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# Appearing to Followers

John 20:11-30

*Russ Kennedy*

There are two important considerations in a trial. If something is going to be established as true then there must be one of the following. If the narrative offered by the prosecution or the defense is going to be proven true, then:

There should be some *evidence* and proof of the story. There should be tangible evidence that supports the story; that fits what is being said.

There should be some *eye witnesses* to the story. There should be those who saw firsthand the events of the story, who can report what they saw.

This is what we have in this text. It is a continuation of the crucifixion narrative. The evidence and eyewitnesses now are brought forward to testify of the resurrection, of the fact that Jesus has come back to life from the dead.

You see, these dear people have gone through the most horrible week imaginable. From a tender evening around a dinner table to a long walk, talking about so many things. From the sudden clanking noise of military and temple police to the slobbering betrayal kiss. From the cold and questioning hours in the courts to a horrible beating and mocking array. From a long dragging trip to the place of execution. Then, their beloved master, teacher and friend cruelly dying. From the sad hour over the broken body, cleansing and anointing and wrapping it to the final, thudding roll of the stone over the entrance. And the dark hours waiting for Sunday. And now – the body is gone and an unbelievable story of resurrection?

How do we respond to dark hours and difficult events? Does depression, fear and doubt rule our hearts? Are we inconsolable? Are we pensive, hesitant, hiding from life? Do we defy truth and trumpet our doubts? Sure we do.

That is what we see here as Jesus appears to His followers.

**The Troubling Problems****(v.11-29)**

John shows us ourselves through a series of short scenes. Here are the followers of Jesus responding to the troubling problems.

**Mary Magdalene****(v.11-18)**

It is probably just past dawn. Weaving her way down the garden path, head down, shoulders shaking, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. <sup>12</sup> And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. <sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> 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.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

Weeping, standing, then stooping. She looks into the tomb. But it is not empty as she expects. There are two angelic messengers sitting at the head and foot of the burial bed. And they ask the question for us.

Why are you weeping? Why are you grief stricken? Why are you despondent?

We know why. She is disappointed and frustrated in her sadness. There is an underlying love that fuels this. A question of, "Why? Why would they take the body away? And where? Will I ever see Him again." Ah, the angels must have looked at the One who was standing behind her. She turns and sees someone she thinks is a caretaker. She does not initially recognize Him as happened often. We do not know whether His appearance is different or her vision dimmed. And He asks her our question.

Why are you weeping? What are you seeking? What are you expecting?

Can't you see a bit of frown, a bit of frustration, a tone of appeal? Just tell me and I will take care of Him. Clearly, in all the resurrection accounts, the initial reaction to the body being gone is surprise, not joy.

And Jesus speaks her name. It is enough. What her eyes did not see, her ears heard. This is ever the way of the gospel. Faith (seeing) comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Jesus speaks, she hears and now she sees. And so she speaks. She recognizes Him as God, her Lord and Her master. She believes and she bows.

What are we to make of Jesus' statement? "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.'" All the wrangling over these words

focuses on the grammar. Frankly, I don't see what the problem is. Jesus has been telling them for a week before His death that He is going away. When He goes away, He will send the Spirit to serve His people in His stead. Mary is clutching at Jesus, clinging to Him, holding onto Him. But He has not ascended to His Father and He will not for the next forty days. He is not talking about Mary contaminating Him. He is not talking about going up to heaven right now. When He says, "Go tell the disciples, 'I am ascending...'" He is reminding them of the talks along the way, the promise of the Spirit and that they will see Him but He is not staying. He is going away. They must stop clinging to His present physical presence and glory in His resurrection and the Spirit's soon descent. Isn't that it? Isn't it just that simple. Isn't Jesus saying,

Your grief is misplaced. You have not been listening to the truth I have been teaching. You are clinging to what I have told you will come to an end. I am alive. I am here. But I am on the way to heaven. And when I ascend, I will send what I have promised.

Isn't this so often what we need to hear? Embrace what God has told us. Don't be disappointed, despondent or down. Don't grieve over unexpected calamities. This world is passing away. It will come to an end. But what God has promised will come to pass. *Your unappiness comes from your clinging to the wrong things.*

Now her spirits are lifted, her life is changed and her message is hope!

## **The Disciples**

**(v.19-23)**

It is evening of that day. They have the news that Mary has brought. But they are afraid.

<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."<sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."<sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."<sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Here the followers are, locked in a room. John's question, though not asked directly, leaps off the page.

Why are you afraid?

The Jews, the enemies of Jesus, may come and take them away too. They were Jesus' followers. They were part of challenging the Jewish leaders. They had fanned out across Israel preaching that the king had come. Rome may even be hunting them. Now that the tomb seal has been broken and the tomb opened, now that the body of Jesus has disappeared, the culprits are obvious.

And suddenly, Jesus is simply, *there*. His first words are, "Peace be with you." This has always been Jesus' greeting in the midst of fear-causing storms. He is here. Everything is OK. Shhhhh. Don't be afraid. Still your heart.

He shows them in His resurrection body the evidences of His death. Even in the resurrection body, the effects of the crucifixion are there. And knowing now who He is and that He is alive, fear moves through peace to joy. They are glad.

Jesus speaks to them again. Now peace will be needed because of the magnitude of the mission. They could easily be fearful of moving out into the world with this astonishing message. And so, they are sent on the mission. They receive a preview of the Spirit's empowering. They are invested with apostolic authority. Here is simply a demonstration of what will actually happen later in Acts. This is meant to connect them and us to the creation story for this is the beginning of the new creation. The exhalation that gave life to Adam now will give the Spirit to the Apostles.

Here are the reasons we often tremble in fear:

The enemy is large, dangerous and near...

The task and responsibility is huge, daunting and frightening...

Here is what Jesus has given us:

His presence with us till the end of the age – so be not afraid...

His power in us by the Word and the Spirit – so be not afraid...

## **Thomas**

**(v.24-29)**

On a Monday evening, the next week, the disciples are gathered once again. This time, someone who had been missing before is now with them.

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

<sup>26</sup> Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

On that Sunday evening when Jesus appeared, one of the disciples was not there. He missed that great event. But the other disciples excitedly told him about it. What a great thing had happened. But Thomas is a proof kind of guy. He wants to see the physical evidence. In his mind, the eyewitness accounts must be backed up with real proof. He's not going to believe unless the Lord is right in front of him and the evidence is there.

So that brings us to our late Monday evening. Thomas is here at this gathering. They are still locking the doors for safety in their fear. And once again, Jesus is simply, there. To them all, He greets them with peace. And then He turns to Thomas. Here is the question for him and for us in that moment.

Why are you doubting?

Jesus says it in such a winsome, loving, gracious and convicting way. "Here, look. Here is my hand and the hole where the nails were driven. Put your finger in there. He pulls aside his clothes – here, here is where the spear went in. Put your hand in there. Don't disbelieve; be believing."

Would you have walked up and stuck your finger in His hand? Would you have peered into the wound to see where your hand should go? If so, then you truly doubt and are utterly different from Thomas.

While Thomas demands evidence, Jesus' presence and His words to believe cause Him to believe and bow. He responds, not with an inquisitive finger, but with a confessing mouth. This is a recognition and personal confession of Jesus as God and as Sovereign Lord. Here is believing and bowing in 5 words: "My Lord and my God". One writer says, "Thomas thereby not only displays his faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but points to its deepest meaning; it is nothing less than the revelation of who Jesus Christ is. The most unyielding skeptic has bequeathed to us the most profound confession."<sup>13</sup>

Jesus responds with a question and a blessing. The idea is not so much to correct Thomas as to commend us.

Like all the disciples in John's gospel, Thomas sees and believes. He has the report from the other disciples and the words of Jesus. He has seen Jesus and He believes. This is not some low level of faith otherwise the other disciples are also being cast in a bad light. No, they believe having heard and seen.

Those who believe the message, the word alone, are commended for believing without the privilege of seeing Him personally. Thomas could see and believe; the reader of John cannot. They and we must believe without seeing. We believe the message, the Word.

## **The Transforming Purpose**

**(v.30-31)**

This is the transforming purpose for John writing his gospel.

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

What is needed for the person who overtaken with sadness? Who is struggling with fear? Who doubts the truth? They need the kind of faith that John has written to produce.

## **More than Recorded**

**(v.30)**

John makes an obvious statement. Jesus did way more in His life than John has recorded. If everything that Jesus did in His life and particularly in His ministry were written down, even Google's data warehouses couldn't hold it all.

But look at the statement more closely. Here something important is actually being said. It is not just the record of Jesus' life, but "the signs that He did in the presence of the disciples." Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament and His performing of authenticating

signs is a massive body of work. John has seen and witnessed to much more than He has actually written. What does this mean?

### **Recorded to Believe**

**(v.31)**

It means that John has carefully chosen the material he has written in order that people may believe in saving way. Every writer of the Bible narrative is writing with a purpose. In the constant flow of people's lives and history, the events that are chosen to be recorded, the order in which they occur, the way in which they are written and connected and even the commentary on them is all selected to serve the author's purpose. The Holy Spirit moves the human author to recall, to select, to record what was written.

We have seen that clearly through our text today. John has written about these particular appearances by Jesus in order to serve His purposes. His primary purpose is that you may have saving belief.

John is first focused in the content of saving belief. All through the book, John shows all kinds of belief that doesn't save. True saving belief knows, understands, trusts and affirms with the affections two core truths.

Jesus is the one who is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. He is the promised Messiah. Yes, He is the King of the Jews. But so much more, He is all that God has promised through the Old Covenant.

Jesus is the Son of God. Writing from the Old Testament, John knows that asserting this means that Jesus is not merely a man. He is not just saying that Jesus is a son that somehow came into existence in eternity past. He is saying that Jesus is God and that He is the second person of the Godhead. Confessing the Trinity is an essential part of truly saving belief.

Why do I say that John is concerned that you have saving belief? He is writing so that you will believe in a way that you will have life in Jesus' Name. This his way of speaking of saving belief.

Is your belief in Jesus truly saving? Do you believe He is God and that He is your Lord?

In the midst of disappointments and despair, in the midst of uncertainty and fear, in the midst of real questions about the reality of it all, will you accept the Word of God as true? Will you come to the point where you exclaim, "My Lord and my God!"

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<sup>13</sup> Carson, *John*, p.659.