

Jesus Appears to His Own

By David Harrell

Bible Text: John 20:11-23
Preached on: Sunday, September 27, 2015

We come now to the pinnacle of worship where we have the opportunity to look into the word of the living God so will you take your Bibles and open up that word, the inspired, infallible record of God. John's Gospel, chapter 20, where we will be looking at verses 11 through 23. We are actually returning to this historical narrative of the empty tomb on that resurrection morning, a deeply moving account that helps us once again grasp the essence of what John is trying to communicate, namely to help us see that Jesus was who he said he was, the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, and here we see his glory and his majesty put on display in a very unique way but it's also a way that I believe will touch us very personally and very practically.

We're going to examine these verses under two very simple headings: first, Jesus reveals himself to Mary Magdalene; and then secondly, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples. And I've prayed for each of you who will sit under this exposition this morning that the Holy Spirit will dramatically use this passage to minister to your heart and to impact it as it has mine. And may I remind you of just the astonishing reality of the resurrection, to think that as Paul said, "Jesus was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification," Romans 4:25, an amazing concept. By raising Christ from the dead, God the Father declared his approval of Christ's work of redemption. Christ's work of suffering and dying for our sins was perfectly completed. He no longer needed to remain dead. The penalty for our sins was paid for in full and in the scene before us, we witness the very first appearance of our risen Savior and Lord.

So I want you to join me. Let's go back to that resurrection morn. You will remember that Mary Magdalene has come in the dark, the first one, early, and she discovers the empty tomb and in her bewilderment and fear, she runs to find Peter and John and tell them what has happened. No doubt, she ran to John's home that we know was in Jerusalem. Then Peter and John came to the tomb to see for themselves and there they discovered the grave clothes tightly wound around what used to be the body of Christ; there they were lying there undisturbed and the face cloth was set aside and placed by itself, certain proof that a resurrection had occurred. That Jesus had somehow dematerialized and passed through the grave clothes and all of the 100 pounds of spices that Nicodemus had brought. He had also passed through the stone sepulchre. But they had no idea where he was so Peter and John run back to Jerusalem, probably to tell Jesus' mother what had happened. And not knowing that Peter and John and some other women had visited the tomb and what they had seen and heard, Mary Magdalene then returns alone to the tomb with her heart breaking and here we come to the first section of our little outline where we're going to see Jesus revealing himself to her.

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So we pick it up in verse 11, "But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb." Obviously, her faith was too weak to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead as he promised that he would do, but her love for him compelled her to return to the place where her Lord's body had last been placed so her tears reveal her love for Jesus but they also betray her unbelief. As you think about it, how often do we also, like Mary, weep without reason? How many times do we mourn over things that really don't exist? Or over the absence of things that are right within our reach and we don't realize it? Certainly we must guard our hearts against this. Whenever we grieve as those without hope, not necessarily that she was doing that, but whenever we do that, we walk by sight and not by faith.

But the Lord knew her heart. He knew her weak faith and he loves her still. In fact, what we're going to see happening here is a magnificent demonstration of his love to her. The Lord has something very special for her. The Holy Spirit has orchestrated all of these events so that Mary would come to the tomb alone in her sorrow so that she could be the very first one to whom the Lord would appear in his resurrected body. The Lord Jesus is about to reward her for her steadfast love for him. If I can digress for a moment: as I was meditating upon this in my study this week, my mind went to the love of the forgiven prostitute in Luke 7. Remember, she wept at Jesus' feet, covered his feet with her tears and then anointed them with perfume and wiped them with her hair and then Jesus turned to her in the presence of his disciples and he said, "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven for she loved much but he who is forgiven little, loves little." In other words, her outpouring of love for her Savior proved the depth of awareness that she had concerning her own sin.

We see the same type of thing here with Mary, her great love for Christ which is really animated by the depth of her awareness of her own sin. Beloved, the more we're amazed at the greatness of our sins, the more we will be amazed at the grace that forgave them. This was certainly true of Mary Magdalene and when we're amazed at that grace because of our sin, our love will increase more and more for Christ. No doubt she remembered well Jesus delivering her from those seven demons. No doubt she remembered many of the sins of her life that had marred her life so. There is such a great lesson here for us to learn. The lesson is simply this: the little love that we have for Christ or I should maybe say, little love for Christ, will really betray our awareness of how little we understand our sin, that we want to learn that.

Let me ask you: do you really love Christ? You know, when you love someone, what do you want to do? You want to be with them. You want to hear their voice. You want to serve them. You want to know them. You don't want to leave them. Is that how you see Christ? I hope it is. Sadly, many Christians today know far more about what they've been

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saved to than what they've been saved from and, folks, a superficial love for Christ will produce a great apathy toward serving him. But not so for Mary who returned again to the tomb of her Lord.

Notice verse 12, "and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying." Now, evidently the angels were no longer appearing in some dazzling light that terrified the other women when they had come to the tomb because Mary's reaction indicates that they seemed to her to be just like normal human beings, certainly she did not recognize them as angelic beings. There was no terrifying fear or anything like that.

Verse 13, "And they said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?'" Now, you must understand this is not so much a stern rebuke as it is just a gentle inquiry in order to help her pensively reflect upon what is happening so that she will think, so that she will understand which, later on, she did.

"She said to them, 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.' When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus." The Lord's timing is always perfect, is it not?

"Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?'" And I love this, "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.'" Well, obviously, she did not recognize this to be Jesus. Mary wasn't expecting to see him. Plus, his resurrected body looked so different than that tortured, swollen, bloodied corpse that had been laid in the ground. But I can't help but notice how deeply concerned Mary was about the body of her Lord. It's as if she's saying, "It must be preserved at all cost." It's as though this is all she had left of him and she was wanting to hang onto him. All she had left or so she thought.

Oh, that we would all take such a personal interest in our Lord. Notice she calls him, "my Lord." There is something personal and intimate about that. I hope that's true for you. Framing this scene in a different context, I ask you: do you really care how the Lord is treated in your life? Do you care about how the Lord is treated in your marriage and in your family? Do you ever miss him? If so know this, it's because you have forsaken him because he will never forsake you. Does his mistreatment in this world bring grief to your heart? You see, to the degree that it does, reveals the degree of your love for him.

But then notice what John tells us in verse 16, "Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'" Oh, she knew that voice, didn't she? She would recognize that voice anywhere. Suddenly her spiritual

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eyes are opened and what music that must have been to her ears to hear the voice of her Savior and Lord. "She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, 'Rabboni!' (which means, Teacher)." This is such a moving scene and how graphically this illustrates Proverbs 8:17 where God says, "'I love those who love me; And those who diligently seek me will find me.'" And what a dramatic illustration of Jesus' statement recorded in John 10 where he says he calls his own sheep by name and then Jesus says, "My sheep," in verse 27, "hear My voice and I know them and they follow Me."

Folks, what an astounding privilege to be the first person to whom the risen Lord would appear and how wonderful this is, how kind this is, of the Lord to minister to her in this way as he does for all who love him. The Lord knows when and how to meet us in the moment of our greatest distress and so here he reveals himself in this very unexpected way. And I want you to think about how God has arranged all of this. This is all by divine appointment. Earlier, the angels had been summoned to make an announcement to the other women and then evidently they disappeared from sight when John and Peter came because they didn't see any angels. But apparently now they have reappeared in human form. They are seated inside the tomb in which the Spirit of God now compels Mary, the text says, to stoop and to look. None of that happened by accident. This is all a picture of the providence of God.

Ah, but those angels were not there, will you notice. They were not there for some sacred vigil. They were there for one purpose and that purpose was to minister to Mary. Think of the care and the love the Lord Jesus Christ has for his own and what enormous comfort this should bring to each of us. Though our faith is sometimes small and our hearing dull, the Lord will still go to amazing lengths to bless us even in our time of desperation and we never know the ways that he dispatches his angels to minister to us. The Scripture teaches they're all around us. You don't know how many are in this room. We can't see them. I'm sure they're here. I'm sure they're guarding this place in ways that we cannot fathom. In fact, the Triune Godhead is here. He is here with us right this very moment, not just in spirit form in ways that we can't see but in the mystery of all mysteries, he is dwelling within each of us that know him. In fact, the psalmist tells us in Psalm 91:11 that, "He will give His angels charge concerning you, To guard you in all your ways." And the writer of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 1:14, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?"

Beloved, the Lord is always up to something in our life and he even uses his angels to accomplish those ends. But, dear friends, don't miss the great lesson here and that is that true love will always seek the object of its affection, even as Mary sought after her Lord. Moreover, the Lord then lavishes his most special blessings on those who truly love him, who truly seek after him and desire to honor him. I hope that is the attitude of your heart.

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In Psalm 27:4, we learn that God commands us to "Seek my face." In other words, "Seek my personal presence. Let your greatest desire on earth be a longing for intimate fellowship with me." Why? "Because in my presence alone you will find that soul satisfying joy and peace that will minister to your spirit in the hour of your greatest peril."

Perhaps some of you are anxious about some great need in your life. What should you do? Well, Jesus tells us, for example, in Matthew 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." So in your hour of need, you come before God. You seek the full care and provision that he offers in salvation. You seek his presence. You seek to understand who he is. You run into his presence and you rehearse in your mind the magnificent benefits of your justification of your salvation and all of the promises that he has given you and you pursue him in intimate prayer and you hear him through his word because it is there that you will discover his will. There you will discover his blessing and his wisdom. Might I add that he might not change your circumstances, but he will always change your perspective in them and then minister to you in some unexpected way that you will never forget and that you would never trade for anything in all the world. Just ask Mary Magdalene, which we will be able to do some day.

But notice what happened next. "Jesus said to her, 'Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, "I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'"" Now, will you notice this phrase, "stop clinging to me for I have not yet ascended to the Father." What a curious statement. What could this possibly mean? Now, Mary had probably fallen on her face and grasped Jesus' feet as the others did later as Matthew tells us in Matthew 28:9. But I believe what Jesus wants her to understand and all of us to understand is that her relationship with him is now going to be very different. She must not think that by holding onto him so firmly that she is going to be able to keep him in her presence, even though he had not yet ascended to the Father, as he said. "I'm still here and I'm going to be here for 40 more days."

So Jesus is in essence saying, "Don't feel as though you need to cling to me as if I'm about to disappear permanently. That somehow you're going to lose me. Moreover, I've not even ascended to the Father yet." But I believe there is something else inherent in this text that we need to grasp that he was saying to her and to all of us and it would be something like this, "Mary, understand that the never ending, uninterrupted fellowship that you long for is not at risk. In fact, it's going to be deepened. It's going to be made more permanent because I am going to ascend to the Father and I am going to send the blessed Holy Spirit and he will dwell within you and then you will be able to experience an intimacy with me like you've not experienced heretofore. Only then will you be able to experience the communion you yearn for, an intimacy far richer and more blessed than

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what you ever have experienced before." Furthermore, I think he wants her to understand more forcibly and all of us that, "Don't be clinging to me now. I am no longer an earthly man." You see, his humanity is forever changed at this point. He is what he has always been and that is the uncreated Creator of the universe, the eternal Son of God, the Almighty God of glory in a resurrection glorified body. "Mary, you need to understand this."

So he says, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'" Now, notice those two words, "my brethren." This is the first time he has ever used this term to refer to his disciples and it's an amazing thought. Why is this so important? Well, Paul tells us in Romans 8:29 that Christ is the firstborn among many brethren. In other words, he is the preeminent one, the only rightful heir and yet here we see that we are also his brother. We are brothers and sisters in Christ being made like him. In fact, God the Father has adopted us as sons, Romans 8:14-15. Ephesians 1:5, he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself. You see, friends, we must understand that because of his death, his resurrection and his exaltation which, by the way, was already in process as he stands before Mary, because of this, all that the Father had given the Son in eternity past is now being given to us as sons and daughters in Christ.

Notice how he says, "I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God." You see, Jesus is careful to make a distinction here but he's also emphasizing the closeness of fellowship between himself, his Father, our Father, and his disciples, his brothers. To be sure, his sonship differs from ours. He is the Son of God by nature. We are sons by adoption, nevertheless, we all enjoy this familial fellowship, this fellowship in the Spirit that's about to be poured out upon them and his disciples now are given a new name. We've all been given a new name here, one far more intimate than the name that he had used before, the name friends. Now we are his brothers. We belong to the same family. In fact, in Romans 8:17, Paul says that all believers are joint heirs with Christ. That is absolutely mind blowing to me. And in Hebrews 2:11, the writer says, "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren."

Now, folks, beyond the astounding theology of this, look at practically what's happening here. What a magnificent blessing this would have been to the disciples who had earlier run away in fear and abandoned Jesus and now he's calling them brothers. The Lord of glory is my brother. I just can't fathom that. In Luke 23:69, he speaks of himself as the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power of God. That's my brother. Remember in Isaiah 6 when Isaiah saw the preincarnate Christ, the Lord that was sitting on the throne, lofty and exalted and the train of his robe filling the temple? Remember the

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seraphim flying around him, hovering around him, crying out, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory"? That's my brother. Does that put it in perspective for you? I will never be able to harmonize that in my mind this side of glory and probably not even in glory.

But may I remind you of another marvelous truth here and that is Scripture teaches us that Christ's physical resurrection body will be his eternal possession. Do you realize if you could see him now you would recognize him as a human being? We know that he ascended into heaven in a physical body, Acts 1:9, and the angel immediately told the disciples in verse 11 that this Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. He is the Son of God but he loved to call himself the Son of Man. Again, my mind cannot harmonize such a thing, that the one that is seated upon the throne emanating the resplendent light of his glory looks like me, looks like you in some unfathomable way. He is God, very God, yet my brother.

Then Mary looked upon him and he looked like a gardener. John is trying to communicate something wonderful here. What a picture of how Christ will share our humanity permanently, but as I picture the risen Christ standing there before Mary, I'm reminded that as believers we are all united with Christ in every aspect of his work of redemption. We see this all through Scripture. For example, the Apostle Paul says that we have died, we have been buried and resurrected with him. Paul said, "It is no longer I that live but Christ that lives in me." He said in Colossians that, "You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

You see, while we await our glorified bodies, our true essence as glorified saints is concealed to the world. To the world, we look like gardeners and probably far worse, but they don't see the glory any more than Mary saw the glory of Christ. Peter says in chapter 1, verse 3, "We have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." You see, Jesus' resurrection is explicitly connected with our regeneration, our new birth. When Jesus rose from the dead, he was given a new quality of life here. He has a resurrection life in a human body, in a human spirit that were perfectly suited for fellowship and obedience to God forever. But think of this: in his resurrection, he earned for us a new life just like his. A new life, even a new body. When we are born again, we all receive the new resurrection life, the Scripture teaches. That resurrection life in our spirits. We are made alive with new resurrection power. We're going to be given a resurrected body one day.

This resurrection power of Christ is a spiritual power, beloved, that is at work in every one of us right now, all of us who know Christ. It's for this reason that Paul prayed for the saints in Ephesus, the same prayer that I pray for you all the time, that they would know

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what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places. You see, friends, this resurrection power includes the power to gain more and more victory over remaining sin in our lives. As Paul says, so that sin will have no dominion over you, Romans 6:14. And it includes power for ministry in the work of the kingdom and it's the power of eternal life in these bodies that are wearing out, that will one day be recreated and suited for eternal fellowship and service in heaven.

But I'm compelled to dwell on something else here that I want you to see that I believe John would have us see. The implications of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, dear friends, exceed the importance and the power and the potential of every other event in the history of our universe. In fact, it is only rivaled by the actual creation of the universe because within the resurrection body of Jesus Christ exists this supernatural power source of eternal life and God's eternal kingdom. But that's not all, in a mystery beyond anything that we could understand, he dwells within all of the redeemed and we exist in him. Again, our life is hidden with Christ in God.

Paul put it this way in Romans 8:11, "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you," in other words if you're born again you have this spirit, if that's so, here's what's going to happen, "He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." Absolutely astounding. Think of this: contained within the resurrection body of Christ that appeared to Mary was the seed of resurrection glory for all of the redeemed. The power source of the universe. The Creator and sustainer of God's everlasting kingdom. And think how this relates to us, in 1 Corinthians 15:20, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep." In other words, a sample of what is to come. He's a taste of what the rest of us will be like. He says, "For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam," the first Adam, "all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."

You see, in Christ we have been given a new kind of existence. His body was made perfect, no longer subject to weakness, no longer subject to death, but to live eternally. He put on immortality. And like his resurrection body, our resurrection body will be raised as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, imperishable, in glory, in power, a spiritual body. It's astounding. In other words, we will be given a body like Christ's, one that is fit for heaven. One that is no longer subject to sickness and death or shame because of sin. No longer frail in temptation. A body that is not limited to time and space in the sphere in which we currently live.

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But I think John wants us to see something even more remarkable here, more extreme when he says that Mary thought he was the gardener. Now, obviously when she looked at him he must have looked like a first century gardener. I don't know really what that looked like. When I think of a gardener, I think of especially my grandfather: lace up leather boots, bib overalls, an old shirt and a big straw hat. Now, the point is that somehow he looked like that yet think about it, within his resurrection body was the never ending power of the uncreated Creator of the universe, the one who spoke all things into existence and upholds all things by the word of his power.

Perhaps an illustration would be helpful. Some of you have read the book that I wrote for my father than chronicle his WWII story of faith and survival, a book called "Out of the Depths," and there my dad is able to tell his story that in 1945, he was a Marine guard aboard the Navy cruiser, the USS Indianapolis, and he was in charge of guarding a top secret cargo. It really consisted in two parts: there was, first of all, a large plywood crate measuring about five feet high, five feet wide, perhaps 15 feet in length; then they also brought aboard this ominous looking black metal canister that was about two feet long, maybe 18 inches wide and it was padlocked inside of a steel cage. Then they welded it securely to the deck floor of the ship and only later after they had delivered that cargo to the island of Tinian, it's a B29 base, did they learn that that top secret cargo contained the integral components of the atomic bombs that were dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, code named Fat Man and Little Boy. That ominous little container, inside of that, was uranium 235. It accounted for approximately half the fissionable material possessed by the United States but, folks, think of the unimaginable power in that little container and today they say that the nuclear capability that we have is exceedingly more powerful than that.

Beloved, my point is simply this: the power contained in the resurrection body of the Lord Jesus Christ is infinitely more powerful than anything that man could ever make or even conceive for in it was housed the omnipotent power of our Creator God and then mystery of mysteries, to think that we are united to him. Our life is hidden in him and he dwells in us. And to think that one day we will behold that body, one that will in so many ways look like ours but, beloved, when we do, he will not look like a gardener anymore. From that body will emanate the effulgence of the celestial majesty of the living God. The resplendent light of his glory will blaze forth brighter than the brilliance of the sun and to think, again, that Christ was the first fruit, a price sized sample of the coming harvest which means our resurrection bodies will in many ways be like his minus the incommunicable attributes of God that are his alone.

Oh, child of God, don't miss this, don't miss the majesty and power of Christ that is latent in this scene. Mary could not see it, she saw a gardener. She doesn't see a gardener

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anymore because dormant within the risen Christ that stood before Mary was the seed of eternal life for all whom the Father had given him, the infinite power source of the universe and God's everlasting kingdom. I wish to quote for you the old Scottish preacher, William Still, who put it so well and I only wish I could speak with his Scottish accent but I have heard him say some of it on an old tape. Speaking of Christ he says, "He is the embryo of all that one day will exist outside of hell." Gets your attention, doesn't it? He went on to say, "All that does not belong to him in his resurrection body and issues not from him will be burned up one day. Only that which is transformed by his coming power and glory will remain. The potential of that new Christ that stood before Mary at the first so that she mistook him for the gardener, is the source of all that will survive the original creation when it is burned up and reconstituted. And it is the Holy Spirit," he says, "sent from God, belonging to him and enshrining all the virtues of his victories over evil, who dwells in your poor heart and mine."

Oh, what a precious, what a comforting thought this should be for all the redeemed. For this reason, Paul could say in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." Beloved, again, as the writer of Hebrews says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

So verse 18, "Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord,' and that He had said these things to her." Now, we're not told how they reacted but we can only assume that they responded in the same manner that they did when the other women told them about the empty tomb in Luke 24:11. There Luke says, "These words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe."

Secondly, we move into the scene where Jesus reveals himself now to the disciples. You see, the disciples were fearing for their lives. They saw what had happened to Christ. They feared the Romans would come and kill them as well so they remained in hiding throughout that resurrection morn, that day. Verse 19, "So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were." By the way, the word "shut" that Greek verb can also mean "locked." "When the doors were locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews," I love this, "Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" I believe John's purpose in telling us that the doors were locked is to demonstrate the miraculous nature of the Lord's appearance. Perhaps this is a preview of our resurrected bodies, some of the things that we may be able to do when we're no longer subject to time and space. But talk about a

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shock. Later I can only imagine when they told Mary, "Do you know what happened?" And after they finished, she probably looked at them and said, "I told you I saw the Lord."

But there in the midst of their worst fears, in the midst of their deepest disappointment, Jesus revealed himself and I'm sure they had to have been ashamed, no doubt their minds were suddenly flooded with how they had fallen asleep in the garden when Jesus warned them to stay awake and watch and pray. And I'm sure that their minds rehearsed the scene of the arrest when they all ran in fear and abandoned the Lord. But here he is, risen from the dead, as he said he would do. And won't you notice he does not come into their midst and say, "Shame on you." He says, "Peace be with you."

Boy, this is a lesson we all need to learn. We must understand too that this is far more than a greeting, this is a pronouncement of a special blessing. This is the bestowal of a priceless gift because herein we understand both the objective and subjective nature of peace. Objectively, he's saying, "Guys, the war is over." Paul put it this way in Romans 5:1, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." And in Romans 4:25 he says that Christ was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Raised so that now legally before the holy bar of justice God can declare us righteous because of the imputed righteousness of Christ. So we are no longer at war with him.

But it's more than an objective peace that Jesus is referring to, it's also a subjective peace, one that we can experience in the midst of turmoil and distress. The peace of God which surpasses all understanding which will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. You know, the disciples really needed this will all that was going on with them and to think that the Lord had dealt with all of their sin and shame at the cross. We all need to remind ourselves of this healing balm that brings such peace to our troubled minds and our guilty consciences. It's only God's grace that can bring this kind of peace.

Verse 20, "And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord." What a tearful scene this must have been. Oh, I can see it in my mind.

And now that they're convinced of his resurrection, "So Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you,'" and then he adds this, "'as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.'" Oh, my goodness. What another blessing this is, a blessing to these men who were lamenting over their failures of what they had become. Not only does the Lord Jesus bestow upon them this gift of peace, he also reaffirms his former commissioning of them and

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ceremonially and symbolically gives them a pledge of his power so that they could go and serve him, a power that they would receive at Pentecost.

Notice verse 22, "And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Now, Jesus did not merely puff out some breath on them at this point and literally impart the Spirit in all of his fullness, instead he gave them a visible figure, a picture of what would happen to them at Pentecost. I know there are those who would say that this is when the Spirit was poured out but I think Scripture says otherwise because Jesus specifically said in John 16:17 that the Spirit would not be given until after his ascension. And Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:8 that, "When He ascended on high, He gave gifts to men." In fact, on the very day of his ascension, he told the apostles to wait for the Spirit to come upon them in Acts 1:8.

Then he says something very curious here. He says, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." Now, at first glance, it would appear that Jesus is giving the disciples the authority to offer forgiveness of sins or to withhold forgiveness of sins. This is what the Roman Catholic church erroneously believes, that somehow the apostles were given this authority and that authority has been passed on through the church. But, friends, Jesus was not granting authority, as we understand Scripture, he was delegating authority. Scripture is so clear that only God can forgive sins. The only authority the church has to tell someone that he is forgiven or that he is still in sin comes directly from the word of God.

Look at Matthew 18:15-20, and this was not a new idea for the disciples. You must understand this. Earlier the Lord had told them in Matthew 16:19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." You see, this merely speaks of the church's authority to regulate behavior within it. Binding speaks of declaring that which is forbidden and loosing is used of what is permitted. So as believers, we can declare that a sinner is forgiven or unforgiven based on how that sinner responds to the Gospel of salvation. Scripture is so abundantly clear here: Christ is the head of the church, not the pope. And the word of Christ is the supreme authority within the church, not man, not his traditions. In fact, nowhere in Scripture do we see any disciple conferring on anyone forgiveness of sins or withholding forgiveness of sins. Jesus did not give them the authority of a priest to forgive sins, he gave them the authority of a preacher to proclaim forgiveness of sins and warn those who reject Christ that they will die in their sins.

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Well, my time is gone, but may I leave you with a very, very brief practical application? First of all, dear friends, you cannot love someone you do not know and I hope you know Jesus. Certainly if you've listened today you know who he is. But if we know Christ, if we truly love him, we need to be as serious as we can be about seeking his face because he longs to be with us. He longs to commune with us and therein is the joy that we can find in fellowship with him so may I give you three ways to seek his face? Very simple. 1. Make it a habit to spend time alone with him in fervent prayer and ask him to reveal himself to you. He will do that. Make it a habit to spend time alone with him in prayer and ask him to reveal himself to you. Secondly, find someone to disciple you. Someone who will invest in your spiritual growth because without discipleship, without that kind of intentional fellowship, your spiritual growth will be stunted. We were not made to live in isolation. We are part of a body and certainly this church has wonderful opportunities for that kind of discipleship. Then thirdly, this is so practical: get a MacArthur Study Bible and read it. It's not good enough to have one, you need to read it. I think this is the best study Bible out there. But through the word of God, you will hear the Lord's voice. You will get to know him and the more you know him, the more you will love him and the more you love him, the more you will serve him and the more you serve him, the more you will enjoy his blessings upon your life.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these eternal truths. Cause them to bear much fruit to the praise of your glory that in all things Christ might have the preeminence in our lives. For it is in his name that I pray. Amen.

We pray you've been edified by this presentation. You have been listening to Pastor, Bible Teacher and Author, Dr. David Harrell. For more information or for other messages from Dr. Harrell, please visit the Olive Tree Christian Resources website at otcr.org.