

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part seventy-one

Sunday, March 1st, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

Teaching #1787 - Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church

THE VERY FIRST RECORDED BELIEVER IN THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

John 20:1-18 - "Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. [2] So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." [3] So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. [4] Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. [5] And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. [6] Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, [7] and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. [8] Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; [9] for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. [10] Then the disciples went back to their homes. [11] But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. [12] And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. [13] They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." [14] Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. [15] Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she 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 in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). [17] Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" [18] Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her."

Here are the tough questions this text raises:

First, as John records some of his autobiographical details in the third person, he tells us the "*other disciple*" (John himself) ran into the grave and became a *believer* (8). And in the very next verse (9) he labors to tell us these disciples hadn't a clue about the resurrection of Jesus from the Scriptures. So here we have a believer who hasn't the foggiest idea about the Scriptural teaching of the resurrection.

Second, Mary initially has no idea who Jesus is. And the explanation that it was the sound of Jesus' voice that caused her to identify Him falls flat because Jesus spoke *nine* words to her before she concluded He was a gardener (15).

Third, Jesus tells Mary not to "*cling*" to Him (17) because He had not yet ascended to the Father. Was He ascending to the Father right away? Did He ascend *twice* - once secretly between His resurrection and His appearance to His disciples, and then again as these same disciples *watched* Him ascend into the clouds? What did He mean when He told Mary, "*...Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father....I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God*" (17).

Aside from questions, today's text has vivid high points as well. We read of the very first believer in the resurrection of Jesus from the grave. Notice I said the first believer *in the resurrection of Jesus*. Certainly there were believers *in Jesus* before this. But there was never a *believer in the risen Christ* before this moment. The floodgates for billions of others open in today's text. The world changes right here.

1) **THERE'S A REASON JOHN OPENS HIS ACCOUNT WITH THE DISTURBING REPORT OF MARY AT THE EMPTY TOMB**

John 20:1-7 - "Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. [2] So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." [3] So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. [4] Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. [5] And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. [6] Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, [7] and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself."

The important point is found in Mary's complaint to Peter and John - **John 20:2b** - "*....They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.*" Mary wasn't looking for a risen Lord. She was looking for a corpse. And the reason her sorrow-filled words matter is they tell us a great deal about the *nature* of the resurrection these followers are about to discover.

John wants to make it abundantly clear that long before these people *saw* their resurrected Lord they *saw* His body was missing. In other words, these soon-to-be proclaimers of a risen Jesus didn't just *imagine* they saw something a lot *like* the body of their Lord. And they weren't just victims of some kind of wish fulfillment or mass hysteria. If these followers of Jesus hadn't actually seen the same *body* of Jesus that was laid in the tomb there would be no reason for that tomb to be empty when Mary arrived that morning.

John's point? The resurrected body *everyone would soon see* was the *same* body *no one could find* earlier anywhere else. If what people saw was only Jesus' risen *spirit* His *body* would have still been in the tomb and we would never read this account of Mary's dismay that someone had *removed* her Lord's body from the grave.

2) **THE APOSTLE JOHN IS DESCRIBED AS THE FIRST BELIEVER IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD**

John 20:6-10 - "Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, [7] and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. [8]

Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; [9] for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. [10] Then the disciples went back to their homes."

Two things stand out in these verses:

First, we're struck with the simplicity with which John describes the greatest discovery in the history of the world - **"...he saw and believed"** (9). No adjectives or adverbs. No piling up of exclamation points. One might have expected John to bubble over with the sheer emotion of discovering, yes, Jesus was, in fact, the conqueror of death, that nothing in the whole world would ever be the same, that there was nothing left to ultimately fear, that this **"King of the Jews"** really was a living King and God over all.

Nope. He saw and believed. And the reason, I suppose, for such restricted prose is this is John's way of telling us his belief, while emotionally explosive in its consequences, was **simple in nature**. It was **reasonable** and **within reach** of all who would simply **see** what he **saw** without prejudice.

The resurrection of Jesus is the only standing answer to the tough finality of death. **Pico Iyer's article in Time Magazine**, lays the issue of death on the line: **"One reason why we cannot seem to learn to die, of course, is that death is the one great adventure of which there are no surviving accounts; death, by definition, is what happens to somebody else. Empiricism falters before death. Yet death is more certain than love and more reliable than health."**

The Apostle John would disagree. John says his belief was fanned to life because there **was** a **"surviving account"** of death. The evidence was for the beholding. Stone rolled away. Body gone. Grave clothes left. Separate head cloth folded and set aside. John does the math and invites all doubters to do the same.

I said there were **two** striking features in these verses. The first was the **striking simplicity** of John's testimony. He **saw** and **believed**. The **second** is the way John immediately seems to back-peddle, almost taking away from the nature of his own belief - **John 20:9** - **"...for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead."**

Note. This admission comes **after** John describes himself as a **believer** in the resurrection. Belief is born in the absence of religious indoctrination. I believe this is John's way of stating the **fact** of the resurrection can stand on its own even before the Scriptural **meaning** of the resurrection is fully appreciated. This is the **bare evidence** removed from any religious packaging or dogma.

In other words, contrary to what many more liberal religious scholars suppose, John makes clear his faith wasn't something **read back into the events**. It wasn't that John knew he was **supposed** to believe in a resurrection of some sort, so he **did**. No. It was the other way around.

Certainly the full light of the Scriptures **predict** and **explain** the saving, life-giving significance of that body of Jesus turning death around and coming out of the grave. But the resurrection itself - the actual event - stands up alone. It isn't the private domain of the religious or the bleary-eyed mystic.

Religious people have the reputation of putting faith in things they know can't possibly be factually true. That's why we're known by our unbelieving culture as those rather quaint **"people of faith"** rather than **"people of truth."** And John reminds us such was not the case for himself. His belief rose first of all from **evidence**, not **religion**. The truth of the risen Christ is for all who will simply see the evidence.

3) MARY DOES NOT RECOGNIZE JESUS - AND THIS ISN'T THE ONLY TIME THIS HAPPENED

John 20:11-16 - **"But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. [12] And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. [13] They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." [14] Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. [15] Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she 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 in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher)."**

You could fill Lake Ontario with all the explanations for Mary's initial ignorance of Jesus identity. It was dark (Was it **that** much lighter after Jesus' nine word questions?) - Mary was crying (I've cried, but I could still recognize my wife and family) - It was Jesus **voice** that Mary recognized (Certainly not at first. He spoke nine words to Mary and she still took Him to be a gardener). These all seem to be buckets with more holes than tin.

Add to this the fact that the resurrected Jesus seemed to have **repeated** issues with being quickly identified. You find the same situation with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (**Luke 24**), where the text actually **says** what I think may have been the case in other situations - that **"their eyes were kept from recognizing"** Jesus (**Luke 24:16**). This happens yet again with the disciples and their miraculous catch of fish, not recognizing the resurrected Jesus on the shore (**John 21**). And, of course, the same thing happens in our text with Mary at the empty tomb.

So what is going on? Were they **all** crying? Was it **always** dark? The two on the way to Emmaus were continually chattering with Jesus, hearing His voice, and chewing Him out for His ignorance of current events in Jerusalem.

My own opinion - and it's not a provable one, by any means - is there is always an **identity bridge** - a gap of some unexplainable kind - between that which is **risen** and that which **isn't yet** risen. And, as far as all of the above accounts indicate, the bridge is only crossed at the initiation of the risen party - Jesus Christ, so far, being the only one.

In other words, Jesus *reveals* Himself to Mary. He *reveals* Himself to the disciples as they pause their Emmaus trek and break bread with Jesus. He *reveals* Himself to the disciples on the beach. It happens in different small ways, to be sure, but there is always a trigger - some small event - something said or done by Jesus, that pulls back the curtain.

Please don't let this trouble you. This has nothing whatsoever to do with you and I knowing each other in heaven. There will be no *identity gap* because we will *both* be in resurrected bodies. And this has nothing to do with Jesus and Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration and the ability for them to be known and recognized. There too, there is no *identify gap* because *none* of those had resurrected bodies. Nor did the disciples observing it.

I'm only talking about that brief, unrepeatable window of time when we had - praise God - a solidly resurrected body meeting and talking and eating and walking with non-resurrected people like us. There is a glorious, unexplainable brilliance to resurrected life. It's *like*, but not in any way *the same*, as our frail existence now. One day we will all share in it.

4) **MARY HUGGED JESUS AND JESUS ASKED HER TO STOP - WHY?**

John 20:17-18 - "Jesus said to her, **"Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"**[18] Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her."

There is much depth in these verses. On the surface of things one can hardly blame Mary - or the disciples in a short time - for the exhilaration they feel. Jesus was *dead*. For *sure* dead. *Buried* in fact. And is now alive and with them again. You can feel the earth tilt slightly on its axis.

And one can hardly blame Mary or any of Jesus' disciples for thinking the resurrection was the end of the battle. Jesus won. And now His work was finished.

But it wasn't. Jesus never died to rise from the grave and then live and rule on the earth from A.D. 33 onward. He died and rose in order to ascend. He died and rose to link all believers to the Father through the ascended, right hand of the Father, intercessory ministry of our high priest.

In other words, Jesus never rose from the grave to establish earthly physical contact with Mary. And she must not mistake Jesus *partly* finished redemptive work for His *completely* finished work. Jesus will come again *physically* (as much as that term can be applied to His resurrection body), but not until the gospel has been taken into the whole world and He comes again.

Jesus tells Mary she has to let go. He's not staying - not the way she thinks as she tightens her embrace. And what you're seeing in Jesus' words to Mary is the preparation of Jesus divine love for that time when all the disciples will see Him go back to the Father. He has to leave. He's building that understanding right away - right in the middle of the excitement of His freshly welcomed resurrected body. There is more of God's plan yet to be completed. And the resurrection of Jesus is the proof it is unstopable.

5) **JESUS' CAREFULLY CHOSEN WORDS AS HE WELCOMES HIS BROTHERS INTO THE FAMILY OF GOD**

John 20:17 - "Jesus said to her, **"Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."**"

It was only earlier this same week-end Jesus surprised His disciples by telling them He was calling them *"friends"* rather than *"servants"* (John 15:15). Now the completed work of the cross is already unleashing deeper kingdom realities. In the same way the Apostle John would be identified as a son of Jesus' mother, these disciples are now called *"brothers"* rather than just *"friends."* The cross starts to scoop up the family of God through the work of Christ.

And then come words, not of *assimilation*, but of *distinction* - ***"I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"*** (17). Outside of the Lord's prayer Jesus never once refers to *our* Father. Not in conversation with anyone.

This is what the cults always mix and blur, and Jesus will have none of it. It's not for lack of love, but for our eternal safety that Jesus constantly reminds us all that *we* are children by *adoption* through *grace*. He alone is Father God's *eternal Son*. And in that truth lies our deepest security and fullest joy.

Thomas - God bless him - good old *doubting* Thomas - he will get it right in just a few hours - ***"My Lord, and my God!"***