

## **JOHN 20:1-18. How do we respond to the risen Christ?**

The reading we've just listened to from the Gospel of John is not just an eyewitness account of the drama that unfolded on that first Easter morning. If we look a little deeper, we find it gives us a snapshot of four of Jesus' disciples, and how they reacted to this mind-blowing event we call the Resurrection. As we look at them, I wonder if we might just see something of ourselves?

The main players in this drama are the disciples John, Peter, Thomas, and Mary Magdalene. Mary was a woman that Jesus had dramatically healed, and who became one of his most ardent followers.

### **MARY**

We'll start with Mary. She was unique amongst Jesus' followers in that she was present at the three key events which surrounded Jesus' final days: she was there at his death, she was there when he was buried, and she saw him raised from the dead. Mary's experience of Jesus was dynamic. She'd been miraculously healed. Mary's encounter with Jesus was something powerful that completely transformed her life. And so – because of her dramatic encounters with him, and because she'd walked closely with him through his earthly ministry, she could believe in his resurrection. Right from the start, when Jesus asked her to serve him by telling the other disciples he was alive – she did so, without question.

There will be those of us who come to faith in Jesus through a dramatic encounter. My own experience – or conversion if you want to call it that – was like that. I met Jesus in my mid-teens. I was overwhelmed by the experience! I discovered, beyond any doubt, that Jesus was real. Meeting Jesus completely turned my life around and I was never the same! I know that many folk could tell a similar story.

### **JOHN**

Then there was John. John was the youngest disciple, and often referred to as the 'beloved' disciple. He would have been in his late teens/early twenties when he first met Jesus. It seems Jesus had something of a soft spot for him. The thing that stands out about John in this story was his lack of confidence. In the Gospel account, we read this:

Peter and the other disciple (who was John) started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside.

John hesitated. By Jewish law having contact with the dead made a person unclean, and they had to go through a purification ritual before they could be admitted to temple worship again. This may have been one of the reasons for John's hesitation. Perhaps he just couldn't face going into the tomb. Whatever it was, he held back a little, and so it took him a little longer than it took Mary to embrace the reality of the resurrection. The following verse then says this: **He (John) saw and believed.**

We don't know quite what it was John believed at this point, because the next part of the verse says, **The disciples still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.**

We see from John's response to the resurrection that coming to faith in the risen Jesus was not as instant for him as it was for Mary. It was more of a journey. His understanding (as with most of the disciples) was progressive. He did finally have the courage to take a step towards belief by entering the tomb, and we know from the rest of Scripture, that John grew to be a great leader in the early church. He was the only disciple who lived through the persecution of Nero, finally ending up in exile on the Greek Island of Patmos. John shared his wisdom and maturity with the early church, leaving behind three letters and the book of Revelation, which form a significant part of the New Testament Scriptures.

Perhaps we see ourselves in John's response to the resurrection. We can have a basic belief in the Christian message, yet we can be hesitant to commit ourselves fully to the risen Jesus. We may need more information or we may need more courage before we feel ready to accept the truth of the resurrection, and commit ourselves to following Jesus.

## **PETER**

Peter is an interesting character. Like John, he wasn't convinced about the resurrection right away. We read that the disciples returned to their homes. Had they been fully convinced at that time that Jesus had been raised from the dead, he surely would have shouted it from the rooftops! Later, when the disciples were together, Jesus appeared to them, and from then, he too began to believe.

However, the real shift for Peter came some time later. It's not alluded to in this section, but we know Peter was carrying a lot of guilt. If you know the story, you'll remember that Peter boldly stated he would die with Jesus. Yet when Jesus was arrested, he fled. Then later when he crept up to find out what was happening to Jesus, he was seen and challenged about being one of his disciples. Peter denied it – three times. Then he caught Jesus' gaze, realised his cowardice and ran weeping from the scene.

It wasn't till some time later, when Jesus appeared again to a group of them on the beach after his resurrection, that Peter was able to fully commit himself to the risen Jesus. Jesus was cooking some fish, and offered the disciples some breakfast when they came in from fishing. During the conversation that followed, Jesus asked Peter 3 times if he loved him. As Peter said yes each time, Jesus affirmed his calling to be a leader among the disciples. One time for each time Peter had denied Jesus. Peter left that encounter healed and restored, and he too became a powerful witness for Jesus.

Peter needed some deep healing before he felt able to fully follow the risen Christ. I wonder if some of us relate to that? Perhaps we too carry some guilt, or some deep hurts – which prevent us from being able to commit ourselves to the risen Christ. We need some healing to happen before we can come to faith in Jesus.

## **THOMAS**

Then of course there was Thomas. Doubting Thomas, he's been called. He's the disciple who found his analytical mind got in the way of him believing in the resurrection. The first time Jesus appeared to the disciples, Thomas wasn't actually with them. Of course next time they saw him, they told him all about how they'd seen Jesus alive and spoken to him – and Thomas had missed it!

That's when he got aggro, and said that he wouldn't believe till he saw for himself!

Jesus met Thomas at his point of need. Thomas *really* needed to see for himself, particularly in the light of the life Jesus would call him to live – and so Jesus showed himself in a special way to Thomas. Jesus specifically addressed his doubts, and invited him to believe. Thomas was convinced. “My Lord and my God!” was his response.

Perhaps there's something in Thomas that we see in ourselves. Do we feel that Jesus rising from the dead is all a bit far-fetched? Do we want to understand God more fully with our minds before we will commit ourselves to the risen Jesus?

If we can relate to Thomas, or any of these disciples, and their response to the resurrection, know that these responses are normal.

Some of us, like John, will be hesitant about committing ourselves to the risen Christ; some of us, like Peter, will have baggage that gets in the way. There will be others of us, like Thomas, who want to analyse and dissect matters of faith, and have their doubts removed before they are willing to embrace the risen Christ, and there will be those who will have a dramatic encounter with Jesus and dive in, boots and all.

Wherever we might be on this spectrum of responses, the thing we need to remember is that the deepest desire of God's heart is for us to come to know him. Not just know about him – *know* him. In other words, to enter into a friendship with him, where we can communicate intimately with him; where he can deal with the sin and brokenness in our lives and heal all that separates us from him. The whole reason for the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was so that we could be reconciled to God.

He wants to come and live within us, to empower us to reach our full potential as human beings and to fulfil the calling he has for each of us to serve him in his church and in the world.

In the same way God met his disciples at their point of need, so he will meet us. We need to ask him to do that. Then we'll find that whether we are hesitant, or

broken, or doubtful, God will work with us and in us to bring us to that point where we, like Thomas, can bow before him and say, “My Lord and my God”.

If you'd like to explore this further, please speak to me after the service, I'd be delighted to visit, or have coffee with you if you're local, or be in touch another way if you're not.

Let's pray...