

Encounters with Jesus: The First Christian Sunday, 2/5/23

Last week we attended the wedding at Cana, where we saw Jesus turn water into wine and save the bride and groom from the shame of being poor hosts to their community. Mary trusted Jesus to answer their need, even if she didn't know quite how he'd do it.

Today we're in a text that's usually reserved for Easter Sunday. We're there today because when Mary Magdalene found the empty tomb that early Sunday morning, and then the risen Jesus himself, she responded in ways that can instruct us in what it really means to be a Christian. Most of us are very familiar with her Easter profession of faith, "I have seen the Lord!"¹ But the preceding seventeen verses tell a story that we need to pay careful attention to if we hope to embrace the same kind of faith that Mary had.

Try to put yourself in Mary's place for a moment by imagining what witnessing a resurrection might look like today. Yes, I know that Jesus was buried in a cave or rock tomb with a stone rolled over the entrance, but these days, if there's not a cremation, we still dig rectangular holes in the ground and bury bodies in caskets. Imagine that three days after attending the funeral and graveside service of a close friend, you return to the cemetery, early in the morning, to place flowers on the grave. What would you think if you found an empty grave? Wouldn't you assume that some twisted person had dug up the casket and stolen it, body and all? Would you pull out your cell phone and dial 911?

Mary didn't have a cell phone, so she did the first century equivalent of calling 911- she ran to Peter and John, exclaiming, "They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"² Well, that's interesting. Did you happen to remember that Mary's first response to finding the empty tomb was not one of faith, but one of common doubt? Really, her response wasn't much different than ours might have been.

Like us, Mary would have remembered Jesus saying repeatedly to his followers some variation of the following: "[T]he Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and [he will] rise again on the third day."³ Since that was common knowledge, Timothy Keller wonders why Mary and the other disciples weren't camped out

¹ John 20:18, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² John 20:2, Ibid

³ Luke 24:7; Matthew 16:21, Ibid

in front of the tomb, eagerly anticipating that Jesus would walk out of the tomb on Easter morning.⁴ Incidentally, apparently that's a thing now- camping in abandoned cemeteries. Weird. Google it.

But getting back to Mary. Instead of looking for the risen Jesus, when Mary came to the empty tomb, it apparently didn't even occur to her that she was witnessing the fulfillment of exactly what Jesus had said would happen! Instead, she assumed the explainable- somebody moved the body.

How many of you know that in a crisis, our first responses tend to reveal what we really believe. The missing body was definitely a crisis for Mary, revealing just how incapable she was of accepting such a radical supernatural miracle as the resurrection of the dead, even though she herself must have heard all about the previous resurrection of Lazarus.

I wonder how often God does something miraculous in our midst that simply goes unnoticed by us because we're looking for something we can explain instead of a supernatural answer to prayer. The idea of resurrection is especially incomprehensible to us today; the stuff of science fiction zombie shows like *The Walking Dead*. Think about the last funeral you attended. When we're staring at a casket or cremation urn of a loved one, it can be a challenge to our understanding of how the world works to believe that their deaths are not the end of the story. But they're not.

It's common to hear people, even pastors, talk about resurrection as if it was only a metaphor. There are of course many ways in which God metaphorically raises us to new life every day, but that's not what happened on Easter morning. Jesus was raised into a new body. Where did we ever get the idea that resurrection means that we turn into ghostly, disembodied spirits that invisibly float off to heaven? Well, we probably got that idea from the ancient Greeks, who believed that the material world was evil and separate from the spiritual world. That's certainly neither a Jewish nor a Biblical idea. Jesus didn't leave his bones behind for 21st century archeologists to discover. Jesus was raised from the dead, completely, and given a new resurrection body. That means that we also will be raised from

⁴ Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 90. Penguin, 2013.

the dead, and given a new body, different and yet somehow still ours, made perfect through the powerful love of God.

But Mary, like each of us, was incapable of having real faith in Jesus without the help of Jesus himself, despite all the evidence that had piled up around her. Let's read about how that happened as we continue the account from the Gospel of John, beginning with verse 11.

{Read John 20:11-18 NLT}

Did you notice what it was that opened up Mary's eyes? It was when Jesus called her by name, simply saying "Mary!"⁵ Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name.⁶ That's exactly what Jesus did to Mary. He called her by name, and the relationship they had prior to the resurrection allowed her to hear his voice, believe, and finally see.

Mary's problem before that was the same problem some people still have today. As Timothy Keller observed, Mary "was looking for the wrong Jesus. For a dead Jesus. For a Jesus infinitely less great than he really is. So she would never have found him unless he sought her...Her faith comes by grace. She doesn't earn it."⁷

I believe that the same is true for each of us today. Our humanity limits our imagination of the divine, and so we really can't grasp the fullness of who Jesus is. All of us, in some way, are looking for the wrong Jesus. That's the bad news. But the good news is that Jesus is looking for us, relentlessly seeking to draw us close to him by his Holy Spirit. We don't have to find our faith on our own. Jesus wants to give us faith as a gift. Our saving faith comes through grace alone, just as it did for Mary.

Faith in Jesus is so much more than a baptism and confirmation certificate with an intellectual assent to the facts of the Gospels. As Timothy Keller wrote, "Real faith is always personal. If you only believe that Jesus died to forgive people in *general* for their sins- but you don't believe that Jesus died for you- you aren't taking hold of Jesus by faith. You haven't heard him call you by name."

What made Mary the first Christian is that she was the first person to believe that

⁵ John 20:16, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁶ John 10:1-16. Ibid

⁷ Timothy Keller. Encounters with Jesus, p. 98. Penguin, 2013.

Jesus was the Son of God who died for her on the cross and then rose in body and spirit three days later, defeating death once for all. She never would have gotten there in a classroom or a synagogue. Mary needed to hear Jesus call her name before her eyes were open to what she could not see apart from faith.

And then notice what Mary did next. She did what so many others do in the Scriptures after meeting Jesus. She did what Jesus told her to do, seeking out the others and making her dramatic confession of faith. “I have seen the Lord!” That, too, is what it means to be a Christian. We aren’t called by name to be a silent witness for Jesus. We’ve all seen these signs around the airports and schools, right? If you see something, say something. When we have a personal encounter with the living God, it’s almost impossible to not share it with someone else. I suspect that the real reason we don’t hear more people telling stories about meeting Jesus today is that, like Mary, we’re too focused on looking for the wrong Jesus, a smaller Jesus who more closely conforms to our limited expectations, and we’re missing the life-transforming encounter that would open our eyes.

I invite you to do an honest examination of your own faith this morning. You don’t have to share it with me or anyone else unless you want to. Are you looking for a Jesus who fits into your life, who follows your plans, who you can take out of a cupboard when it suits you and then put him away again until you need him? If you are, then you haven’t yet experienced the heart-racing, upside-down moment of meeting Jesus on his terms. That moment when you offer your heart and love to Jesus on bended knee, holding nothing back. That moment when the Spirit of God is burning so brightly in your heart that the only thing you really want to do is run to find the others to tell them what has happened.

I don’t know if you’ll ever see someone raised back to life during this lifetime. But I know that you can meet Jesus and experience the one who is life himself. As Timothy Keller notes, everyone seems to come to faith in their own way and in their own time.⁸ But nobody comes to faith without first surrendering to God’s initiative and allowing Jesus to show us what we cannot see.

Aren’t you tired of following a small Jesus? Take a moment now to ask God to speak

⁸ Ibid, pp 101-102.

your name and reveal Jesus more fully to you.



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