

DAY OF RESURRECTION: EASTER April 4, 2021 St. Alban's Church

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The resurrection appearances provide our primary evidence that the Lord is risen, so let's take a careful look at what John's description tells us. For John, the death of Jesus is a victory (or leads to one), and Jesus willingly dies. John makes it clear that the disciples would not understand the full glory of their Lord until after the fact of the crucifixion and resurrection. And many come to John's account because it is "the most personal resurrection story." Mary Magdalen is the first to arrive in all of the gospel accounts, so we have to take this seriously in view of her position as one of his closest disciples yet not one of The Twelve designated ones. She comes alone in John's gospel and her first reaction to finding the stone removed has been influenced by the opposition to Jesus which she observed and which preceded his arrest, trial and execution. She is clearly assuming that "they" (meaning the opposition) have removed the stone; she is not expecting a resurrection because arriving in darkness implies lack of belief; throughout John's narrative darkness is a sign of lack of understanding or disbelief itself.

Next Peter and the Beloved Disciple arrive in a kind of footrace upon hearing Mary's report. There is no body in the tomb and the linen funeral wrappings are in two piles on the floor – the face covering along with the linens for wrapping the body. The point of this observation is the contrast with the raising of Lazarus. He came out of the tomb with his face covering still on and his wrappings in place. It is not normal to find the body cloths on the floor of a tomb. It means something. It is a new sign, one of many in John's account, a sign that leads ultimately to belief. One of the early Church Fathers saw that the meaning of the linens was plain: "if anyone had removed the body, he would not have stripped it first, nor would he have taken the trouble to remove and roll up the cloth covering for the face and put it in a separate place." We need to recall that in John's gospel, Jesus never relates that he will rise from the dead, so what Mary and the two men discover is truly mind-stopping. They do not know what to make of it. They are not thinking of resurrection as even a remote possibility.

Mary's weeping tells us that she does not understand or believe in such a proposition. She does not encounter Jesus himself until he appears to her in the garden. She doesn't know him at first and only recognizes him by his voice. Clearly, his body is not visible to her as it had been before his death. When he tells her not to touch him, this is an affirmation of his physical appearance to her. And Mary takes pride of place as the first to witness Jesus in a close-up, personal way.

The failure to recognize Jesus is a familiar feature in other resurrection appearances. In Luke, the disciples who are on their way to Emmaus, do not recognize Jesus until he breaks bread with them. Nor do the other disciples recognize him. Apparently, he is not the same "person" they knew before. There has been a kind of transformation "in form and substance" even though his appearance occurs on a physical level. When Mary touches Jesus, he tells her not to do so but offers no explanation. However,

he had told them that he was on his way somewhere and could not take the disciples with him. Later, of course, he does ask Thomas to touch him in order to affirm his appearance, but we are unclear why the two episodes differ enough to explain the difference in the response of Jesus. Nevertheless, the command to Mary confirms that she has had actual physical contact with her Lord which affirms his appearance in the garden. (see Mark A. Matson, John, *Interpretation Bible Studies*, Westminster John Knox Press, London, 2002)

There are two prevailing themes in all of the gospel resurrection stories. The first is that *Jesus lives*. “He continues to be experienced after his death, though in a radically different way.” All of the stories confirm the new reality: Jesus is not among the dead, but the living. But the truth of the idea that he still lives is that it is “grounded in the experience of Christians throughout the centuries.” The spirit, the presence, his followers knew in him before his death continues to be known. The second theme is that “God has vindicated Jesus.” That is a powerful idea. It means God has said ‘*yes*’ to Jesus and ‘*no*’ to the powers that executed him. He has overcome the might of one of the greatest domination systems the world has ever known. Mark sums this up in the most succinct way: “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified; he has been raised.” Easter means “*God’s Great Cleanup of the world* has begun --- but it will not happen without us.” When in celebrating Easter, we only emphasize the personal dimension (that is, “we are invited into the journey that leads through death to resurrection and rebirth”) we betray the “passion by which Jesus was willing to risk his life,” because the political meaning of Good Friday and Easter “sees the human problem as injustice, and the solution as God’s justice.”

One of the realities that is visible to clergy on Easter is that despite the festive moments that permeate the day, “many people express insecurity regarding the quality of their believing.” But John’s resurrection accounts speak directly to the nature of our believing, because “he provides diverse models for experience and faith.” John seems to be telling us that “no one path accounts for the emergence of hope and new life.” The Beloved Disciple can believe without seeing. Mary needs a personal touch --- the voice of her Lord. Peter, “having encountered the risen Jesus at least twice, has yet to fully believe.” The Gospel story “judges none of these people...all three come to faith. Seeing and believing takes its own shape in each instance.” Seven times in John’s text words for ‘seeing’ are used, and “the seeing always results in some belief about what is seen.”

But Mary best illustrates John’s emphasis --- that correct faith comes from *hearing*, not seeing. However, what is most clear in John’s account is that “faith in the resurrection does not emerge easily or naively; from the beginning, it arose *despite claims to the contrary*.” And here the model of Thomas is most helpful. He makes “seeing and touching Jesus a pre-condition for belief.” Yet when Jesus appears to him, *in a way that recalls the previous words of Jesus and the other disciples*, he confesses his faith without actually touching his Lord. Jesus transforms Thomas’s unbelief into faith, *a faith informed and expressed*

by the testimony Thomas has heard before. Thanks to the skill of John in relating these events, “in each of (the three responses of the first witnesses) we find at one time or the other.”

In the beginning of John’s gospel, Jesus’ first words are a question directed at the disciples: “What are you looking for?” He asks Mary the same question, “Whom are you looking for?” And we might well ask ourselves that very question on this new Easter morning: “What are **we** looking for?” In the first creation story, God drove Eve and Adam out of the garden. In this new creation story in John’s gospel, Jesus sends Mary out to tell everyone the darkness has not overcome the Word made flesh who had lived among us. She understood that she had seen “the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” The fact that we are all here this morning suggests that we have heard Mary’s message, and it has filled our hearts with hope as it has always done. Amen.

Sources:

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