

Encounter with the Risen Lord

Sermon · Not stated

Last Sunday we commemorated the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The message Mary Magdalene carried to the disciples of Jesus set in motion the Christian movement which has forever changed how the world understands God; a God whom people could never comprehend, a God who was considered unseen and mysterious, has on that day become the risen Lord, the living God. We will today meditate on the theme “Encounter with the Risen Lord.”

While the Gospel passage for today narrates the encounter of Thomas with the Risen Lord, and the passage from Acts speaks of Saul’s conversion, I would like to back up a bit to the Saturday that came in between the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I have always been amazed at how fast life can change. Things are one way one day, and the next day they are totally different. That is precisely what happened when Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Lord.

When the body of Jesus was placed in the tomb on that fateful Friday, that was a dark and terrible day. As the sun went down that night, so did the hopes and dreams of all the Lord’s disciples and followers. They had believed that He was the Messiah; that He was the One Who was going to fulfil all the ancient prophecies; that He was the One Who would be the King of Israel; and that He would establish God’s kingdom on the earth. All their hopes for life and eternity were bound up in what they believed about Jesus. The huge stone that was rolled in to seal the tomb of Jesus seemed to mock at them, saying, “It’s all over! Hope is gone! There is no future! There is no salvation! There is no King, there is no kingdom! Jesus is dead!” Faith turned into grief, and grief into utter hopelessness.

They spent a harrowing Saturday in fear, despair, hopelessness, and downright uncertainty. When the Sabbath ended, on Saturday, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went into town and purchased “sweet spices” to “anoint” the body of Jesus (Mark 16:1), as one final act of love and service to the Lord. For them, it was a way to find closure concerning His death. On Sunday morning, early, broken-hearted, filled with sorrow, grief, and fear, they made that two-mile trip from Bethany to the tomb just outside the city of Jerusalem. And these women were not going there looking for a living Lord; they were looking for a cold and perhaps already decomposing corpse. Do you know what their problem was? Their problem was that they were still living in Saturday!

Mary Magdalene was blessed with the very first encounter with the risen Jesus, and she was entrusted with the task of carrying the message of the empty tomb to others. This message of the risen Lord rolled away the stone from the hearts of those grief-stricken women. That encounter brought them out of the gloom of defeat into the glory of life; it changed their lives and replaced their sorrow with an overwhelming sense of the power of God. They knew that they were now a part of a great miracle, and they ran to tell others about their risen Lord! It can do the same for you and me, if only we allow God to roll the stone away from our hearts. That new life is a life of Christ living in each of us. It is a life that is no longer satisfied with Saturdays. Jesus has the power to deliver us from the Saturday of our death. He has the power to allow us to live in the Sunday of His victory!

In Hebrews 11:1, we read, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” If grief and hopelessness were the problem with Mary Magdalene and others, it looks like faith was the problem with Thomas. When the other disciples informed him about the visitation of the risen Jesus, he said to them, “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25).

We know that this assertion earned him the name “Doubting Thomas.” We don’t know a great deal about Thomas, but it does seem that he was a natural pessimist. The disciples heard the doubt expressed by Thomas, but there was an unseen listener as well. That is something we all need to remember. The risen but unseen Christ witnessed his dogmatic statement of doubt, just as Jesus knows ours, whether spoken or only in thought. While we do not have the right to make outrageous demands on God to help us in our unbelief, there is no doubt that He does understand and care, especially if we are truly honest in our search for truth, like Thomas was.

I wonder how Thomas felt when Jesus turned to him. Was he in for a severe scolding for his sheer unbelief? Our Saviour does not treat an honest seeker like that. When Isaiah spoke of the coming Servant of the Lord, the Messiah, he said, "A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench" (Isaiah 42:3). How true! Jesus does not want to reject anyone who seeks Him; He comes to restore and strengthen. Thomas had a negative characteristic of doubt, but he also had a positive side. He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. There is an engaging honesty about him. When Jesus said to him, "Be not faithless, but believing" (John 20:27), He was preparing His disciples, and all who would live in the years to follow, for the truth that very soon He would no longer be visible to human eyes. There was nothing wrong with the words that Thomas used, but there was something lacking in the way he reached his faith.

The story of Thomas gives hope to doubters, if only they are willing to make the leap of faith in Jesus. The word of Jesus to us today is the same as it was to Thomas: "blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29). May we do that, and be able to say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

We now move to the narrative of the third encounter with the risen, but now unseen, Jesus, as read to us from Acts 9:1-18. God has a plan for even the worst kind of people doing the worst kind of things. This plan reveals that God had the Gentiles on His mind, and He was going to send a special man to reach them with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The man, then known as Saul, was one of the most unlikely candidates to preach salvation. He was a murderer, an enemy of the Church, and a violent man whom God wanted to use in an amazing manner. According to Acts 8:1, Saul consented to the stoning of Stephen. He was on a sinful mission to harm God's Church, determined to wipe out the Gospel from the face of the earth.

Jesus literally stops Saul through divine intervention. Jesus stops Saul when He is ready to save him; Jesus stops Saul when the time is right; Jesus stops Saul when He is ready to use him for His glory; Jesus stops Saul and reveals who He is to him. Let us pray that Jesus does that to us today. I very much doubt if anyone prayed that Saul might be saved. I can believe they might have prayed that Saul might be stopped by some divine act. I can believe that some would have prayed for the protection of the Church in Damascus and for the safety of individual believers. No one, it would seem, was even thinking of what God was about to do and how mysterious His actions could be.

What a shock Saul's conversion must have been to those who were keeping track of him! To the Church, Saul turned out to be a friend, a fellow believer, in fact a flaming evangelist, who proclaimed Christ more clearly and powerfully than anyone had done. The Church did not shrink or suffer for Saul's arrival, but it grew because of him. When Saul became Paul, he did not for a moment forget his past atrocities. On various occasions in his epistles, he made either direct or indirect references to his former life of opposition and his radical conversion. Paul's theology, his lifestyle, his ministry, and his methodology all are rooted in his conversion, as he encountered the risen Jesus Christ on the road. The great light of Jesus that fell on Saul made him Paul, who himself became a light to the Gentiles and Jews alike. The lesson for us, my friends, is that we have no right to judge anyone, nor should we condemn ourselves, however great our sins may be, because Jesus can use us if He chooses to. We just have to have faith and trust in Him.

Omnipresent God, who encounters people in their journey of life; as You have met Jacob and Paul on their way, meet us when we move against Your will; touch us when we wrestle with You; rename us to proclaim Your transforming presence in our lives; awaken our spirits to affirm and witness unto You; and transform us to move across the human-made boundaries that divide people, that we may be forerunners of peace and reconciliation. In the name of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen.