutely *everything* is different! John provides us with a beautiful portrait of

stunning contrasts, and shows the awesome revolution that the resurrection of Jesus really is. Peter & John are bewildered, and Mary is crying loudly - the word used here suggests wailing. Her sadness is not just because she believes Jesus is dead, perhaps also she assumes that tomb raiders have stolen the body, which would have been an outrage in that culture. Even the presence of the angels doesn't shift her grief. Notice how quietly and unpretentiously Jesus appears without a hint of 'I told you so'. At first she mistakes him for the gardener, which in a sense He is. Considering all that we know underlies this new creation episode perhaps echoes of Eden are to be found here. But His quiet appearance turns everything upside down. Grief is turned to joy, and fear is turned to peace. Now because Christ is alive, we too can be changed, as that very same resurrection power is at work within us to bring about real heart change (Ephesus 1:18-19). Now we don't need to sweat away at being better people, because the very same Spirit who breathed life again into the dead body of Jesus is breathing life into us (2 Cor. 3:18).

Our Churches are to be communities of resurrection life too. Notice that the resurrection was immediately reported to the wider group of disciples. The resurrection brings into birth a new life community that is far more than a mere human institution. Often we get frustrated with our churches, and for good reason. But let's not lose hope, for the living God is still at work among His people. The whole evolution is possible because not only is Jesus alive, but also He is revealing Himself to, and engaging with, His people. Mary's exclamation, 'I have seen the Lord!' (v18), is the heart of Christianity.

Now while we have yet to catch a glimpse of Jesus with our physical eyes, we are able to report that we are engaged with Him personally. We need to look, in numerous ways, to 'see' the Lord today and everyday. Because He is alive!

So whilst telling us the wonderful news that Jesus has risen and is Alive: John uses his telling of the Resurrection to show

us that there is not just one-way to respond to the Risen Christ. The journey from Faith to understanding for each of us will inevitably be totally unique: but sure as empty tombs are empty tombs, Faith is the place we need to start: "They still did not understand" is not just a description of Peter & John but also the reality of any kind of spiritual journey! So the reactions of those who were first on the scene that Easter morning are mirrored in many today who hear the claim that Jesus is Risen.

So first let's look at Mary: initially she was hugely distressed. She could only assume that Jesus' body had been taken away. Her mind was so full of Jesus' physical presence, His physical Body, that when she met Jesus alive and eventually recognised Him she wanted to cling to Him forever: so initial distress turns to a response of Intimacy. The danger of such Intimacy is that we must not seek to keep Jesus to ourselves. The remedy is the words of Jesus: do not hold on to me (v17). So we must not seek to keep Jesus to ourselves nor must we seek to tie Him down to particular places and times. Later Stephen would be stoned to death as the first Christian martyr for suggesting such a revolutionary idea! Mary's response started with emotion, which is legitimate and important but it can also blind us to deeper truths.

Second there's the Unnamed Disciple (whom Jesus loved): John His initial response was from the heart and he was a fast runner but then he hesitated on the threshold of the tomb: he had arrived second only to Mary. He feared losing Jesus and he was fearful of what he might discover. There are many who are attracted to Jesus and worship Him nominally, who would like to believe in His Victory over death, sin and suffering, but who hold back, who stay on the threshold. Lets not expect everyone to respond in the same way or at the same time: lets be comfortable with people on the threshold. With

encouragement John eventually entered in, and experienced the full wonder of the Resurrection - he saw and believed - and his experience eventually gave birth to the fourth Gospel. For John the remedy was to exercise trust in Jesus and walk with Him all his life. Clearly we must create a whole range of ways for people to enter in: some like John will be so enthusiastic that they almost outrun us and encounter Christ in a life transforming way. We must also stress that you don't need a certain level of understanding of the scriptures (v9).

On a visit to Papua New Guinea the then Archbishop of Canterbury said he had visited a Cathedral, which had a tin roof but no walls. People were able to enter or hover around the edges listening if they wished and then walk away: "I believe with all my heart that the Church of Jesus Christ should be a Church of ragged edges....a church of no walls where people can ask their hardest questions without condemnation or share their deepest fear without reproach." Church with ragged edges: that's the kind of Church, which will win Canterbury once again.

Then there's Peter who responds from the hip, with an open heart and mind. Arriving third, he plunged straight into the tomb and saw the 40 yards of abandoned grave clothes. In I Corinthians 15:5 Paul wrote that after His Resurrection, Jesus appeared first to Peter. This meeting is not specifically mentioned in the gospels, although it is alluded to in Luke 24:34. But the sight of the grave-clothes must have opened Peter's mind and heart further to the possibility that Jesus was alive and it prepared Him to welcome the Risen Christ. The danger for Peter as for us is his desire to get ahead of God, he wanted it sorted. The remedy was his re-commissioning in John's final chapter: Do you love me more than anyone and everything? Only then could God use a humbled Peter having received a heart transplant. We need to open our hearts and minds to the possibility that Jesus is who He said he is. As C S

Lewis commented: either he is a liar or a lunatic or He is Lord! And we need to be ready to help people respond in the immediate for as the Bible says: today is the day of Salvation.

However this journey to Faith for these first three believers did not lack divine intervention in the form of the Angel who asked a question to draw her further in: Women why are you crying? They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where to find him. There then follows a case of mistaken identity: Jesus' response could have been from John 15: **My father is the gardener!** His word to her was but one word: **Mary!** (Not I've survived: as if ever in doubt, not I've conquered as that would have come out of arrogance) No with quiet authority, gentleness and love he **Calls her by her Name** as does the Father to each one of us: thus underscoring the perfect plan for the named ones of Jeremiah 1:5. He also **calls her to be a Child of God:** I am going to my Father and your Father, my God and your God, thus thrilling Mary's heart with this brand new relationship and reality which later that day Thomas would verbalise and embrace. A relationship of maturity that as with our children and so with God's children results in our letting go and letting Him have His way. Finally Mary is **called to be a witness** (thus anticipating the claim of Acts 1:8 that all should be witnesses to Christ): she has her story to tell, good news to share: I have seen the Lord!

The same Risen Christ is **calling you today by Name** into your true identity as a **Child Of God** and then he's saying **be my witness to the ends of the Earth.**

Such a Saviour deserves nothing less.

Pastor David

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