

Encountering Jesus on the Way Home

Pastor Jeff Wood

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Twenty-five year old Charles McKinley wanted to go home. He acquired an airline cargo crate, contacted a courier service, secretly put himself inside, and, having his pick-up arranged, was flown from NJ to TX. He was delivered 15 hours later to his parents' doorstep where he broke out surprising his parents and the delivery man. Pilot and air freight chief executive, Richard Philips commented, "He could have easily died." The freight cost was \$550. At that rate he could have flown home in first class.

There can be some surprising ways to get home, yes? Generally, after the resurrection the disciples of Jesus, with their Messiah dead and shown to be a non-Messiah, generally they were just headed home. They had to get burial chores done and to hole up until it was a little safer to travel, but generally it was just that they were headed home. But Jesus (surprise) came back from the dead and encountered them.

Those first encountering Jesus were a variety of people, with a variety of personalities and needs. After Easter we're taking some weeks to look at some of those encounters. You know what I wonder? I wonder if maybe you are like one of them (or if I am) and what that might mean? Let's look and pray and see.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then these words: John 20:1-31

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. [2] So

she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

[3] So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. [4] Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. [5] He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. [6] Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, [7] as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. [8] Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. [9] (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

[10] Then the disciples went back to their homes, [11] but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb [12] and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

[13] They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." [14] At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

[15] "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

[16] Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

[17] Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

[18] Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

[19] On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" [20] After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

[21] Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." [22] And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

[24] Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. [25] So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But 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."

[26] A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" [27] Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

[28] Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

[29] Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

[30] Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. [31] But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The word became flesh and dwelt amongst us, full of grace and truth, and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.

We've turned to the Gospel of John and chapter 20 again this week. John has more material about the after-resurrection part of Jesus' life than the other three gospel writers put together. He reports Jesus encountering various people in various ways. Let's see what we might learn.

The first one is simply known as the Beloved Disciple. This is probably the author of this book and passage, John. He, we are told, races Peter to the tomb, gets there first, peers in, makes way for Peter who goes all the way in, and then John goes in himself.

At this point we are told, 'He saw, he perceived, he entered and he believed.' We talked last week about how this is a good pattern for us all -- meet the data, process it, step in, and believe. Observe, think, make some reasoned conclusions, commit accordingly. There isn't a physical appearing of Jesus to John right then and there, but we do have a kind of appearing of the resurrected Jesus, an appearing in the disciple's understanding such that he believed. The first believer.

You know, I have a suspicion about John. Maybe it has to do with that nickname, the Beloved

Disciple. Some people have a heart for certain things. I had a friend who had a heart for birds. She loved birds. Once when we're driving I noticed something on the road's white stripe. It took my mind a second to comprehend what it was, but when I did, I realized it was a morning dove. It hadn't been hit, it was just sitting very still on the stripe amid the traffic flow. Because my friend liked birds, she recognized that bird way before I did. We turned around and got the bird. Does it make sense to you if I say that because she liked birds, she recognized it before I did? The liking helps the seeing.

John, being called the Beloved Disciple, may have been like that. There's something -- a disposition, a wanting, a caring -- that precedes the intellect, the reasoning, the apprehending facility. The Bible tells us time and again that, with respect to God, resisting hearts lead to confused minds and calloused lives. Oppositely, a heart that instead leans toward God, that opens to him with some hope and desire, leads to clarity and meaningful living. John, perhaps, had this lean. How about you? Me?

The next person we meet in this chapter is Mary. Mary has come to the cemetery earlier. John had a heart open to believe. Mary had a heart simply broken. She is weeping and at the sight of his body gone, says forlornly, "They've taken him and I do not know where." I think her grief keeps her from being able to see and understand who she is really talking to. Stress and brokenness can do that. It just eclipses everything.

I met a couple once. They were from Pennsylvania and had come back from being Presbyterian missionaries in Kazakhstan. I asked them about their personal stories. They said, with

conviction, “Our lives were a mess.” Their heads were shaking and the shadow of those days crossed for a moment in their eyes. “We were both alcoholics and it was all we had in common, and we were destroying ourselves and whatever marriage we had. It was in the depths of our pain that we got an idea to read the Bible. It just came to us and we did, and Jesus spoke to our hearts.”

That’s the way it seems to be in Jesus’ appearing to Mary. For the Beloved Disciple, it took a couple of pieces of plain evidence for him to get the picture. For Mary, with her heart sad, it took Jesus calling her name. One runs and sees evidence. The other cries and hears her name. One of us might read a book on the evidence for Jesus (*The Case for Christ* is in the theaters). Another of us might, in times of difficulty, hear our name spoken plainly by the Savior.

The next figures we come to in this chapter are some disciples *as a group*. The text tells us they were in a closed-up, scared huddle. Mary was alone and sad. They are together and scared. Jesus simply comes to them and they see his hands and feet, hear his voice, and they believe with rejoicing.

I’ve been with others and seen Jesus. I was in a Sunday School room when someone was talking about Jesus being really there for us, and I saw adults and other nodding. That was when I first thought clearly about Jesus. It was with others. It wasn’t because of others exactly, but those were the circumstances ... and maybe in a way being with others did help. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them, said Jesus.

The next person we meet is Thomas. Thomas is one who is stubborn and a little bit sullen when it came to believing. When Jesus had lingered at the

news of his friend Lazarus being sick...when Jesus explained that he knew Lazarus to be dead, explained that this was going to be a faith-builder trip to see Lazarus in the cemetery... when Jesus had said all that, it was Thomas who muttered to himself and all the rest, "May as well go with Jesus and get ourselves killed." He had a loyalty, but it was a pessimistic kind.

And here he is off by himself. Mary was by herself crying. Thomas was by himself being pessimistic and stubborn. When he meets up with his fellow disciples, he brushes their intelligence and experience and faith aside and says, "Seeing his hands and side may have been good enough for you, but unless I probe his hands and side with my own fingers, I will most certainly not believe."

Parents have sayings, you know. My mother would say, "If everyone else jumps off a cliff, you don't have to also." I think she got this line from Thomas' mother, because he is not going to jump off any cliff of faith. But Jesus meets this stubborn Eeyore. He meets him generously. He meets him with a bit of a challenge to stop being so hard-headed and special, and get on with his life by believing. He says to him, "Quit being committed to disbelieving." Think about that ... stop being committed to disbelieving.

I used to teach a Sunday School class in San Antonio, and there was a young lady in her twenties, a lawyer, who, as certain as the sun does rise, would every class challenge me. She was a great person and I liked her, but I came to sense that she took pride in doubting, that she was committed to it. She never doubted her doubts. She was like Thomas and yet, she, too, Jesus met. One day she just brought all her IQ and pride to Jesus and her life was never the same.

The Beloved Disciple, Mary, the disciples, Thomas. Each a little different – if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen one ... and the variety is to show that we in our differentness, Jesus can find. Isn’t that good news?

They were, generally, going home. They say home is *where* the heart is, and we mean that that’s where your/my heart is. But Jesus is the one who is all heart for you and for me. Wherever he is, is home. Let yourself be encountered by him, your heart’s true home. He encounters all sorts of people in all sorts of ways. Thanks be to God.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call. pastorjeffwood@gmail.com
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