

28 – WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION

Note that the resurrection is never described in any of the four Gospels. All we have are witnesses to the resurrection. The closest we can come to a portrayal of what may have happened is in John 20: 5-7, but even that is only by implication.

The whole chapter may be an adaptation and weaving together of several earlier stories from the tradition which came to John separately. John's theological intent was to show that the resurrection was not just a miraculous act of God in and of itself, but fulfilled what had gone before in both the signs of the early part of John's narrative and the promises of the farewell discourse. Two parts of the chapter (vss. 1-18; 19-29) were meant to be complimentary. Both revealed how the several witnesses moved from unbelieving to believing.

Other Gospels do not mention Mary Magdalene alone at the tomb, only in company with at least one other woman. The visit of Peter and the Beloved Disciple, instigated by Mary's fear-filled report, also differed from other gospel narratives. Mary's meeting with Jesus, finally recognizing him and what had happened may be the most beautifully told story of all the resurrection appearances.

A striking contrast is drawn between the reaction of Peter and the Beloved Disciple to seeing the empty tomb. The Beloved Disciple outran Peter as they raced to the tomb. Ever the bold one, when he arrived, Peter entered right into the tomb and saw the empty shroud linen. But we are not told that believed what the evidence showed. Although

first to look into the tomb, the Beloved Disciple only entered after Peter, but he instantly recognized what he saw. He believed, but not completely understanding what he was seeing. John's interpreted their belief as incomplete with scriptural confirmation.

Mary's experience of the resurrection came through the resolution of her grief. Fearing first that the body had been stolen, she first had what may have been a hallucinatory vision of angels. Then she saw Jesus, but mistook him for a gardener. Was Jesus trying to comfort her when he asked her why she wept and whom she was seeking? On the other hand, mistaken identity is part of the Emmaus story in Luke and may have been an original aspect of the early tradition.

The moment of recognition came for Mary when Jesus spoke her name. That recalls 10:16 and 24 where John wrote of Jesus as the good shepherd whose voice his own sheep would recognize. Possibly without understanding, Mary would have clung to her risen master. Jesus prevented her from doing so by pointing to the on-going process of his returning to the Father as he had previously told the disciples he would do.

John's narrative presented Jesus' glorification as beginning during his life, and continuing during his trial, crucifixion, death and resurrection, but would reach its fulfillment only at his ascension. Hence Jesus' instruction to Mary to go and tell his disciples not only that she had seen the Lord, but give them his message of what was yet to come. Mary was the first to witness to the whole story.

29 – MORE WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION

The complementary story in 20:19-29 told of Thomas coming to believe a week after the other disciples saw the risen Jesus and believed that he had indeed risen from the dead. The final two verses (30-31) have been the subject of much debate among scholars as to whether or not they conclude John's Gospel as the evangelist wrote it.

Jesus' greeting when he first appeared in a locked room where the disciples were hiding in fear had a double meaning. "Shalom" ("peace be with you") is still a conventional greeting, but it also recalled Jesus' earlier promise to give his peace to the disciples (14:27). His repeated "Shalom" had much greater meaning after the disciples had recognized him. His words echoed his farewell prayer, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you." He commissioned them for their ministry and that of the whole believing community who would carry on the work God had sent him to do.

Jesus breathing on the gathered disciples was meant for all believers, not just this small assembly. His parting gift of peace would be for all time. That is the meaning of his words, "Receive the Holy Spirit." It reflected the breath of God at the creation (Gen. 2:7) and Israel's return from exile in Babylon (Ezekiel 37:9). In fact, the new community of faithful believers was indeed a new creation.

Granting the community the right to forgive sins was not about an act of penance in relation to individual deeds. John's view of sin was refusing to

recognize and accept God's revelation in Jesus as stated in throughout the Gospel (3:17-21; 8:21-24; 9:2, 39-40; 15:22-24.)

In that light was Thomas' doubt sinful? No, he wanted to see the evidence for himself. But Jesus reprimanded him for refusing to accept the word of the other disciples and being superficially concerned with the miraculous. In fact, John told of four different ways of coming to believe the resurrection: 1) The Beloved Disciples saw the grave wrappings. 2) Mary Magdalene heard her name spoken. 3) The gathered disciples saw Jesus and believed. 4) Thomas saw and overcame the miraculous aspect of his unbelief.

O'Day and Hylen describe Thomas' experience this way: "The story is not about Thomas' doubt and skepticism, but about the abundant grace of Jesus who meets Thomas' demands point for point in order to move him to faith. Notice that John does not narrate that Thomas actually puts his finger in Jesus' hands or side. The story moves directly from Jesus' invitation to Thomas' confession of faith." His confession fulfills Jesus' earlier promise to him that those who knew him would know the Father also (14:7).

The subsequent blessing reassured future generations that seeing Jesus is not a prerequisite to faith. Proclamation by word of mouth and in the written words such as John had done would bring the same gift of faith as seeing the risen Jesus. Subsequent copies of the original manuscript vary about "coming to" or "continuing to believe." Yet even those who do believe do not fully understand.