

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Studies in John's Gospel: John 20

If you care to look back, what do you consider the most spectacular event which has taken place in this world? Most of us can only think of our lifetime. Perhaps we remember the London bombing of 7 July 2005, or perhaps we think, as Americans will, of 11 September 2001, the destruction of the twin towers in New York. Older ones may even remember the bomb that dropped on Hiroshima. What a catastrophe! Sadly, these events are bad but now try to think of something good and spectacular. We may well draw a blank. Let me tell you straight away that I believe the most spectacular event, the greatest event in history, took place on the day we commemorate as Easter Sunday, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is good news! Can there be a greater event than that of the one Man known to have been crucified just three days before, now raised again? But this event is all the greater because of the proof it gives to every sinner who comes to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness from sins that His death on the cross has paid their penalty before a holy God. All who trust in the work of the Lord Jesus are free from the penalty for sin and enter a new life with Christ. This is the superb reality of the resurrection. What a great day!

As we have been seeing, John writes his Gospel to show that Jesus is the Son of God and he has used signs, actions which demonstrate the spiritual truth behind the act. In chapter 20 we see the fulfilment of the Lord's work by a further tremendous act which brings to a crescendo the path of the Lord in this world. John does not give us a history in his Gospel. He selects certain events to make his point and as we go through those given in this chapter we see each one brings a sense of awe and trust at the wonder portrayed by them. Yet no one saw the Lord Jesus rise from the dead. His enemies were not permitted to see this and His friends were not expecting it. But Peter, having seen the risen Lord after His resurrection, could say, "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses", Acts 2:32. God would not allow His Son to return to heaven without this great confirmation of triumph, this mark of a completed work. God the Father has accorded His Son this tremendous honour by raising Him from the dead! Now we are permitted to know a risen Saviour - He, who is the Son of God and was crucified. Rejoice my friend today; rejoice in the victory declared by the resurrection.

The four events John selected describe:

1. The two foremost disciples as they visit an empty tomb, and the result, verses 1-10.
2. Mary of Magdala, so crushed by events, sees the living Lord, verses 11-18.
3. The band of disciples visited by their Lord in the evening, verses 19-23.
4. Thomas, with all his doubts, finally bowed in utter worship, verses 24-31.

We will take each section in turn.

The two disciples, verses 1-10.

The day began very quietly. Early in the morning a group of women, having prepared spices used for burying, decide to visit the tomb. John only describes Mary because he wishes to concentrate on the story of her recovery. They go with great concern because they cannot themselves remove the stone which was laid against the entry to the sepulchre. It is very early and dark. When they arrive, they see, "the stone taken away (or lifted out) from the sepulchre". Doubts about moving the stone existed and John shows why as he uses the expression "taken away" or "lifted out". Mary believes that her Lord has been taken away. Where is she to go? Whom should she tell? What better than to go to the house of John. Perhaps they will know what to do. Peter is also there. How thankful we can be that, when Peter feels the burden of great failure, he finds sanctuary with John.

These two disciples feel most keenly the death of the Lord. Peter, the man with the broken heart because of His total denial, and John, because of the intense love he felt from the Lord towards himself, decided to go themselves to the tomb. In the original language, verses 3 and 4 give a sense of the incompleteness and urgency of their visit. "They were going forward and they were running both together". "The other disciple ran on in front more quickly and outran Peter", verse 4. What urgency, what desire they had to get there! O Lord, what has happened to Thee?

On arrival John looks in and sees how the clothes are lying, verse 5. There was no body. On his arrival Peter must go right into the sepulchre. He also sees the linen clothes lying but notices the "napkin, that was about his head, not lying

with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself", verse 7. These clothes had not been carefully wrapped up but were just left lying as they were but flat. In burials of that time the napkin about the head was separate from the rest of the linen clothes and Peter noticed this was left in the same way. John followed Peter into the sepulchre; he saw the whole scene also. There had been no disturbance, no hurried snatching away of that body. The scene was exactly as it had been but the body was no longer there. What did it mean?

To understand this better we need to follow the different words used to describe the way Mary, Peter and John were seeing. In verse 1 Mary "seeth" the stone taken away. When John arrived, he "saw" the linen clothes lying, verse 5. Peter, in verse 6, "seeth" the linen clothes lie. When John went into the sepulchre we are told, he "saw" and believed, verse 8. When Mary came to the sepulchre, the word used for her seeing is "*blepo*" which means just to see, an ordinary word. John also saw in that way when he came and looked into the tomb. When Peter went into the sepulchre, he used his eyes and the word "*theoreo*" is used, describing the way he looked, critically enquiring and searching, and he noted the head napkin alone by itself. He was really trying to understand the situation and it must have provided a reaction, of which we are not told. Lastly John entered the sepulchre and the word John used is changed again. It is "*eido*" which means that he saw intelligently and understood what had happened. He believed with conviction that the Lord Jesus had risen. This is the effect of the resurrection on John. His mind is transformed! "He saw and believed". Jesus is risen!

We read in verse 9, "as yet they knew not the Scripture that he must rise again from the dead". What Scripture was this? We cannot be sure but, perhaps, it is Psalm 16:10: "Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell (or Hades); nor wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption". That scripture certainly supports the resurrection. All that the Lord had been teaching the disciples now fell into place. John was thrilled and amazed and he, with Peter, went back to their home. Let us be thrilled again today that the He is risen!

Mary, so crushed by events, sees the living Lord, verses 11-18.

Now John finishes the story of Mary that morning. Matthew tells us that when Joseph of Arimathea buried the Lord in his tomb, two of the Marys were sitting there watching and they may well have been sitting there most of the night. What love they had for their Lord. Now Mary of Magdala, who had been saved from the control of seven demons, is among the first to return at the beginning of this week. She was utterly distraught with the crucifixion of her Lord. She was sobbing, convulsed with grief. She had lost Him. Amidst her weeping, she bent over and looked into the sepulchre as John had done. Then she "saw", using the same word used of Peter, with critical enquiry, two angels sitting. Why were they there?

The angels kindly address her. Surely her sorrow can be eased by the unusual presence of angels. "Woman, why weepest thou?" they ask, verse 13. She can only answer again "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him". She told Peter and John in verse 2 that they had taken away *the* Lord. Now she speaks of *my* Lord. So great is her love for her Lord that the presence even of angels cannot stir her from her distress. In her mind He was dead but He was still her Lord. She had now lost even that dead body. How faithful was her love, unto death and beyond! Do you have that sort of love in your heart for the Lord Jesus? Clearly nothing will move Mary from her extreme sorrow.

She turns herself away from the angels and she notices another figure behind her. She saw Jesus, the same word used of Peter, of enquiry and critical examination. She thought this must be the gardener who asked the same question, "Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? Mary answers, "Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away", verse 15. She was not even concerned with the impossible task, by herself, of lifting a dead body. Her great sorrow hid every problem if only she could recover the body of Him whom she loved. This stranger uses only one word. "Mary". How did He say it? Only she knew that voice, that call. She turns herself to Him and cries out, "O my Teacher", this being the better rendering in English. Was there no doubt in her mind? She was absolutely certain and satisfied that Jesus is risen. What joy thrilled her heart! He is risen!

She would there and then have seized Him and held Him to herself, nevermore to be parted. But the Lord Jesus says to her, "Touch me not", or rather, do not cling to Me, do not hold Me "for I am not yet ascended unto my Father", verse 17. He was telling her that a new way is to be established; she must put aside the old manner. He was speaking of the day soon to come when she, like many another, would be joined to Him through the Holy Spirit in a way she could never have known whilst He was there. The Lord then gives her a mission, to tell His disciples. This mission was not to tell them of His resurrection but of His ascension. The disciples were to receive this second testimony to an empty grave, a second testimony to the resurrection and a first testimony to the ascension. That testimony included the phrase to "my Father and your Father, and to my God, and your God", verse 17. So they were now indelibly linked together with their Lord in realising that His Father and God was their Father and God too. How wonderful it is to know that the fact of the resurrection now has brought such a close link for every believer to the Father Himself. Jesus is risen!

The band of disciples are visited by their Lord in the evening, verses 19-23.

I see a group of bewildered men and women sheltering for safety behind closed doors, unable to focus on the amazing events of which they had been hearing during the day. They had heard that Jesus is risen. They had Mary's report and had seen the absolute change in her. They had heard that Peter had seen the Lord. They had received word from two who had gone to Emmaus and had then returned, having witnessed the Lord in their evening meal. They were still in fear of the Jews who were anxious to obliterate all reference to Jesus and His activities. They had lost their focus, a focus which had been established through three years of walking with Jesus. What did all the reports mean?

"The same day". Could the Lord ignore His disciples? Could He leave them until later on? Never! "The same day", when He knew they were together, "came Jesus and stood in the midst", verse 19. The same Lord still has the same care for His disciples. He will not leave them comfortless. He "stood in the midst, and saith unto them, "Peace be unto you"". The door had not been opened but here was the Lord in the midst, in His resurrection body. There is one thing that the Lord brings to every situation; it is His peace. So He spoke to His disciples before the cross, "My peace I leave with you". Now He commences with this usual greeting. Luke tells us that they were extremely distressed at His appearance. The doors were still shut and locked, but He was alive and present. The Lord had a simple way of convincing them as to His Person, "He showed to them his hands and his side", verse 20. They were utterly convinced and "they were glad when they saw the Lord". Their seeing was as John finally saw, in complete belief and acceptance that this Person is risen and is their Lord. They were glad!

Then the Lord gives them a commission. "As my Father has sent me, even so send I you", verse 21. They were now to have a responsibility. These two words for "sent" are different. As the Father has sent Me - with the Greek word "*apostello*" - set me apart and sent Me, delegating His authority to Me. When it comes to the disciples, He does not delegate His authority but sends - the Greek word "*pempo*" - despatches under His authority, to be His messengers. In this commission, all believers become messengers of His. We go in the power of the Holy Spirit doing His bidding, knowing He is risen.

Thomas with all his doubts, finally bowed in utter worship, verses 24-31.

Thomas was absent on that first evening. Fiercely loyal, yet utterly distressed, he could not be present. When the other disciples told him of the event and of seeing Jesus' hands and feet, Thomas could not accept it. "I will not believe", he said. He demanded full proof before accepting what seemed to him impossible. The gracious Lord is ever ready to meet men on their own level. The next week Thomas joined the others and the Lord came especially for his sake. "Thomas, reach hither thy finger..." the Lord said, verse 27. He offered the evidence the others had received already. He added, "Be not faithless (or, become not faithless), but believing", verse 27. Thomas was totally convinced. "My Lord" he says, indicating a total understanding of the identity of the Lord. Then he confessed to the full truth as he adds, "and my God", verse 28. Thomas was convinced. He is risen! "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed", the Lord adds. What a privilege to be included with those who believe. Today, will you rejoice that He is risen?

Epilogue.

Shortly after the events described in this chapter, the Holy Spirit came upon the believers, Acts 2. What a Gospel was theirs to proclaim! The great central point, speaking of Jesus of Nazareth was, ye "have crucified and slain, God hath raised up". Acts 2:23-24. He is risen! The tremendous news spread around the world; in the east, Peter travelled as far as Babylon, and west, Paul went as far as Italy with this same message. Very many believed in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This great message brings cheer, gladness and salvation to all who come to Him. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and all this included, changed the lives of many, so much so that when Paul preached the resurrection in Thessalonica, Acts 17:6, he was accused as being of "these that have turned the world upside down". This is what the resurrection has done. Will your testimony do this today? Are you one who preaches? Preach the glad news that He is risen, today. Perhaps, as a housewife, you can happily chat to your neighbours. Chat about the resurrection today! Maybe you find it difficult to make conversation. Live in the joy of the resurrection now. Rejoice in the resurrection! He is risen! Hallelujah!

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