

72. Encounters with the Risen Christ

March 18, 2012

An empty tomb, still early in the morning. The sun was barely peeking out of the top of the Mount Olive. Mary Magdalene was hearing a few birds singing on the trees around her. "What is there to sing about? My Lord Jesus is dead and somebody took His body away and I cannot find Him," she mumbled under her breath.

She remembered the time when Jesus freed her from the living death of having seven demons. How was she tortured by those demons day after day, month after month, and year after year! Then this Savior came to her town and set her free from the bondage of the demons. They instantly obeyed His command and left her. Her life that once was filled with grief, anxiety, and torment, He filled it with joy and excitement of understanding of the Scripture. Whatever she had she didn't look back; she left her former life and followed her Savior.

But now her Savior was betrayed, brutalized, murdered, and entombed. He couldn't even rest in peace in the tomb. His body was missing. Two of His disciples came by the tomb, but they didn't know what to make out of it either.

She couldn't even have the comfort of tenderly anointing His body. She couldn't even say her final good-bye to Him. He was gone, desecrated and nowhere to be found, Jesus, though, was much nearer than she realized. And soon she would have greater comfort than she could ever imagine. And no more good-bye, ever.

Psalm 30:5b Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning.

For the rest of chapter 20, we are going to witness three encounters with the Risen Christ – the first one, Mary Magdalene on the first day, Sunday morning; the second, His disciples on the same day evening, minus Judas who betrayed Him and committed suicide by hanging, and Thomas; the third, Thomas eight days later.

A. MARY'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

John 20:11-18 But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. 13 Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." 14 Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" She, supposing Him to be the gardener, 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, "Rabboni!" (which is to say, Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her.

Mary's weeping was the loud lamentation so characteristic of Jewish people when they express their sorrow. There is certainly nothing wrong with sincere sorrow, because God made us to shed tears; and weeping is good therapy for broken hearts.

Please don't tell other Christians not to cry when they are sorrowful because they just lost someone they love. Do what this verse says:

Romans 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

But the sorrow of the Christian must be different from the hopeless sorrow of the unbelieving world, because we have been born-again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We do not weep because our believing loved ones have gone to heaven, rather because they have left us and we miss them.

Please note what she saw in v12 – two white-robed angels sitting at the head and foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. Mary didn't even notice that they were angels. Their position of either end of the place where Jesus' body had been lying makes us think of the cherubim on the Mercy Seat from the Book of Exodus. As if the Lord was saying, "There is now a new Mercy Seat! My Son has paid the price of sin and His blood was sprinkled on here. This is where I meet you."

Why did Mary not recognize Jesus in v15? First, she wasn't expecting Him to be alive and secondly, her eyes probably were filled up with tears so that she couldn't see Him well. But when she heard Him calling her own name just the way He used to, immediately she recognized His voice.

In two weeks, Karen and I will celebrate our 31st wedding anniversary. She has been putting up with me for all this time. Now that we've been together that long, I can even recognize her quiet coughing in a noise filled room like here before the service starts.

When Mary realized that it was the Lord Jesus, she had a death grip on Him and clung onto Him. She was not about to let Him go anywhere without her. This shows us a very important fact about the resurrected body of Jesus. It is a tangible actual glorified body, not a spirit like Jehovah's Witness' false doctrine about Jesus' resurrection.

Mary Magdalene called Him, "Rabboni!". 'Rabboni' is a Greek word which has an Aramaic origin. The title Rabboni is used in only one other place in the Gospels, Mark 10:51. "Rabbi" and "Rabboni" were equivalent terms of respect. In later years, the Jews recognized three levels of teachers: rab (the lowest), rabbi, and rabboni (the highest).

Some people insist that their KJV is the only anointed version and tend to use this particular verse to prove their point. Since KJV translated 'Rabboni' as "Master" while other versions "teacher", they argue that KJV is superior and the only version that Christians should read. To tell the truth, both translations are correct. However, the definition of 'Master' in KJV is a 'teacher', not necessarily 'owner'. Let me put it in this way. If you are taking a martial art class, the main instructor is known as your 'master' which means 'teacher.'

Jesus told her, "Do not cling to Me." It is not that He didn't want her to greet Him, but to tell her that she had an assignment to do – letting His disciples know about His resurrection and His message.

Did you notice the subtle shift in Jesus' choice of words in v17? In the Upper Room, He had called His disciples "His friends" in John 15:15. Now they are His brothers, sharing the same Father, becoming children of God. And this new relationship, made possible by Jesus' Resurrection, is available to all who believe in Him.

B. THE DISCIPLES' ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

John 20:19-25 Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to 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, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24 Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

The first day of the week which is Sunday. This is the reason Christian churches have their worship services on Sunday. The Seventh-Day Adventists insist that Christians should have service on Saturday since it is the Sabbath, the day of rest according to the OT law. If they want to follow the OT laws in strict sense, they also should follow everything from the OT law including strict diet laws and animal sacrifices, and including not traveling more than a mile on the day of Sabbath. They pick and choose.

The Sabbath was over when Jesus arose from the dead. There is no evidence in Scripture that God ever gave the original Sabbath command to the Gentiles, or that it was repeated for the church to obey. Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the church epistles in the NT, but the Sabbath commandment is not repeated.

Just a side note: God the Father worked for six days and then rested. God the Son suffered on the cross for six hours and then rested.

Some Christians or self-appointed Christians who choose not to attend church services use a common excuse: "I don't have to go to church to worship God." They are absolutely correct, but at the same time they are not obedient to the Lord for what He said through the author who wrote the Book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 10:25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Put yourself in the disciples' sandals. The room is dark. With only a flickering oil lamp makes the disciples' shadows dance upon the walls which give them more eerie feeling in their stomachs. With windows shut and door barred, the disciples huddled together, afraid of what might happen to them in the near future. Then out of the blue, Jesus, their very dead Lord and Master stands in the middle of the room. If you were them, would you be scared? I would be. I would be screaming like a little girl. I am sure that there would be mixed emotions – joy and fear all rolled into one.

How did our Lord transform His disciples' fear into courage? For one thing, He came to them. Second, His first word to them was the traditional Jewish greeting, "Shalom-peace!" He could have rebuked them for their unfaithfulness and cowardice the previous weekend, but He did not. Mankind declared war against God, yet He gives peace to those who believe in Him.

V21 was the formal ordination of a church order for the task of world evangelism. It is not a duty, rather it is a tremendous privilege and a great responsibility for everyone, not just a few.

The Lord Jesus just gave them a command to evangelize the world. Someone might say, "You mean that God is willing to risk His name on these 11 disheartened disciples to evangelize the whole world?" Yes, He was and look what these disciples of Jesus did to the whole world. We should not think that God would not care enough to equip us properly to do the work He wants us to do. Where God guides, God equips, ALWAYS. He is NOT looking for someone with all the right human credentials, rather He is looking for someone who is available to the Lord. He will do the rest.

In v22, these disciples finally received the Holy Spirit into their hearts because they believed in Jesus. See this, ladies and gentlemen? With the Holy Spirit in them, there is nothing they could not do.

Mark 10:27 But Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible."

In v23, we have a rather controversial verse. Does this verse mean that we or a special spiritual elite group of people can go around and tell people, "Oh yes, you are forgiven. But I don't like you, so your sins are not forgiven." No, it is one of those verses that lost in translation.

Here is a literal Greek translation of v23:

"Those whose sins you forgive have already been forgiven; those whose sins you do not forgive have not been forgiven."

In other words, God does not forgive men's sins because we decide to do so nor withhold forgiveness because we will not grant it. We simply announce it; we do not create it. This is the essence of salvation. And all who proclaim the Gospel are in effect forgiving or not forgiving sins, depending on whether the hearer accepts or rejects the Lord Jesus as the Sin-Bearer.

Mark 2:7b Who can forgive sins but God alone?

The answer is "No one." The Roman Catholic Church has insisted that the apostles were here and they were given the right of absolution – the right to forgive sins. And that in the papal succession, Peter being the first Pope – so they say – and all the Popes after that also have the right of absolution of sins, that the Pope can forgive sins. A wrong doctrine.

C. THOMAS' ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

John 20:26-31 And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" 27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." 28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." 30 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

We are not going to venture to guess why Thomas was not with his buddies. He could have been in Sam Levitz Furniture Store for their Easter Furniture Sale. Who knows? Since Thomas made a comment like that in his unbelief, Jesus came to his faith level to help him believe. As I said it before, the Lord will help us with our honest doubt and unbelief, but He will not accept any cynical skepticism.

Thomas is a good warning to all of us not to miss worship service on the Lord's Day. Because Thomas was not there, he missed seeing Jesus Christ, hearing His words of peace, and receiving His commission and gift of spiritual life. He had to endure a week of fear and unbelief when he could have been experiencing joy and peace. Remember Thomas when you are tempted to stay home from church. You don't come here to be in a social scene or to do your religious duty, but to hear from God. You never know what special blessing you might miss!

In v28, Thomas' response shows what we are supposed to say to the Lord Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" This takes us to the climatic words of John's Gospel in v31 – *"that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."*

D. APPLICATIONS

1) It is good to have faith that is based on solid evidence, but the evidence should lead us to the Word, and the Word should lead us to the Savior.

It is one thing to accept a doctrine and defend it; it is something else to have a personal relationship to the living Lord. The key is faith in the Word of God.

2) Where God guides, God equips.