



Sermon

Witnesses of the Resurrected Christ: Healing the Lie-Bound Soul

John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-20; Revelation 5:11-14

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Easter Season

We are in the Church season of Easter, a period of 50 days from Easter to Pentecost. During the Easter season, the Church colour is white signifying the glory and holiness of Christ. You might notice that there is a certain symmetry around Easter. First we have Lent - a forty day fast. But have you realised that it is forty-six days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday? Why is that? The answer is that Sundays are never fast days, so if you subtract the six Sundays in Lent you have forty fast days. After Easter, the Easter season runs for forty days to Ascension when we celebrate Christ ascending to the Father's side and a further ten days to Pentecost and the close of the Easter season.

Broadly speaking the questions being answered in today's readings are still our questions today:

1. Did the resurrection of Jesus really happen?
2. Will God forgive me and restore me to divine communion, even when I have denied my Lord and let him down badly and repeatedly or even actively opposed him?
3. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Witnesses

From the gospels and Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 15, we can build a list of appearances of the Risen Christ:

- The women at the tomb,
- Mary Magdalene,
- Peter later that day,
- Cleopas and another disciple,
- Upper Room on the day of the Resurrection,
- Upper Room a week later when Thomas believed,
- Seven disciples on the Lake,
- To the disciples on a mountain in Galilee recorded by Matthew,
- Before 500 at one time,
- To James the brother of Jesus,
- To the disciples on the Mount of Olives,
- To Paul on the road to Damascus.

Dr William Hendriksen wrote, "We are not dealing here with a universe of unreality, with a phantom, hallucination, subjective visions or dreams. On the contrary, it is the Lord himself in person who manifests himself." ¹

¹ Hendriksen W., 1954, "New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of John", The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, p478 (Original emphasis).

On Easter Sunday, we heard the account of Cleopas and his companion walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus in grief but being encountered by the risen Christ who walked and talked with them on the journey before revealing himself to them as he broke the bread for the evening meal.

Last Sunday, we heard how he appeared in the Upper Room shocking his disciples but proving he was not a ghost by having them touch his hands and his feet and by eating food before them. But Thomas was absent and refused to believe. A week later, they were all assembled there again this time with Thomas when Jesus came there again. He knew what Thomas had been saying and quoted it back to him as he urged him to put his finger into his wounds and see that he was alive, real and physical. We can be sure that the Lord knows our words and our actions. More than that, the Bible tells us he knows our thoughts.

Today we have heard three accounts of meeting the risen Lord Jesus. Witnesses are important. How else can we know about any historical event? Someone who was present has to tell us about it or record it for us. Luke tells us that the risen Jesus said to his disciples about his resurrection, "You are witnesses to these things."² In Chronological order they are:

1. Peter and the other six disciples fishing on the lake.
2. Saul encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus.
3. The revelation of Jesus to John on the Island of Patmos.

1. The Disciples on the Lake

On the day of the Resurrection, the angel told the women to tell the disciples that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. In today's gospel reading at some time over a week later, they have gone back to Galilee and are by the Lake on the northern shore. Peter has led these seven with him to go fishing - his trade.

John makes it clear that he was present - this is an eyewitness account. In terms of evidence of the resurrection of Jesus, it is one of the more comprehensive descriptions of an encounter with the risen Christ.

There are seven people together who all experience it. It is sustained over a period of time. They are given an instruction which they obey to good effect. They recognise Jesus. He has food prepared for them which he gives to them to eat. In front of them all, he talks to Peter about his denial of him and reinstates him in leadership. The conversation also involves John who is standing close by. It is followed by John's assertion that he is the eye-witness and this is reliable testimony.

2. Saul on the Road to Damascus

Saul encountered Jesus on his way to persecute the Christians in Damascus. This was not someone expecting or biased towards such an event. On the contrary, he was rabidly against this new movement and believed it had to be stamped out. We heard it told in Acts 9, but his testimony is repeated in Acts 22 and 26. Let's hear it again from Acts 26:

Acts 26:13-16 ... I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. 14 We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' "'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 16 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.'

Those with him, heard a sound but did not see anything. Lest you want to reduce this to a mere impression, you should realise that Paul himself rates this appearance of Christ as significant the appearances of Jesus in the Upper Room and at the Ascension. His companions did not see Christ but what Saul saw was a light brighter than the sun blazing around him and his companions. This was not imagination - it was life-changing. In this encounter Jesus spoke clearly, intelligibly and authoritatively to him. It was transformative - could there be a greater change than from persecutor to preacher of Christ in the synagogue three days later?

3. The Revelation to John on Patmos

Again, we may be inclined to dismiss the reading from Revelation as a vision and quite separate from to physical appearance by the lake. But if we go back to Chapter one of Revelation, we find John encountering the glorified Christ. Who speaks to him and gives him a message. Then in chapter four, he is invited through a door into a heavenly realm and he recorded what he saw there.

² Luke 24:48

So John has a meeting with Christ in his majesty. He then sees in Chapter 5, our reading, the worship of Christ by angels. Here we have the uttermost heights of the angelic host and all creation giving worship to the Lamb of God, Jesus. They say, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"

So we are given today, three testimonies of meeting Jesus after the crucifixion, in his resurrection body. He knows our thoughts and actions, he is concerned for his people and his Church on earth and he is glorified and worshipped by the highest angelic beings in heaven.

In answer to our first question, "Did the resurrection of Jesus really happen?," St John and St Luke answer, "Yes, Yes and Yes!"

Restoration of Peter

I would like to turn now to the content of this account from John's gospel about the restoration of Peter. After the Last Supper at Gethsemane, in John 13, Peter had strongly asserted that he would be ready to die for Jesus. In Matthew's account, he compared himself favourably with the other disciples saying that even if they fell away he would not. Jesus warned him that he would deny him three times before the cock crowed. And so it happened. Peter was terrified of being caught up with Jesus in the persecution and swore that he did not know Jesus. When the cock crowed, Jesus looked at Peter, who went out weeping bitterly.

There are two stages to this reinstatement of Peter, which shows something of the deliberate care the Lord has for us.

First of all there was the great catch of fish.

It is an obvious replay of the former event recorded in Luke 5. It was the beginning of Jesus' ministry and Peter and Andrew had fished all night without a catch. Jesus told Peter to push out to the deep water and let the nets down again. This was against expectation they caught a great catch such that the nets were breaking. In response, Peter knelt before Jesus and confessed he was a sinful man. Jesus said, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." ³

Now Peter is broken and ashamed and Jesus sets up a repeat. Once again they have fished all night without success. Again, Jesus tells them to cast the net when it makes no sense to a fisherman. Again there is a great catch of fish. Then there is the call to a role - now to be a shepherd.

Surely, Jesus is saying to Peter, I called you before and that calling is permanent. I am still calling you to follow me.

This great catch after their failure also illustrates for us the truth Jesus stated in John 15:5, "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." We would do well to remember that: "Without me you can do nothing!"

The second part of the process is to undo the three-fold denial.

Peter had been by a charcoal fire when three times he denied that he knew or followed Jesus. Now by a charcoal fire, three times Jesus asks him if he loves him. Three times Peter responds that he does. Each time he is affirmed with a responsibility.

This is a good psychological healing practice. It is the basis of prayer for healing people's memories of lies or traumas. There is exposure to the circumstances again either in reality or imagination, then the truth is spoken to replace the lie.

People often end up believing lies about themselves. It may be things said by another about us; it may be wrong beliefs about ourselves that we have taken to heart. Sometimes we need to allow Jesus to speak the truth to that deep part of our thinking and believing.

I remember someone in England who had claustrophobia. It restricted her life. She knew the root of it - she had been buried in a big pile of grass clippings and taunted when she was pre-schooler and even as an adult in her seventies, the smell of new mown grass or confined spaces terrified her. We asked her to recall the event as best she could and then asked Jesus to make his love known to her. She started to cry, then shortly she started to smile and was beaming. She explained she had seen a great golden light and had a wonderful sense of being loved. The result was she no longer had that fear of confined spaces.

³ Luke 5:10

For Peter, there was a profound change. He had asserted he would die for Jesus but when it came to the test, he denied Jesus. Yet this passage ends with Jesus telling Peter that in the future he would die for him by crucifixion. And indeed the historians Eusebius and Tertullian both record that is what happened.

Dr Henriksen paraphrases Jesus as saying:

Simon, you were weak like a lamb, wandering like a sheep, yet, through it all, you, like a dear little sheep were the object of my tender and loving solicitude. Now having profited by your experiences (because of your sincere sorrow), consider the members of my Church to be your lambs, and feed them; your sheep and shepherd them; yes, your dear sheep and in feeding them, love them. Do not neglect the work among the flock, Simon. That is your real assignment. Go back to it! ⁴

The point of this interaction between Jesus and Peter is found in the final words of our reading: "Follow me!" That was what Jesus said to Peter when they first met, now it is repeated. After all he has been through, in spite of his crisis of faith, the call remains, "Follow me!"

For us too:

1. We can be reassured that in spite of our failures in following the Lord, he is merciful to forgive and reinstate us. We should not presume on that, but we can return to him with confidence should we have failed him. Take courage - he is for you not against you. When we come to him in repentance and trust him, he is quick to forgive and reinstate us into relationship.
2. Just as he healed Peter from the crippling lie, "I do not know him" and the likely shame-based lie of being a reject, so he can heal us from lies that blight our lives.

Bruce Milne wrote in the IVP commentary on John:

... no matter how desperate our failure, or how deep-seated our shame, he can forgive and renew us and then use us in his service. Failure is never final with God. [To quote Rita Snowden:] 'You ask me what forgiveness means; it is the wonder of being trusted again by God in the place where I disgraced him.' ⁵

We started with three questions:

1. Did the resurrection of Jesus really happen? John and Luke answer, "Yes!"
2. Will God forgive me and restore me to divine communion, even when I have denied my Lord and let him down badly and repeatedly or even actively opposed him? They answer, "Yes!"
3. What does it mean to follow Jesus? They both answer, "To follow Jesus wherever he leads them, whether to peaceful death in old age or to martyrdom."

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⁴ Hendriksen, p489

⁵ Milne B., 1993, "BST: The Message of John", IVP, Leicester, p317