

RESURRECTION: A MOTIVATING HOPE

John 20:15-31

Our faith in the fact of the Resurrection is important and gives boldness and hope. If we ever wanted to see a picture of the opposite of hope, then you could not find one any clearer than the little band of followers of Jesus immediately after He was crucified. That hopelessness grew as the hours passed and they considered the last three years of their lives and the expectations that they had. It all seemed to have resulted in failure. He had taught them to not go the way of the world and that they would have victory. Yet, it seemed that the world had won.

It is not unusual to find ourselves in situations of hopelessness. A family member is diagnosed with cancer, a loved one is killed in a freak accident, your life savings are wiped out by someone who stole your identity, a person's house is destroyed by a flood and there was no flood insurance. You get the idea! We see this kind of hopelessness in the life of our nation in which godless forces are taking us down a road away from the principles that made our nation great and we don't have to have the gift of prophecy to see that it is not going to end well.

These various challenges and developments can and do produce a sense of hopelessness in our minds. We look around and wonder if the message in one of the verses in the Christmas carol written more than 150 years ago by Longfellow ("the wrong shall fail and the right prevail") is still valid. We see little evidence to support this; however, we must walk by faith and not by sight. Our faith is strengthened by the hope evidenced in the Resurrection and we can know by faith that "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep."

How can we make the transition or transformation from hopelessness to victorious living in the power of the resurrection? What can turn grief into great joy, or replace our fear with focused purpose, or change doubts into deeds of faith? Maybe we can learn from what the early followers of Jesus experienced after His death and resurrection.

From Grief to Joyful Testimony – 20:15-18

¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and *that* He had said these things to her. John 20:15-18 (NASB95)

Our first example is Mary Magdalene. What can we learn from her experience? One obvious action in which she was involved was simply that "she went about doing what needed to be done." She and some of the other women went to the tomb to complete the job of the embalming process which amounted to adding more sweet smelling spices to the body and the tomb.

One might argue that this was a totally superficial ritual that had essentially no "preserving" effectiveness but was simply to cover up the bad order of a dead body. We see a carryover of this practice in having sweet-smelling flowers at funerals. Our concept of death is anything but beautiful and so we try to "dress it up" with some things that are beautiful or pleasant such as perfumes and flowers. There is nothing wrong with such practices, but they are essentially tied to the physical mind set that we have. The fact that these women were going about the ritual tied to tradition put them in a place to discover the fact that Jesus was no longer in the tomb.

We know that they hurried to "share the information" of what they had discovered with

the disciples. Many of them went to the tomb to see for themselves and they really did not know what was going on so they (all except Mary Magdalene) went to their own homes.

Mary did not go home immediately but remained near the tomb weeping as she was overcome with grief. As she “tarried in the place of grief” she experienced some things that the others missed by resigning themselves to the obvious and returning to the routines of the moment. She saw angels (although she may not have immediately recognized them as angels) and she saw a setting (picture) that was reminiscent of the description of the Holy of Holies in which the mercy seat sat atop the Ark of the Covenant and had an angel at each end of this slab of gold. This was where God would meet with His people.

Beyond seeing angels she also saw the risen Lord. He asked her the same question that the angels asked: “Why are you weeping?” However, He added another question: “Whom are you seeking?” The answer to the first question that Mary gave is significant in that she essentially said that she could not find the Lord. This has been the condition of mankind following the break in fellowship that Adam and Eve had experienced. Man was separated from the Lord and could not find Him. This separated condition produced loss and suffering that led to grief and hopelessness. This was the message of “angels and prophets of old” that we find in the Old Testament account of God dealing with mankind.

With the coming of God in the person of Jesus, mankind was given a solution and an answer to the separation problem that caused the “weeping.” That remedy was in the Person of Jesus the Christ, the One Whom we are to seek. So many times people look for a remedy to ease their grief with rituals and decoration and perfumes when the answer lies not in the question of what to seek but Whom to seek?

Mary was seeking the right One but was having difficulty in recognizing Him Who was in plain sight. This same problem of not being able to recognize Jesus Who (in making Himself available to us in the rituals and routines of life) is still around. This difficulty in recognizing the Lord may be more of a problem when we are in the midst of problems, trials, and grief.

How does Jesus come to us in such times? It may happen when we remember a verse of Scripture, or recall a line from a song. It could happen when a friend comes by to “just be there” when we are undergoing difficult times. Time spent in prayer is an active way that can help us recognize His presence.

The thing that enabled Mary to realize that she was encountering the risen Lord was when He called her name. There is a fairly new popular worship song that has a line that says “He knows my name.” If we can remember that truth and trust in having such a close personal relationship with the Lord, then it helps us to recognize Him in the midst of whatever is going on in our lives.

It is amazing how much a physical hug or embrace can affect us when we are hurting emotionally. Mary needed that kind of “touch” and she was immediately looking to Jesus for that kind of support. That kind of relationship that produces a firm handshake, a pat on the back or an embrace that we can share with another person is not the same as the comfort that we can have or should expect from the Lord. Jesus had told His disciples that He would be interacting with them by the Holy Spirit (Comforter) Whom He would send to them. The comfort He gives us is much deeper and more lasting than a physical touch. It is important for us to realize that He will be leading each of us who belong to Him to provide those physical touches when they are needed to strengthen and encourage one another.

The final thing that Mary Magdalene did was to share the good news that she had seen the Lord with the others who were grieving. This was her joyful testimony. Let’s review how

she got to that point. The first thing we saw was that Mary went about doing the things that needed to be done in spite of the grief she was experiencing. She even engaged in some rituals that placed her in a position to discover truth. She was eager to share what truth she had learned even though she did not have a fully understanding of the significance of it. She did not deny her grief but let it become a point of meditation and waiting on the Lord. She revisited the evidence to see if there was something she missed the first time. That was rewarded in that she saw angels and gained knowledge that had spiritual significance. In the midst of her grief, she was seeking to reunite herself with the Lord and that was rewarded in that He revealed Himself to her. (If we seek the Lord, then He will find us.) In her attempt to seek comfort from a physical touch from the risen Lord she was able to learn that we must be available to provide that for each other as we experience the deeper eternal comfort that comes from the presence of the Comforter (Holy Spirit) in our lives. All these things were helpful to her and will help us in making the transition from grief to joyful testimony in whatever situation we are in that causes grief.

From Fear to Bold Mission – 20:19-23

¹⁹ So when it was evening on that day, the first *day* of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace *be* with you.” ²⁰ And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ So Jesus said to them again, “Peace *be* with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” ²² And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ “If you forgive the sins of any, *their sins* have been forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they have been retained.” John 20:19-23 (NASB95)

As we read the accounts of what happened that day, it seems obvious that news of the resurrection from those who had seen Him that day did not eliminate fear. There were at least four Resurrection appearances of Jesus on that first day of the week prior to the one John mentioned here. We’ve already mentioned the appearing to Mary Magdalene. Matthew (28:9–10) mentions the “other women.” In 1 Corinthians 15:5 and Luke 24:34 there is mention of Simon or Cephas having seen Jesus and Luke related the account of the two Emmaus disciples who were probably in the room with the others when Jesus appeared the fifth time that day.

Let’s examine what they did know at that time. Jesus had died for their sins. He had fulfilled a multitude of Scriptural prophecies. He was no longer in the grave. Though they knew all of this, they were still afraid!

Is that the condition of many today who are practicing Christians? We know the facts and we gather together with others who know the facts and confine ourselves to a “room” so that we do not “rock the boat” lest those “in power” do something to harm us. That is a fairly good picture of fear.

What has to happen to get us out of the condition of fear and focused on the purpose for which we were saved? In the example of the disciples, the first thing that happened was that Christ appeared in their midst and greeted them. In other words, not only was He there, He made His presence known. Many times we may find ourselves in a “gathering of believers” and we either think of or someone will quote the promise that “when two or three are gathered in My Name, I will be there in the midst of them.” I’m sure that happens a lot, but it may be difficult for us to point to specific instances where we could say that His presence was manifested in such a way that there was no doubt that Christ was there.

Their reaction to “His being in their midst” was one of great joy which they had not experienced just from hearing about the resurrection from the testimony of Mary Magdalene and several others. Joy came from the personal encounter with Christ.

The next thing that happened was that they were given a reminder of what they were

called to do. Specifically, they were to be Christ's apostles or those who had been sent by Him in the same way and for the same purpose as Christ had been sent by the Father. That purpose was to make God known to mankind which would result in eternal life.

Some have suggested that this apostolic commission was specifically for the remaining eleven disciples who are generally referred to as Apostles with a capital A. However, there were others in the room that night in addition to the eleven disciples. Therefore, the commission would seem to be applicable to all who count themselves as disciples of Christ.

Since our purpose is to make God known to people in such a way that eternal life is the outcome, then we might ask "how does eternal life come about in those who are possessors of it?" The answer is found throughout the Gospel of John and was first mentioned in the encounter Nicodemus had with Jesus as recorded in the third chapter of John. "You must be born again." The new birth imparts to the believer the uncreated life of God and gives life to the dead or comatose spirit that is characteristic of those born of Adam after "the Fall."

Since that is the case, one might wonder what was going on when Jesus "breathed on them and said 'receive the Holy Spirit.'" Was this the point in time at which these disciples were "born again?" It was certainly the point at which they fully embraced the fact that Jesus had died for their sin, was buried and rose again on the third day (see Romans 10:9-10). They had already confessed Him as Lord, but now they believed in their heart "the rest of the story." Perhaps one could make the argument that this statement was simply an affirmation that they had already been born again OR it was pointing to the coming of the Holy Spirit that would be poured out upon them at Pentecost. From what we see in this passage, it is not obvious what was happening.

This brings us to the somewhat difficult statement in verse 23 regarding forgiveness of sin and specifically the role of these apostles and, perhaps, the role of all believers with regard to forgiveness since that time. As you might imagine, many commentators disagree as to the implications of this verse. Those in the Roman Catholic tradition use this verse as a proof text for priests and others in the church to grant absolution to those who have sinned. The statement can be translated so that the meaning is that "those who have the Holy Spirit should only affirm forgiveness for those who qualify for such forgiveness according to Scriptural precepts." What does the Bible teach about qualifying for forgiveness? Repent, Believe, Trust, Obey. This is essentially what we see in 1 John 1:9-10. The other part of verse 23 would tell us that we should not continue to remember and hold the sins of their past against people if they have repented and believed, trusted and obeyed.

We could summarize what it takes to go from fear to focusing on the purpose for which we have been saved. In addition to hearing the message that the Lord is risen, we need to have a personal encounter with Him. We need to experience the new birth and be reminded of why we have been saved. We need to also change our criteria for interacting with other people from old prejudices and stereotypes to using the same criteria that God uses in receiving, accepting, and forgiving lost mankind.

From Doubt to Confident Faith – 20:24-29

²⁴ But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." ²⁶ After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace *be* with you." ²⁷ Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." ²⁸ Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you

believed? Blessed *are* they who did not see, and *yet* believed.” John 20:24-29 (NASB95)

We sometimes make a “big deal” about the fact that Thomas doubted. The others doubted also at first. When Jesus appeared to the group the second time, then Thomas had no trouble confessing Jesus as Lord. Just as it took a personal encounter with the risen Lord to bring those to whom Christ appeared on the day of His resurrection, Thomas also needed such an encounter. Notice that Jesus did not rebuke Thomas for wanting to make sure. I think that God is patient with us when we CAN not believe. The problem comes when we WILL not believe.

Why This Gospel Was Written – 20:30-31

³⁰ Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. John 20:30-31 (NASB95)

The purpose of John recording the events in the life of Jesus was so that we would have the necessary evidence so that we can believe. As we read these accounts and are open to the truth revealed, then we open up ourselves to experiencing a personal encounter with Christ that will be life transforming.