

Sermon: 24/4/22 Extraordinary Times

Christianity is not without its challenges for those who believe. For those who would like to have faith, quite daunting and seemingly impossible for those who disbelieve its statements of faith...(creed)

Let us try to lay aside our rational self for a moment, to take a fresh look at what is one of the most central beliefs of the Christian faith.....The Resurrection of Jesus Christ, remembering that "nothing is impossible for God."
There are three scenarios that we can visit.

Mary Magdalene: The forgiven one. She is standing just outside the empty tomb where Jesus's body had been laid. She is brokenhearted, overcome with grief, sadness and an aching sense of desolation and loss, because not only has Jesus died but his body has unexplainably gone. Weeping from the depths of her being she sees a figure that she presumes is the gardener and asks if he has taken the body away. It is not until this person calls her by her name, "Mary," that she recognizes that it is Jesus standing there. Her instinct is to reach out and touch her beloved, however she is told to go quickly and tell His disciples that He is ascending to "my Father and Your Father, my God and your God." Her weeping has turned into joyous proclamation.

Emmaus: Two people, (one called Cleopas the other unknown) are walking along a dusty road towards their home. Their shoulders are hunched and their conversation, full of sadness and grief as they have witnessed their beloved teacher and friend, after being falsely accused, tortured and killed in the worst possible agonizing way, by excruciating crucifixion. The finality of death took 6h. A stranger joins their company and asks questions about their conversation. They relate their sad story of all that they had witnessed. The stranger rebukes them for their ignorance and then begins to interpret all the things in the scriptures that the Messiah must suffer before entering into his glory. (Luke 24)

Eventually, they come to their village and the stranger walks ahead as if to leave them. Because it is getting late they invite him to stay. It is meal time and as they begin to eat, the stranger takes on the role of the host, takes the bread, blesses, breaks it, and then gives it to them.....Immediately their eyes are opened and recognition dawns that this is Jesus, who then ...Vanishes from their sight.

The disciples in the upper room: In fear of the Jews, the door has been locked. They are terrified. Suddenly Jesus is there, allaying their fears with the words, "Peace be with you". Their mourning turns to joy as he reveals his wounded hands and side. Again the word of peace is spoken to them followed by the announcement that "as the Father has sent me, so send I you." Then in Jesus style He breathes on them and says "Receive the Holy Spirit" and endows them with the ability to forgive or retain sins. (Foretaste of the coming Holy Spirit). One of their group was not present.....Thomas.

One week later we are back in the same room with the disciples. This time Thomas was with them. As he had been absent on the previous occasion when Jesus had revealed himself, he probably felt quite "left out" of all the excitement. He wanted absolute proof. He wasn't willing to take another's account or take anyone else's word of the impossible appearance of Jesus. Jesus recognizes Thomas's need, gives him permission to reach out and touch his wounds.

The resurrection of Jesus after his death by crucifixion is crucial to faith and understanding. To some people miracles can be explained away, but the bodily resurrection cannot. The factual accounts of his appearance to so many (500 over 40 days) and the appearances so realistic, test the depth of our own belief. Sometimes we can be like Thomas and have many doubts.

Why did Jesus appear to so many people before His ascending to the Father?
I think there are many reasons:-

1. To address the grief of those who were chosen and closest to Him. He met the needs of each individual. This is the compassionate Christ who has suffered all that mankind has experienced or will experience in future.

He continues to meet us where we are. He sits with us in our sorrow, unbelief, tragedy or any crisis we may face in daily life. Today the risen Christ wants to commune with us. "If with all your heart you truly seek me, you shall surely find me." Through Bible reading etc. There are unlimited possibilities because God wants us to experience and know him in his unfathomable love. (Height, depth breadth and width Cross).

2. To restore hope for his followers future, as they were commissioned by Him to continue His work of salvation and healing for all people.

They were empowered to pronounce forgiveness and bring reconciliation of mankind to God the Father and each other. Forgiveness is absolutely necessary, for us and those who sin against us...(the Lord's Prayer, confession P).It cleanses us and frees us to be open to the Holy Spirit and His work in and through us.

Extract from the book "Rachael's Tears" about a daughter who was a victim of the Columbine massacre in America. It was written by her parents.

"There is a great misunderstanding about forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about pardon. It is an attitude, whilst pardon is an action. Had the perpetrators lived we would not have pardoned these boys for what they did. In fact I (Darrel) would have killed them to prevent the slaughter that occurred if I had been given the chance. I believe most people would have done the same. If they had lived, we would have testified against them and demanded that justice be done.

However, our hearts toward them could not have harboured unforgiveness. Unforgiveness blocks God's ability to flow through us to help others.

Our understanding of God's heart left us with only one choice, the decision to forgive. It was the choice of Jesus as He hung on the cross, dying and saying "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do"

Forgiveness is not just for the offender but also for the offended against.

Some examples are shown in the lives of Corrie Ten Boom, whose sister died in WW2 concentration camp. She was confronted by the one in charge of the camp, asking for forgiveness. With God's help, she was able to extend her hand and offer this grace. Another more recent example is Walter Micak, whose family was hunted down and shot during the Port Arthur Massacre. He knew that he could not get on with his life unless he found forgiveness for the perpetrator.

If we do not forgive, we end up in perpetual anger and bitterness, eventually offending others with our words and actions. When we choose to forgive we experience a letting go, a cleansing process that frees the offender. We also experience another level of grace...(Two glasses of water. One clear the other polluted....Which one would we drink?)

3. Thomas' response to seeing and touching the risen Jesus prompted the statement and joyous proclamation, 'MY LORD AND MY GOD' and has been said to be the highest level of faith. JESUS responds "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Can we put our own name here and respond with joy?

4. By appearing to so many witnesses the reality of Jesus' resurrection cannot be disregarded. Had he ascended immediately, we would not know that "death has lost its sting and sin has been overcome, the two worst fears we have. He was the first fruits of a new creation. Fear changed to faith.

5. These appearances that were witnessed and written down, are to help us to 'believe that this Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God and through this believing we have life in his name'. FOR US! A supernatural life, a new way of living with the capacity to love the unlovely, share the good news, have joy even in adversity, help the helpless, find patience where impatience was once part of our personality and gain wisdom. The same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is now with us. When we worship together, when we share our stories of faith, where two or three gather together, Jesus promises his risen presence.

6. These appearances are super-natural. Jesus has a different body not bound to the laws of nature like ours. Walls and locked doors could not hinder nor shut him out. He could set hearts on fire, speak with a familiar voice, still eat food, appear or disappear suddenly. He was still a living, breathing, feeling, bodily form as man but uniquely different. MY LORD AND MY GOD SAYS IT ALL.

Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, is both fully human and fully God. As the grain of wheat has to die before it produces a harvest so it for Him, dying for the harvest of humanity. Our mortal body is to help us with earthbound living, our senses of touch, taste etc. but Jesus shows us that we also will be resurrected. St. Paul says "In the twinkling of an eye, we will be like Him" Read 1 Cor. 2 "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him."

Read 1. Cor 15: 35 - The Resurrection Body: It will thrill you.