

ON THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN

© Christ Community Church, Larry Kirk

Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

One of the many interesting things about the Easter message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the fact that today we actually don't know where the tomb is. There are a couple of good possibilities, but we do not know for sure where the tomb of Jesus is.

It's natural for people to venerate the tombs of great leaders. In Islam, for example, it is known where Mohammed is buried. Yet there is no historical evidence that Christians ever treated the tomb of Jesus Christ as special. Now-a-days people go to Israel and are shown some possible locations, but there is no certainty because no one kept track of it. One reason is that the early Christians didn't make much of a big deal about the tomb. You don't read about it in the book of Acts or the New Testament letters. You don't have any evidence of the early Christians going there to worship. That's odd. Why is that?

You may remember my telling you once about a pastor friend who was talking to a lady in his church about this. She said, "You know, you can save your baby's booties and put them in a drawer. But as long as you still have the baby, the booties don't mean that much. It's only when you lose the baby—when the baby grows up to be a big teenager--that you get the baby booties out and cry over them. When you have the baby, the booties aren't so important. But if you lose the baby and all you have are the booties, then the booties mean everything. They help you remember, and you cherish them."

Here's the point: The early Christians had Jesus. They didn't care about the tomb because they had Him. You can have Him, too. Not just His memory but Him, His real presence, in your life today. That's the lesson that Mary learned on the first Easter morning.

John 20 tells the story of how Mary met the risen Christ and renewed a relationship she thought she had lost forever. What it shows us clearly is that the resurrection of Jesus offers us not just the proof of His lordship but the reality of His presence. That's what you need in your life. That's what I need in my life.

What Jesus Christ wants us to know is that we were never meant to live this life alone. Christ died for our sins and rose again to redeem and reconcile us to Himself so that we can live our life in a new relationship with Him. Of course, first of all . . .

We Need to Understand the Reality of the Resurrection of Jesus

The Bible is not saying that in some mystical, metaphorical, or emotional sense Christ lives on in the hearts of those who treasure His teachings. It is saying that Jesus Christ, having died for our sins, literally came to life again. Four important points underscore this.

Jesus Really Died and Was Buried

It's clear from the story of the crucifixion that Jesus had unquestionably died. He did not just faint and then revive. The soldiers were professionals. One of them plunged his spear into Jesus' side. They wouldn't have marched back to the barracks without making sure He was dead. They knew how to do that.

On Sunday Morning the Tomb Was Empty

Mary wasn't expecting a resurrection. In verse 2 she says: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" That was her first thought.

It Became Clear That the Enemies of Jesus Didn't Have the Body

If the enemies of Christ could have produced His dead body, then later, when the disciples began to preach that Jesus had risen from the dead and thousands believed in Him, they would have brought out the body and ended the whole matter. They didn't because they couldn't.

The Disciples Didn't Have the Body

People might suffer for what they wrongly believe to be true but not for what they know to be a hoax. Tradition says Peter was crucified upside down. Paul was beheaded. The disciples all suffered, and they also saw their friends and loved ones suffer for their faith. They *knew* the tomb was empty. But . . .

The Tomb Was Not Completely Empty

It was empty in the sense that the body of Jesus was not there, but John 20:6-8 tells us that when Peter went into the tomb, "he saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed."

What did John see that made him believe? Jesus had been wrapped in linen strips with seventy-five pounds of spices placed between the strips to preserve His body. A separate burial cloth had then been wrapped around His head. But there in the tomb the burial cloths were lying undisturbed. It was as if the body had simply disappeared, or passed right through them. No one had stolen the body. They couldn't have left the grave clothes lying this way, and they wouldn't have. Jesus had not struggled to free Himself. That's why John looked and believed.

The fourth point that underscores the reality of the resurrection is simply the fact that the empty tomb was just the beginning of the unfolding evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

The Empty Tomb Was Not the End of the Story but the Beginning

What follows in the gospel of John as well as in other Scriptures is that Jesus began to present Himself alive from the dead to numbers of individuals and groups who become eyewitnesses to the reality of His resurrection.

The number and variety of people, and the different circumstances in which Jesus appeared, add weight to their testimony. Some of those who saw the risen Christ were at first hostile, such as the apostle Paul. Others were very skeptical, such as Thomas (often called "doubting Thomas"). In addition, these eyewitnesses testified that Jesus didn't just fleetingly appear to them. He spoke with them, ate with them, invited them to touch Him, and spent time with whole groups of them. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul wrote of hundreds of eyewitnesses who were still alive and around. When the apostles wrote about the Resurrection, there were scores of living eyewitnesses who gave convincing testimony backed up with tremendous commitment to Christ and His cause, even to the point of death.

In his book *The Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel quotes a professor of philosophy who makes this point memorably:

Now, if you were a Martian looking down on the first century, would you think Christianity or the Roman Empire would survive? You probably wouldn't put money on a ragtag group of people whose primary message is that a crucified carpenter from an obscure village had triumphed over

the grave. Yet it was so successful that today we name our children Peter and Paul, and our dogs Caesar and Nero. (p. 254)

The reason the gospel spread from a small group of Jewish fishermen, a tax collector, and an ex-rabbi is because they gave convincing, eye-witness testimony that something powerfully supernatural had actually happened in history. God had come to earth for the salvation of man. He--Jesus Christ--lived a perfect life, taught the absolute truth, died on the cross for our sins, and rose powerfully from the grave. We need to understand that, and ...

We Need to Believe in the Risen Christ

Belief is the overall theme of the gospel of John. One can see how the issue of faith, or belief, runs all through this story, beginning with Mary, in verse 11, standing outside the tomb of Jesus crying, and ending with her telling the disciples that she has seen the Lord. Now, one of the interesting things we learn from Mary is that . . .

Real Faith Often Needs Much Growth

On the one hand, Mary wouldn't have been at the tomb on Easter morning if she had not at some point believed in Him. On the other hand, she wouldn't have been crying if she had fully believed in Him.

Mary believed in Jesus. She was one of a group of women who had been healed by Christ and who followed and supported Him. When He was crucified, she stood at the side of Mary the mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross. She was obviously very devoted to Christ, because she was the first one there on the morning of His resurrection. She believed in Him.

Although she did believe in Him in one sense, in another sense she did not. Jesus had repeatedly promised to rise again from the dead, but her faith failed to grasp and rely on that promise. What Mary teaches us is that real faith, although it *is* real, often needs much growth.

You don't have to have great faith in order to receive Christ as your Savior. Salvation, forgiveness, eternal life, the presence of Christ in your life now and forever, these are gifts that God gives through Christ by faith. Christ died on

the cross and rose again so that these incredible gifts could be freely given to all who believe in Him. To believe in Jesus as your Savior and receive those gifts of grace does not require great faith.

Imagine two women who both need the same operation. One of them goes to the surgeon with absolute confidence. There is little or no doubt in her mind that he will be able to successfully care for her. So she entrusts herself to his care. The other woman chooses the same surgeon, but she has many fears and worries. She is not confident, but she knows she needs his help, so she also goes to him and entrusts herself to his care. You see, in spite of the fact that one woman had strong faith and one had weak faith, both women had faith in the right person, enough faith to go to him and trust in him. When it comes to our eternal salvation, the essential thing is not how strong a faith we have but in whom we place our faith.

Faith is like the windshield on a car. The primary purpose of a windshield is not to be the thing you look at but the thing you look through. You look through the windshield in order to clearly see the road. You may have a windshield that is cracked and dirty, but if you can see through, it will save you. It's nice to have a flawless and clean windshield through which you can clearly see everything. But the essential thing is to have a windshield that you can see through. Faith is like that. It's not the strength of your faith that saves you but the object of your faith, the person in whom you trust the best you can in spite of your weaknesses.

It may be you are like Mary at the beginning of this story. Although you have real faith, you may have a very incomplete and imperfect faith. Although your faith is real, it may be that the single most important element in your spiritual growth and in your relationship to the risen Christ is for that faith to grow fuller, stronger, and deeper. Real faith often needs much growth, and . . .

Growth in Faith Often Comes with Much Difficulty

Mary had seen Jesus' life and miracles. She had seen Him do amazing things by the power of God. She had heard His teachings, and she had seen that not a single word that He had ever said had failed to come true. Mary had heard Jesus say that He would die and rise again. The Gospels tell us that Jesus told His disciples this, and it was well known even if it was only poorly received and understood. Even the enemies of Jesus knew He had said this. Matthew 27 tells us that the chief priests and Pharisees came to Pilate and asked him to set a

guard at the tomb because they knew Jesus had said that He would rise again. If His enemies were familiar with that claim, certainly His inner circle of supporters must have known it.

Then the sun comes up on Easter morning, the birds start singing, and Mary goes to the tomb and finds it empty. The grave clothes are still there, strangely lying in place. She looks inside the tomb and sees angels. These are pretty good clues! Does she say, "Yes! He's done it! He has risen. Hallelujah!" No, she says, "Who took Jesus? Somebody stole His body!"

Now if this is how Mary responded, and basically it was the same way with Peter and John at first and later with Thomas, what this shows us is that sometimes growth in faith comes hard.

I think many of us who are Christians need to look at what was going on here with Mary and learn a lesson as to how quickly unbelief can grow up in our own hearts. Can you see some of yourself in Mary? She was standing at the center of one of the greatest demonstrations of God's love, power, and wisdom in the history of the world. But at first all she saw was a disaster.

Is it possible that God is doing something in your life right now that you are in danger of misreading entirely. You too can have real faith in Christ but fail to take the step of faith that is needed in your present situation. So you run around like Mary, forgetting His promises, disregarding the many clues He has set in front of you, as confused and upset as Mary. When everything seems to have gone wrong, it's not that God has abandoned you or failed to keep His promises. He hasn't. He won't. Believe in Him. Believe in His promises. Don't let unbelief blind you or confuse you.

We need to believe in the risen Christ and . . .

We Need to Know Christ His Way

The high point in the story comes in verse 16. "Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (Which means Teacher)." Now what happens next is of great importance: In verse 17, "Jesus says, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, "I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: 'I have

seen the Lord!' And she told them that he had said these things to her." The words of Christ teach us two things. First . . .

We Need to Know That the Presence of the Risen Christ with Us Is Spiritually Experienced

Jesus said (verse 18). "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father." Some versions translate this verse, "Do not touch me," but that's a misleading translation. It suggests that something mystical or almost magical was going on, and if Mary touched Him she would have been zapped by the power of God. Besides, later on when Jesus appeared to Thomas, He actually invited Thomas to touch Him. And Matthew 28 tells how, that same morning, Jesus appeared to a group of women who fell down and clasped His feet and worshiped Him.

A better translation of verse 18 is, "Do not hold on to me." The Greek word used and the tense of that word pictures Mary already grasping Jesus when He speaks to her. She is not just touching Him as if she were reaching out a hand to touch and see if He is real. She is sure He is real, and she's clinging to Him, holding on to Him.

A moment ago she was weeping. She thought she had lost Him forever. Now she has discovered that He is alive, and she doesn't want to lose Him again. When He called her by name and she suddenly recognized Him, she called Him "Rabboni," meaning "Teacher." It's as if she thinks everything is going to be just the way it used to be. He is going to be the teacher again, and she is going to be the disciple.

Maybe Mary didn't know what Jesus had told the disciples in the Upper Room when they shared the Last Supper. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered. She might not have grasped that any more than she grasped the Resurrection. What Jesus had taught was that He would return to the Father but that this would actually be better for all of us who believe in Him. For in leaving us and returning to the Father, He would send His Spirit, through whom He would live in our hearts in a new way that was deeper and richer than anything previously known or experienced.

In John 14:16-20, He says: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever--the Spirit of truth. The world cannot

accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”

So what Jesus was saying to Mary was, “Don't try to hold onto Me physically, don't try to hold on to the old relationship; let go of the old relationship so that you can enter into the new relationship!”

What Mary needed to know is what we need to know. We need to know that the presence of the risen Christ with us is spiritually experienced.

We Need to Know That the Message of Christ for Us Is Full of Grace

Look at verses 17-18 once more. “Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her. “

The disciples had all deserted Jesus. Peter had denied him, and the others had fled. But He didn't say, “Mary, go tell those miserable idiots that I've got a bone to pick with them.” No, He said to go to--whom? “*My brothers.*”

Jesus Christ says, “It doesn't matter how you've failed, if you believe in Me you are My brother and My sister.” This is why He died and rose again, so that through faith in Him we can belong to Him and to God in grace.

Go to My brothers, he says, and tell them what? “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Through faith in Christ our sins are forgiven, we are born again into God's family, and we share the same relationship to God that Christ has with Him. He is our God, and we are His people. He is our Father, and we are His children. Jesus died and rose again so that through faith in Him we can belong to Him and to God.

Mary is really a great example of this. It's no accident that she was the first one to see the risen Christ and to hear His voice. For a little while Mary, of all people, became the whole church, the only missionary, the only evangelist, the

apostle to the apostles, the only one commissioned with the message and sent to tell the others He has risen! It's no accident. It's a sign and a symbol.

The message of the gospel--the message of the risen Christ--is not that the good are in and the bad are out. It's not that the people who have it all together are in and those who don't are out. Mary was on the outside of all the categories of inside and outside that the world had in her day. She was a woman, not a man. She wasn't a well-respected woman with a great reputation. She had seven demons cast out of her! But the relationship that the risen Christ offers us is not a relationship based on any kind of human performance, pedigree, or pecking order.

Conclusion

Mary embodies the message that the risen Christ is offering Himself to all of us and any of us, if we want Him.

Mary knew that she had been a broken person, and she knew that Christ had brought her love, hope, forgiveness, freedom, and healing. That's the reason she was in the garden that morning, and that's the reason she stayed when everyone else left. Mary knew that she had experienced the amazing grace of God through Jesus Christ. So, wanting to show her love for Him, she went looking for Him. Because she was looking for Him, she found Him, and when she found Him she found far more than she ever could have imagined.

He called her by name. He said, "Mary," and that very moment she began a new relationship with the risen Christ, a new relationship that would be personal, internal, spiritual, and full of grace.

That same new relationship with Christ is offered to every one of us. It's not just Mary that Jesus calls by name. In John 10, Jesus speaks of Himself as the good shepherd who gives His life for the sheep. He says He calls all of His sheep--His people--by name and leads them out. His sheep hear His voice and follow Him.