

Witnesses to the Resurrection

The accounts of the resurrection in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John do not entirely agree. There are minor differences of detail: just when did the women go to the tomb? and how many of them were there? Mark says there were three women and that it was just after sunrise; John refers only to Mary Magdalene who went there while it was still dark. It doesn't worry me that there are these apparent discrepancies, and I hope it doesn't worry you. To me it makes the whole thing even more authentic because I believe that the gospel writers were setting down eyewitness accounts of different people who were saying, "This is *my* experience of the risen Jesus - this is what happened to *me*." I hope *you* have a personal testimony of what Jesus means to *you*: and, because you are unique, there is no one anywhere who is quite like you; your experience of Jesus won't be exactly the same as that of someone else. This is so in human families. I have three children, a daughter and two sons. I am father to each of them, but because they have different temperaments, I relate to them in different ways. There will be great similarities, of course, but because my relationship with each is personal, it is unique. So it is with you and Jesus. He longs to have a personal relationship with you.

That truth is expressed in the wording of the 1662 Communion Service. I am not a traditionalist; I welcome the modern liturgies, but I was brought up on the old Prayer Book, and I love the words of administration set out there - "The body of our Lord Jesus Christ given for *thee*," "the blood shed for *thee*." It is right that we remind ourselves in our modern liturgies that there is only one bread, and so we are one body and are in fellowship with each other; but our unity is founded upon the fact that we each have a personal relationship with the same Lord Jesus Christ. And I suggest that we see something of that in the record of the witnesses to the resurrection.

You will remember that initially the indication of the resurrection was not the appearance of Jesus but the *dis*appearance of his body. Mary

finds the tomb is empty and assumes that someone has taken the body away. The gospels say there was an angel (some say two) who told the women, "He is not here, he is risen!" Then they add this; "Go and tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee - you will see him there." Am I reading too much into the story to say that it seems that the original plan was that the women and disciples should believe the fact of the resurrection simply on the word of the angel? There was no intention that anyone should actually *see* Jesus on Easter Day. He would not appear to them in Jerusalem, they would have to wait until they returned to Galilee to see the resurrected Jesus. But Mark adds an interesting detail. He records that the angel said, "Go tell his disciples and Peter, He is going ahead of you into Galilee." Why the words, "And Peter"? Peter *was* one of the disciples.

Well, we cannot be certain, but let me share with you what *I* believe. I think Peter must have been beside himself with grief and shame. All the disciples had run away, but Peter had denied he even knew Jesus; and he had done it not once but three times! And now Jesus was dead. Peter could never say 'sorry'. What is more, all the other disciples knew that Peter had denied his Lord. What is more yet, he had actually boasted that even if everyone else deserted the Lord, he wouldn't do so. And when Jesus warned him that before the cock crew next morning Peter would have denied him three times, he had insisted, "even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." It is a wonder to me that Peter didn't commit suicide. I am sure he was in an agony of conscience and didn't know how to live with himself. It is as though, in the counsels of heaven, the angel is told, "When you give the message to the disciples that Jesus is alive, make particularly sure that *Peter* knows." They all needed to know it, but Peter especially. Our Lord is a personal Lord and understands what each of us needs.

It seems, then, that there was a change of plan. The faith of the disciples - and of the women - was weaker than the Lord had hoped. The disciples didn't believe the report of the women and very probably the women didn't even believe the angel's message themselves.

Mary, in particular, was utterly disconsolate. It is as though our Lord could not bear to see her suffer so. If her faith was not sufficient for her to believe the word of the angel (and, goodness knows, to receive any message from an angel takes some believing in itself) then the Lord, in his compassion, would meet her need. If she could not believe on the word of the angel then he would appear to her now, personally and not wait for Galilee.

It is when he speaks her name, 'Mary', that she recognises him. Spontaneously she clasps him in her joy. But the Lord has to teach her that things are not the same as they had been. She is not to cling to his physical presence any longer; and even as he gives her the joy of realising that he is alive, he has gently to rebuke her; prepare her for the change in relationship. He *has* a body, the same body, but it has been transformed into a resurrection body. But the relationship is still there, he calls her by name. Jesus meets Mary's need and deals with her personally.

Then there are two more disciples, not members of the inner group of twelve, but probably they were amongst the seventy-two. Personally I think that they may well have been husband and wife. Luke just says "two of them were going to Emmaus," and records that one of them was a male named Cleopas. Emmaus is some 6 miles or so from Jerusalem. Luke records their conversation, and we see from that that they were depressed. "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." That says it all, doesn't it? "*We had* hoped." It is as though the heart of Jesus compels him to reveal himself to them also. Before they left Jerusalem they had heard the report because they explain that, "Some of our women went to the tomb early this morning but they didn't find his body. They came and told us they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive." But their faith also was weak - they didn't believe it. Their need was different from Mary's; hers was a matter of personal relationship with Jesus, theirs was more rational. They were looking for the Messiah, the one who would deliver Israel..

So for them Jesus goes through the Scriptures to show how the Messiah must suffer. Finally they recognise him as he breaks the bread over the meal, and at once he vanishes.

So they rush back all the way to Jerusalem to give the good news to the others. But when they get there, before they can say a word, the others tell them, "It is true, the Lord has risen and (and listen to this) has appeared to Simon." The special message from the angel that Peter, above all, should be told that Jesus was alive and would meet them in Galilee, wasn't enough. Like the rest, Peter hadn't the faith to believe on the word of the angel, so the Lord appeared to him personally. We are told nothing of what happened between them - only that Jesus came personally to Peter to meet his need. Later, in Galilee, Peter would be restored and re-commissioned, the Lord asking him three times if he really did love him - one for each denial. So the two who had rushed back from Emmaus (and remember they would have had to do that in the dark) had to listen first to the news from the eleven and those with them; only then are they able to tell *their* tale of meeting with Jesus on the road.

They are still talking about this - the appearance of Jesus to Peter and to the two from Emmaus - when Jesus appears to them all. They think he is a ghost. Their problem is exactly the opposite of Mary's; she thought he still had the same physical body he had had before, so he had to tell her not to cling to him. *They* thought they were looking at a ghost; so he showed them the wounds in his hands, feet and side, and deliberately ate some food before their eyes to prove that he was real. Do you see how Jesus varies his appearances so that they meet exactly the needs of those who meet with him?

Thomas wasn't there and when the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." So, a week later, Jesus appeared to the disciples again and this time Thomas is with them, and he says to him,

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." I disagree with most commentators here who seem to assume that Thomas did do just that. I don't believe it. I mean would you want to handle the actual wounds? No, that is to miss the point. When the other disciples were telling Thomas about the fact that they had seen the Lord, the Lord was not there; they were *reporting* the fact, and he didn't believe them. He thought he was telling them alone that he needed the proof of examining the wounds for himself, even to putting his fingers in the nail marks in his hands and his hand into the spear wound in his side.

When Jesus does appear to Thomas and the others the Lord offers the very proof Thomas has demanded. In other words Jesus is revealing that although Thomas did not see him at the time, he was aware of every word he had uttered. I think it was that that broke Thomas and brought the confession, "My Lord and my God." He didn't *need* actually to handle the wounds, and certainly John does not record in his gospel that he did so. Far more wonderful than that is the vivid revelation of the truth which Jesus was to share with his disciples immediately before he returned to heaven, "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the world".

Do you see? do you understand? The witnesses to the resurrection all had a personal experience of Jesus, which exactly met their need. What is *your* faith? Is it simply believing the right facts, the right doctrine? Or do you know Jesus personally as *your* Lord, *your* Saviour? If not, have you ever asked him to reveal himself in some way, which exactly meets *your* need, *your* temperament, *your* personality? And do not expect that it will be a revelation of normal human sight. There *are* people who have had such an experience, but that does not mean that they are particularly holy. No, remember that it was only that the disciples did not have the faith to believe the message of the empty tomb, and then the message of the angels, delivered by the women, that Jesus appeared to them in Jerusalem instead of the original plan of meeting with them in Galilee. As he said to Thomas, "Because you

have seen me, you have believed: Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

So look for other signs of the Lord's presence. It may be in the things that happen to you, or in the answer to some prayer, or a remark which someone makes to you. I remember hearing of a man, a factory worker, who committed his life to Jesus, but after a while, doubted if anything had happened, doubted whether he really did believe; until a man working with him asked, "What's happened to you?" "What do you mean?" he said. "Well you haven't sworn all week," was the reply. Now, don't misunderstand the point of that story." I am not saying that anyone who swears cannot be a Christian; but rather that it illustrates the point I am making – Jesus deals with each of us on a personal basis. That man wasn't aware that he *had* stopped swearing, and his mate's remark was enough to convince him that something *had* happened to him, Jesus *had* come into his life, even if he had had no blinding revelation.

Don't look for other people's experiences of Jesus. Learn from them, be encouraged by them, but Jesus doesn't want a second hand relationship with you – it is to be much more personal than that: something that will meet *your* need.

There is just one more thing for me to say. Because Jesus deals with us all individually, don't try to impose the way Jesus meets with you on everyone else. Some like formal services with choirs singing anthems and the great hymns with colourful vestments, ritual and incense. Others prefer informality, choruses, guitars and ministers wearing their ordinary clothes. Enjoy what is right for you but don't despise what is right for others. I hope you have a personal relationship with the Lord which is special to you and they have theirs which is special to them; because God is bigger than we can imagine.