

REDISCOVERING THE RESURRECTION A SERMON ON JOHN 20:1-31

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

Once upon a time a minister was giving a children's message in the worship service. As he gathered all the children around, he asked them: "What is Easter about?" One little boy blurted out, "Easter is the day I wake up and find a basket full of jelly beans and peanut butter eggs and a chocolate bunny." A little girl chimed in: "Easter is the day that I wear a really pretty dress to church, and when we go home I get to look for colored eggs." Finally, a third boy, who was usually very quiet, put in his response: "Jesus died on the cross. They put him in the tomb and rolled a stone in front of the tomb. On Easter day, the stone rolled away and Jesus came out." "Very good" said the minister, preparing to continue with his lesson. "And then" interjected the boy "if he sees his shadow, he runs back in and we have six more weeks of winter!"

Easter is the best holiday in the Christian calendar, period. Why? Because it's about the Resurrection — about Christ's ultimate victory over sin and death. However, I think most Christians lose out on the significance of the Resurrection. Most of us here believe that the Resurrection really happened. Most of us here understand that Jesus died to take away our guilt for sin and that he rose to conquer death show that through faith in him we can live forever.

For many of us, that's where it stops. We have this implicit idea that the Resurrection is no more than cosmic fireworks. Honestly, the church has fostered that idea. But there's something more that is implied in the Resurrection.

The gospel of John gives us a clear picture of what is implied by the Resurrection. As we've worked through this gospel for the past year, we've seen that John likes to show intimate personal encounters with Jesus. Chapter 20 is no exception. John presents the Resurrection in terms of the disciples' personal responses to the Resurrection. I believe that these stories reveal two important principles for us as we seek to rediscover the Resurrection. Our text is this:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have

taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written 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 first principle is that when Jesus calls us, he calls us specifically — **by name**. We saw this to be true in Jesus early ministry, and it is equally true here. Consider the example of Mary Magdalene. Mary, who had been possessed by seven demons, had been freed from that torment in a moment. Mary followed Jesus and his disciples through their ministry, offering what support she could. And she stood at the foot of the Cross with Jesus' mother and watched Him die. She comes early in the morning and finds what appears to be the scene of a grave robbery. She rushes to Peter and John to get their help — and they confirm for her that the tomb is empty. Imagine her grief as she stood there by

herself. The one man who recognized her worth and value was dead and now some ghouls had stolen his body. Her devotion and tenderness marks her as a great saint in Christianity.

Don't you love how Jesus comes to her? "Woman, why are you crying." she doesn't recognize him and then he simply says "Mary". But then, her perspective changes. All she needed was assurance of Jesus' presence with her in this private moment to meet her spiritual need. Contrast that to how he encounters Thomas. Thomas, out of his hurt and grief, makes the outrageous claim that unless he puts his hands into Jesus' torn flesh, he would never believe that the Lord had risen. This is the same bold and passionate Thomas who, when Jesus wanted to go into dangerous territory where his enemies were plotting against him, said "Let us also go, that we might die with him." For Thomas, Jesus miraculously appeared in the middle of a dinner with all the disciples and spoke directly to him, challenging him to believe. He appeared to Thomas in a different way because Thomas had different needs. Thomas the Bold needed a more aggressive counter to his sin of doubt.

This is the same with each of us. Jesus isn't an intellectual concept — he is a real person, and he relates to each of us differently. Some of us have dramatic stories. Back when we were in Orlando, Tammy and I got to know Robert through our Sunday School class. He had been a roadie with the metal band Black Sabbath back in the 1970's. He threw himself into the hard partying drug scene life, at least until he was in a horrible car accident. The next thing he heard was a voice saying, "I am, now will you follow me?" at which point he sat straight up, only to discover that he was in the morgue. They thought he had died and had put him there and were about to shut him in the drawer when he had heard the voice and sat up.

They said he'd never walk. But he did. They said he'd never regain full functionality, but he did. To this day, he carries the photo of the mangled car and he tells the story to everyone he can. Jesus came to Robert in a dramatic way. And Robert responded.

For others of us, conversion is subtler. We feel a subtle inner tugging on our hearts at an opportune time. We sense the presence of something much greater than ourselves in the midst of tragedy. We are struck by something in Scripture, and it nags at our brain and won't let us go — and we know that God has called us by name. The Resurrection reminds us that Jesus isn't just a fact upon which we agree — he is a person we relate to individually.

The second principle we see in the narrative is that Jesus calls us to **do something**. Look at verses 19-22. Jesus appears to his disciples, he says he's sending them, and he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them. The Holy Spirit is given so that we will always enjoy God's presence with us, but the Holy Spirit

also empowers us with particular and unique gifts. Paul in 1 Corinthians presents the definitive exploration of the Holy Spirit working in the church. Early in Chapter 12, he points out that there are different gifts, that all have been given gifts, and that all gifts come from the Holy Spirit.

In other words, Jesus indicates that he has plans for us. He gives us these gifts and he sends us out to do work. The Resurrection is about giving us a new life so that we can be about a new work. That's the point behind verse 31 — these are written that you might believe and by believing you may have life in his name. When Jesus talks about giving life, he talks about living life with meaning and purpose and direction. Thoreau, in his masterpiece *Walden*, said that most men lead lives of quiet desperation, but that he wanted to live life to the full — to suck the marrow out of life. His words have continued resonance today. How many of us shuffle through the routines of life, occupying ourselves with little diversions that we can manage. How many of us live a hollow half-life, doing our best to stave off boredom? Wouldn't you like to have something to *live* for? Wouldn't you like to have a mission to which you could give your all. Wouldn't you like to have a fire in the belly that energized your every move?

One of the few films that I actually saw more than once in the theater is *Braveheart*. I love that movie. If you haven't seen it, it's about Medieval Scottish rebel William Wallace as he tries to secure Scotland's independence from England. The Scottish nobles were so tied in to the English nobility that they would negotiate away all the rights of the common people rather than fighting battles. Wallace inspired the common folk to rise up and fight for their rights. One scene of the movie was when Wallace first shows up before a major battle. The Scottish armies, scared by the superior numbers and discipline of the English, begin to desert. Then Wallace, decked out in blue war paint, rides up and down in front of the lines shouting to the soldiers. "If you stay, perhaps you'll die. And if you go home you'll live. But when you come to your dying day, will you give anything for the chance — one chance — to come back here and tell the English 'You can take away our lives, but you can't take away our freedom.'" That's passion. That is fire in the belly. That is the kind of spirit that Christ offers to us.

Brothers and sisters, Satan wants to crush your spirit. Evil wants you to believe that the chaos that threatens to overwhelm you is insurmountable. Evil wants you to believe that the best you can hope for is to die in your sleep. But that's not true. Christ offers us so much more. The Resurrection of Christ enables us to sign on for one of the greatest adventures of all time. Through Christ's Resurrection, we are able to be a part of building the kingdom of God. How do we do that, you ask? Part of Christian discipleship is learning how. That's why we have church. Here at Covenant-First, we do it through Worship, Witness, Study, Sharing, and Serving. But the key thing is to realize that you can be a part of the adventure!

The Resurrection isn't just a holy fireworks display. The Resurrection is about Jesus calling us by name and about calling us to abundant life. I know that there are some here today who have never thought about that. Jesus has always been a distant concept for you and you never realized that he had much use for you. Know this: Jesus has something exciting and personal in mind for you. The adventure of faith is the greatest adventure anyone can sign on for.

If you've never committed yourself to that adventure before and you hear Jesus calling you to today, or if at some point you committed yourself, but you got distracted along the way, I'd like to ask you to pray with me right now. Add a silent "Amen" in your hearts as I pray this prayer.

Jesus, I know that I break your law. I confess that and I'm sorry. I trust in you alone for my salvation. Thank you for dying on the cross to pay for my sin. Thank you for rising again to conquer death. Thank you for calling me to be a part of your kingdom. Lord, I want to be a part of the great adventure to which you are calling me. Show me what you would have me do, and give me the strength to pursue that calling with passion. In your name I pray. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, I would love to know about it. Give me a call this week or drop me a card. Most importantly, tell someone else about it. Don't let the sun go down without telling someone that Jesus has called you by name and that he's called you to a great adventure. And then come and be with us as we discover together how to live out the greatest adventure of all time. Amen.