

April 8, 2007

“The Real Living Presence of Christ”
John 20:10-18

FCF: Confusion regarding the relevance of the resurrection

PROPOSITION: (anchor) With the coming of the real living presence of Christ,
(magnet) we cannot live as though nothing has happened.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Some news you can dismiss – “Martians Preparing Attack” or any Elvis sightings. Some news you can acknowledge as trivial and set aside – “Man Sets World Record for Pogo Stick Jumping” or another update on Paris Hilton. Other news you need to note but know that it won’t have any immediate effect on you – hurricane season predictions or shakeups in the political realm. These are all things brought to our attention without requiring us to undertake any radical revision of our thinking or our approach to life.

But the news of this morning is not that kind. “Christ is risen!” cannot be set aside or even set beside everything else we know. It demands an upheaval, to be set at the very center of everything and made the starting point of it all. The Bible makes that so clear, it comes out in so many ways, and no less so than in our text this morning.

SCRIPTURE READING: [John 20:1-18](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Having served in churches in other contexts where hospital visitation was a more pressing need, I can tell you I’ve found myself in a variety of such situations – some easier than others. Such visits were most distressing when not only was the patient unconscious, unresponsive, doing poorly, declining, and likely to be passing on soon but when the family was speaking as though they weren’t even there. The lack of sensitivity, the assumptions about “what they would want”, the references to this person so plainly present in the third person all feels so odd. Sometimes I’ve found myself wondering, “*Would you speak that way if they were present? No? Well, they are present!*”

Connecting that with Easter and what we’ve just read, it’s vital we recognize that Jesus is present. He’s not unconscious or absent. He isn’t dead. He’s present. And the significance of that was borne out in the early hours of that morning. Through what John recorded, we have the opportunity to witness this extraordinary exchange between the risen Jesus and one of His grieving followers, Mary Magdalene. Now, who was she? Despite what Dan Brown and others would have you to believe, we actually know very little about her. But this much is clear. She was the first witness of the resurrection and its first herald as well. We also know something of her past ([READ Luke 8:1-3](#)). Taken over by this darkness, she needed deliverance. Demons controlled her and Jesus delivered her out from this condition, which prompted her to leave everything behind and follow him. And she did – all the way to the foot of the cross on Friday and then to the tomb on Sunday. Such was her love and devotion to Him. Such was what fueled her pain when it seemed He was gone and her excitement when He had returned.

What Mary learned is the very thing we need to learn as well. Jesus is not gone. His presence may not be what we expected and, at times, we may have difficulty understanding. But He is not gone. It is “the real living presence of Christ” we see here. May we see more of it. Well, let’s take a look, give this a listen, and see what we find.

I. LESSONS FROM MARY’S WEEPING

The first point comes from what we learn through Mary’s weeping ([READ John 20:10-15](#)). She thought she had lost Him. She thought the light was gone.

A) *Where She Was Right*

Now partly, we would have to say she was absolutely right.

1. What she was doing

After all what had happened? The setting was dark – not just because of the hour of the morning but the death of her Lord. She’s standing at a tomb. Notice the number of times it’s mentioned – this place of shattered hopes and dreams. And she is weeping – not just a whimpering but a wailing, an unrestrained sobbing. Likely, this is at least partly why she did not see who this was near her – that and the possibility His appearance has been altered and perhaps even the need at this point for illumination in order to recognize Him.

2. Why it was right

In any case, she was weeping. And she was at least partly right. For stoicism, the call to the stiff upper lip, is wrong. Jesus wept. It is not immature to weep. Indeed, can’t we say that the felt absence of Christ is a reason worth weeping? It had to be. Life had lost its meaning when she lost Him. And she really thought she’d lost Him altogether.

B) *Where She Was Wrong*

But even as she was partly right we have to say she was partly wrong as well.

1. What she was doing

For her concern is but for a dead body. Her assumption is that He really is gone and His body could be gone only because thieves took it. And now she can’t take any more.

2. Why it was wrong

But He isn’t gone. Indeed, when the angels and then Jesus ask the question, “*Woman, why are you weeping?*” there is a hint of a gentle rebuke. “*Your tears are precious. But you don’t need to shed them.*” His first question is a gentle rebuke. But the second is an invitation. “*Whom are you seeking? What kind of Savior were you expecting?*”

The expectation, the assumption, that Jesus is gone leaves us cold, helpless, and hopeless. And gives cause to cries of all kinds. For we assume then that we need to be able to see, to be in control, in the know, at all times if He’s gone. But we can’t.

Illustration:

Try as we like, we can’t. I remember going through a security check at an airport, losing what little control I had and feeling quite vulnerable. I was wearing my glasses that day and had to take them off as they were checking me over. Now, understand, I’m at this major airport with all kinds of chaos around me and I can’t see what’s going on.

We try to handle it but we can’t. A friend of mine tells of the night time routine with one of his little ones. Every night after this child was tucked in, the protest would come. “*Daddy, I can’t see.*” “*That’s okay. You don’t need to see. Daddy can see you.*”

Application:

Here’s the thing. If Jesus is just gone we do need to just handle it. If Jesus is just gone then we do have to see everything. But He isn’t just gone. He’s here. The tomb is empty. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. We are not alone at the tomb, in the dark.

“*Where is the Lord?*” we cry in the waiting room, facing the uncertainty of diagnosis and treatment. “*Where is the Lord?*” we cry when we don’t know how much longer we can take this deployment and all it brings. “*Where is the Lord?*” we cry when we’re falsely accused or even rightly accused and yet unforgiven by those we thought would understand. “*Where is the Lord?*” He’s there. He’s there. With the resurrection, the real living presence of Christ has broken into this world and shattered the darkness.

II. LESSONS FROM MARY’S CLINGING

That's the first thing. In the wake of Mary's crying for Jesus, we see that He is there. But there's more. And we see that in her clinging to Jesus (**READ John 20:16-17**). She thought she had lost Him. And then learned she hadn't. Then she thought she could hold Him. And then learned she couldn't. Now let's think this through as well.

A) Where She Was Right

Here again, she was partly right in holding onto Him as she was.

1. What she was doing

When she hears His mention of her name, she is then able to see. Anguish and despair are swallowed up with astonishment and delight. "Rabboni!" – likely how she addressed Him before. And equally likely, she then fell at His feet and laid hold of Him.

2. Why it was right

And why shouldn't she? It's Him! Not some vision or some ghost! It's the Master! This is better than she had ever hoped, beyond any expectation she had that morning.

B) Where She Was Wrong

So she's partly right. But Jesus makes clear she's partly wrong as well.

1. What she was doing

She doesn't want to lose Him again and so she's holding on. That's made clear in what Jesus says – telling her to stop doing something that she's doing, to stop clinging to Him.

2. Why it was wrong

Why does He say this? Again, she doesn't want to lose Him. But He wants her to understand what's coming. Things are not going to be as they were. His presence is going to remain. But it is going to change. Things are not going to be quite as they were – they'll be even better. This is a dual encouragement. (**READ John 20:17a**) "Mary, I am leaving – just as I promised. But not yet." (**READ John 20:17b**) "I'm not leaving yet. But I am leaving – ascending to the Father and sending the Spirit, just as I promised."

This is why Jesus said (**READ John 16:7**). Now why would He say this? How could it be better? Because upon His ascension, He was to send someone (**READ John 14:16-17**). Jesus is sending another Helper, Counselor, Comforter, Ally, Advisor, Advocate. He has been that for them. And now He is preparing to send the Spirit that that might continue. The reality of His presence was not to change. But the form was.

And, at the risk of sounding trite, this just stands to reason. For as you look at the progression through the Scriptures, the unfolding of the Immanuel promise of God's being and dwelling with His people, this fits into a pattern. Think with me. After all He has promised, after all He has done, do we really think His presence with us would come to a stop, that it would not be dramatically enhanced, advancing further forward? Based on everything we've seen so far, this is exactly what we would expect to see – an increase in the intensity of the intimacy. This is exactly what we would expect to see and do see.

Illustration:

Let me tell you about the Sticky Book series. The first two I read were Sticky Trees (helping you identify the common North American trees) and Sticky Night Skies (guiding you in the constellations of the stars). I recently finished the third, Sticky Stock Charts – interpreting chart patterns, identifying trend lines, and forecasting earnings based on certain patterns. "Based on this, it seems certain that will follow." Well, that's what we see here. The fullness of the promise implies a fullness to the fulfillment, what we considered just last week – the new covenant (**READ Jeremiah 31:31-34**).

Application:

All of which is true for us. Jesus' words to Mary are words for us. The nature of His presence has changed but the reality has not. It is no longer localized – limited by being but in one place. He is wherever we are. It is no longer externalized – limited by being but on the outside. He now dwells within, the reality of His presence now somehow made more intimate, more intense. It is markedly different. But no less real.

The Spirit's work is connected to the Word of God – inspiring it to be written (words recorded just as He intended) and then illuminating our minds and hearts to understand, embrace, and apply it. He includes us in this mission – gifting, equipping, guiding, sending, sustaining. All the while convicting, comforting, renewing, restoring us to the image of Christ. Jesus' work goes on through the Spirit. Now – even now.

Now the challenge to us is to take daily to heart that His presence is not now less but greater than it ever was. The challenge is to really hear what He is saying here, to let what He says inform what we see. Just as it surely did for Mary. The challenge is not to live as though nothing has happened. Or worse, as if He wasn't here at all. The challenge is to live and abide by our confidence in the real living presence of Christ.

CONCLUSION:

What effect did all this have upon Mary? When we met her at the tomb, hers was what we might call a frustrated devotion. Her heart was agitated, swelling with sorrow. Her life had lost its meaning. But the resurrection changed her. The streams of tears became steps of action. A mourner now a missionary (**READ John 20:18**). All because she knew He was with her – not just for her but really with her. And it meant everything.

That's what the assurance of the "real living presence of Christ" does. It emboldens, impels, strengthens, comforts, convicts – because He does. Think back with me to the question presented in the hospital as to whether we would act a certain way if the person was present. Would you act "that way" if you knew He was present? Would you insist on your way out of fear of giving up control to others? Hold a grudge against someone you're convinced not only did you harm but meant it? Be so dissatisfied with how things are you'd seek to accumulate more and more stuff as though that was all there was and all that mattered? Lust for that person or their image and what you think they can give you? Despair of His not knowing or caring and never cry out to Him?

Would you act that way if you knew He was present? No? Well, here's the deal. He is! He is present. Now think of the difference that makes! Doesn't that mean we should be quick to trust Him, looking to Him for strength in what He has purposed for us and wisdom in how to face it? Become living heralds of this news, "*I have seen the Lord!*"? Living testimonies of mercy, forgiveness, forbearance and with the ready explanation as to how this is nothing less than the real living presence of Christ in us?

Now, please hear me. I list those possibilities not to shame or burden you. He has borne the shame. The burden He has taken upon His back. I stress these things not to shame or burden you but to excite you, to thrill you with what He can do. For "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" "He is risen indeed!"

PROPOSITION: (anchor) With the coming of the real living presence of Christ,
(magnet) we cannot live as though nothing has happened.