

Session 7

April 12, 2020 (Easter)

Unit 1: Jesus Is . . .

The Resurrection and the Life

Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!

The Word

John 20:1-18

Engage the Word

The Empty Tomb as Evidence of the Resurrection

John 20:1-10

John's story of the first Easter unfolded slowly. It began with Mary Magdalene noticing that the tomb was open. Rather than investigating herself, she concluded that someone had stolen Jesus' body and she ran to tell Peter and another disciple. They run to the tomb. John slows the narrative down enough to tell us the other disciple ran faster than Peter! When they arrived they investigated the tomb and found it empty as Mary Magdalene had assumed.

By itself the empty tomb is insufficient evidence for the resurrection. Mary Magdalene's fear could have been true and that would have explained the empty tomb. However, all four gospels begin their account of the resurrection of Jesus by describing the empty tomb. It is evidence, though not sufficient evidence, of the resurrection.

The detail in John 20:7 that the cloth that had been on Jesus' head was rolled up separate from the linen wrapping that had enclosed the body suggests something more orderly than a tomb robbery. John then notes that the other disciple believed. This is significant because the purpose of John's gospel (John 20:30-31) is that people believe. However, neither Peter nor the other disciple understood "the scripture, that He must rise from the dead."

The empty tomb led to believing without understanding, hoping without seeing, and uncertainty about what all this meant.

The Early Confusion about the Resurrection

John 20:11-15

The story of Mary at the tomb captures the difficulty in believing the resurrection for the first followers of Jesus. Presumably she followed Peter and the other disciple back to the tomb, though she did not run. They had observed the empty tomb and left. Mary stayed and wept. When she finally looked inside the tomb she saw two angels who tried to help her. But she was still convinced the tomb had been robbed and seemed completely unaffected by the appearance of the angels.

Then Jesus himself appeared to her. The appearances of the risen Jesus to more than 500 followers (1 Corinthians 15:5-6) provided the proving evidence of the resurrection. Yet the impossibility of resurrection was so powerful in the minds of the first disciples that some did not recognize Him when He stood face to face with them. That was the case with Mary who saw Jesus, but even after looking at Him assumed He was the gardener. She was still convinced Jesus' body had been stolen.

Realizing the reality of the resurrection was difficult for the first people who met the risen Lord. Their minds created confusing alternative reasons for what they were seeing. It is easy, but unfair, to judge them for their confusion and failure. They did not have the benefit of 2,000 years of Christian witness to the resurrection.

The Encounter with Jesus Confirms the Resurrection

John 20:16-18

It was only when Jesus called Mary's name that she finally recognized Him. In this way Mary has become the pattern of all followers of Jesus who respond when we hear Him calling us by name. The call to believe is not an anonymous, mass invitation; it is personal, direct, and compelling.

Mary's response was "Rabboni," an Aramaic variant of rabbi. It is possible that "Rabboni" was a more personal and affectionate title than rabbi with a meaning like, "Oh, my dear teacher!" However, that endearment is not present in the other use of "rabboni" in the New Testament (Mark 10:51). Clearly Mary recognized Jesus as who He was and as alive. The personal relationship between the two confirmed the reality of the resurrection for Mary.

Relationship with the risen Christ would be different from the relationship enjoyed by the first disciples before His death and resurrection. Jesus commands Mary to "not hold on to" Him. The closeness of face to face relationship would be relinquished as Jesus ascended to the Father. Close relationship would continue, but it would be different, experienced spiritually rather than physically.

Relationship with the risen Christ came with an assignment. Instead of receiving the enjoyment of listening to and watching Jesus, Mary was now charged with telling others about the resurrection. Her first task was to go to the disciples and witness to them that she had seen the Lord. It is likely that they were as hard to convince of the resurrection as anyone else who had not seen the risen Lord.

Christians today need to remember that faith in the resurrection is not easy for many people. Jesus gave His first disciples time and space to come to terms with the reality of His presence as one alive from the dead. We need to do the same. But in the final analysis it is hard to imagine someone could believe in the resurrection and not tell anyone else about it.

Did You Know?

Many tombs in the area of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus were carved out of the stone visible on the side of a hill. The entrance to the tomb was controlled by a stone that could be rolled into place to seal the tomb or rolled away to provide entrance.

Think About It

Most Jews (other than the Sadducees) believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. They would have understood Jesus' resurrection as evidence of the end of time breaking into the present.

Reflect

Take time this week to think about the meaning and message of the resurrection.

Roger Hahn