

Building our Faith The Sign of the Resurrection, #4

Intro: In my three previous lessons on the sign of the resurrection I have presented the facts the gospel writers give us concerning the death of Jesus, His burial, and the circumstances at His tomb on the first day of the week. All this evidence points strongly to the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that He would rise from the dead on the third day.

But now let's consider the capstone of the proof of the resurrection--the witnesses of the resurrection.

The testimony of the Gospels is not merely that Jesus' tomb was found empty on the third day and that He was said to be alive, but that numerous witnesses saw Him alive after His death.

Remarkably none of the gospel writers give all the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus; but when we collate the data from all four we see any impressive array of evidence--at least eleven distinct appearances of Jesus to individuals or groups after His death confirming that He was raised from the dead.

Each of these appearances has its own distinct evidential value; so I would like to at each of them some detail.

The Appearance to Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:11-18)

The details of the appearance

Mary had come with some of the other women to anoint Jesus' body. They had taken note of where Jesus had been buried late Friday evening and now returned to discover that the stone had been rolled away and that the tomb was empty. "Two men" (angels in human form) announced to them that Jesus had risen from the dead and that they should go tell the apostles. They left with mixed emotions of joy, fear, and even uncertainty.

Mary Magdalene seems to have had trouble accepting such an idea. When she comes to the disciples she says, "*They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.*" (Jn. 20:2)

Peter and John in response to Mary (& the women's) report run to the tomb, confirming that it was empty. After their departure, Mary lingers weeping in distress that Jesus' body is missing. While stooping to look inside two angels speak to her from within the tomb, "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" (They are asking Mary the right question. There is no reason to cry; but Mary doesn't yet know why.) She sadly responds, "*Because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.*"

Sensing someone standing behind her, she turns around as he also says, "Woman, why are you weeping?" (Jesus too is asking the right question. There is no need to weep; for He is no longer dead.) And still

Mary in her tears and previous mode of thinking can only conclude that the one talking to her is the one who tended the garden where the tomb is. She pleads with him as she turns once more to the empty tomb, "*Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.*" (Jn. 20:15)

At that moment the presumed "gardener" calls Mary by name. How would he have known this? Mary turns around, no doubt startled by the fact that He calls her by name. She knows that voice; and now she sees that it is Jesus. She responds, "Rabboni." (which means in Aramaic "my lord," but was often used of a "teacher" somewhat like the Hebrew word "Rabbi." This term she no doubt had often used to address Jesus.) And then rushing toward him, she takes hold of him as if she would never let him go!

*Jesus *said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'"* (Jn. 20:17)

Some observations about the appearance

First note that Mary was not inclined to believe in Jesus' resurrection, though He had predicted it. Even the previous announcement of the angels at the tomb is not enough to convince her that Jesus is alive.

Only seeing Him in person would change that.

Note that Mary's inability to recognize Jesus immediately is reasonable. She is weeping (tears are blinding). She is focused on the empty tomb, not upon the one speaking to her. And so it takes considerable effort on Jesus' part to get her to see who He is. His question, "Why are you weeping?" is his way of saying, "I am not dead:" but Mary is not hearing it. Only when He calls her name does she focus more clearly upon the identity of the one speaking to her and her reaction is spontaneous and undoubting. No godly woman would ever embrace a total stranger the way Mary embraced Jesus.

Mary was certain who she had seen. As she returns to the apostles all uncertainty about where Jesus body was has been resolved and replaced with the certain testimony, "I have seen the Lord."

One final observation: Though the concept is disgusting to us, in the ancient world women were not considered reliable witnesses. They could not testify in court. Yet the first human to see Jesus alive after His death and report it to others was a woman. If the story of the resurrection had been fabricated by males, would they in view of the culture have made the initial witness a woman? (It might be remembered that when Paul later gives the Corinthians the witnesses of the resurrection, he recognizes this propensity to doubt the testimony of women and omits the female witnesses of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15.

All this adds great weight to testimony of Mary Magdalene.

The appearance to the other women who came to the tomb

The details of the appearance

Mary Magdalene was one of a number of women who had come to the tomb early Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus. They include, Mary the mother of James (or Joses), Joanna, and Salome (Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:1). However after their discovery of the empty tomb, they had all gone back to report the angel's message to the apostles and the others who had gathered with them to mourn.

Their testimony prompted the apostles to return with them to the empty tomb to verify what they were saying. Mary Magdalene lingered at the tomb after the apostles and other women left. It appears that after Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, He then also appeared to the other women on their return from the tomb. Matthew alone records this appearance:

*And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus *said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see Me." (Mt. 28:9-10)*

Observations about the appearance

Again it is interesting that Jesus first revealed Himself to the women who had loved and served Him. Was it His way to showing appreciation for their loyalty and devotion to Him? They were the ones who had initially come to the tomb to render one last act of love and service by anointing His body. They were rewarded with the first opportunity to see Jesus alive after His death.

The Greek expression Jesus used means "rejoice." It was a common form of greeting; but it was the perfect greeting here. No doubt their hearts were heavy from the loss they had sensed, and now the bewilderment of the missing body and the statement of the angels about resurrection. Were they really true? Jesus answers their concerns with a single word, "Rejoice!" That must have been the most joyous "hello" they had ever heard!

There is no doubt that they knew who Jesus is. They, as so many had done before, prostrated themselves at his feet and made obeisance to Him as God. The Greek expression pictures someone on their face before someone they honor. And Jesus accepted this worship.

Again their testimony is impressive since it involves several godly women who knew Jesus very well, having followed him during His ministry.

The appearance to Cleopas and another unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-32)

The details of the appearance

Only Luke records this appearance to two disciples during the afternoon of the first day of the week. These men were followers of Jesus; and they had had great hope that He was the one who would redeem Israel. They had been present with the apostles that morning

to mourn with them when the women came to report the empty tomb and the angelic visitation. They knew that the disciples had gone to the tomb to verify the women's report, but they had not yet seen Jesus alive.

But now apparently later in the day, they were making their way back home to Emmaus, a small village seven miles from the city of Jerusalem. As they walked along, they were talking about the things that had happened. While they journeyed, Luke says, Jesus approached them and began walking along with them.

And He said to them, "What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?" And they stood still, looking sad. (Lk. 24:17)

It is as if Jesus' question literally stopped them in their tracks. Cleopas responded, "*Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?*" (Luke 24:18)

He went on to tell how Jesus had been in their view a great prophet who worked miracles; but who had been crucified by the Jews; and how their hope that He would be Jerusalem's redeemer had been dashed. Further they rehearsed all that they knew about the empty tomb and the disciple's visit there earlier in the day. Little did they know that they were talking with the very one they were talking about. His identify was hidden in some way from them.

But after hearing their disappointments, Jesus mildly rebuked them for their propensity to disbelieve the prophets, explaining to them that the Scriptures had taught that the Christ should first suffer before entering His glory. Their hearts burned within them as He explained the OT prophecies to them about the Christ.

As they reached their destination, Jesus indicated that He would continue His journey away from Jerusalem; but they insisted that He stay with them, since it was getting late in the day.

As they reclined to eat their food, Jesus offered the blessing, and began to give bread to them. At that moment they were made to see who their visitor really was. It was the resurrected Lord.

That fact was confirmed by His immediate disappearance from them, a thing no mortal man could do; but only one with divine power.

Observations about the appearance

Once more it is interesting that Jesus' first appearances were not to the apostles who had fled, but to loyal disciples who believed in Him.

These two were clearly men of devotion to Jesus and had placed their hopes in Him.

Again we see that there was no inclination on their part to presuppose the resurrection of Jesus, though they had heard the testimony of the women.

In this account, there is also a supernatural confirmation that the person they were seeing was Jesus. Jesus' miraculous disappearance confirms the reality of the resurrection they had just witnessed. Jesus was no mere apparition or spirit. Every evidence suggests that He was tangible to them all this time. He walked with them, He talked to them. He prayed with them, and even broke the bread that they were eating. This was no mere vision, dream, or apparition. It was a real appearance of the living Lord. So impressed by their experience, they immediately, though late in the day and a couple of hours at least from Jerusalem made the journey back to report what they had seen.

Conclusion: Each of these appearances in its unique way gives solid proof that Jesus had been raised on the third day and was able to give clear proof of it in the way He presented Himself.

What are your conclusions about the evidence of these people? Were they lying? Were they mistaken? Were they telling the truth?