

Walking the Via Dolorosa – Bonus Session 2

The Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus

“They Did Not Recognise Him; But Some Doubted”

1 Corinthians 15:51-55 - New International Version (NIV)

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

Paul talks about a mystery: that we shall all be changed. That when the great and wonderful Day of the Lord comes, when the last trumpet sounds, we shall be changed. We shall not be as we were. Perishable to imperishable, mortal to immortal, we shall be raised, and in being raised, we shall be changed. Which might explain another mystery; which might explain why it is, that when people encounter the Risen Jesus, the model, the example, the guarantee of our own Resurrection, they don't seem to recognise him. Not even his closest friends. Not at first.

In Matthew, we read (28:16-17): *“Then the eleven disciples left for Galilee, going to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him—but some of them doubted!”*

In Luke, we get quite a bit more. You've got the story of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, putting seven miles between themselves and trouble. Jesus somehow joins them on their walk, but, we are told, *“they were kept from recognising him.”* The miles pass, the conversations go on, but they still don't have a clue. Not until they sit down for supper, when Jesus gives thanks for the bread, breaks it, gives it to them, are we told, *“then their eyes were opened and they recognised him.”* The two run back to Jerusalem – or jog, or stumble – it is seven miles – and tell the others.

And then suddenly, this (Luke 24:36-43):

And just as they were telling about it, Jesus himself was suddenly standing there among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. But the whole group was startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost!

“Why are you frightened?” he asked. “Why are your hearts filled with doubt? Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it’s really me. Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don’t have bodies, as you see that I do.” As he spoke, he showed them his hands and his feet. Still they stood there in disbelief, filled with joy and wonder. Then he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he ate it as they watched.

Over to the Gospel of John where we find that famous scene starring Mary Magdalene, weeping in the empty tomb. Mary turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn’t recognize him. *“Dear woman, why are you crying?” Jesus asked her. “Who are you looking for?”*

She thought he was the gardener. “Sir,” she said, “if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.”

Of course, then Jesus calls her by name, and finally she gets it, she finally understands who it is, and she yelps for joy and clings to him so tight he has to tell her to let go, or he’ll never manage to ascend to heaven, with her hanging on like that.

John then tells the story of Jesus appearing to the disciples, locked doors or not, in much the same way as Luke, but adds the famous professional doubter Thomas to the mix. Thomas misses the first visit, and doesn’t believe his friends when they tell him the good news. Would you write the Gospel like this? A room full of disciples telling of the Resurrection of Jesus, and one of their own friends reacts with, “Yeah, right. If you think I’m going to believe that, you must think I’m crazier than Mary, here.” A week later, though, Jesus does appear to Thomas, who, at last, all doubts aside, believes.

Finally, following orders, the disciples head off to Galilee. You can picture them nervously sitting around in Peter’s house, jumpy, keeping an eye out for the Temple authorities, who just might be on their trail. Days pass. Finally, Peter has had enough. With darkness safely fallen, we hear this (John 21:3-14):

Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing!" The others said, "We will go with you." They went out in their boat. But they didn't catch a thing that night.

Early the next morning Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize who he was. Jesus shouted, "Friends, have you caught anything?" "No!" they answered. So he told them, "Let your net down on the right side of your boat, and you will catch some fish." They did, and the net was so full of fish that they could not drag it up into the boat.

Jesus' favourite disciple told Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon heard that it was the Lord, he put on the clothes that he had taken off while he was working. Then he jumped into the water. The boat was only about a hundred yards from shore. So the other disciples stayed in the boat and dragged in the net full of fish...

Jesus said, "Come and eat!" But none of the disciples dared ask who he was. They knew he was the Lord. Jesus took the bread in his hands and gave some of it to his disciples. He did the same with the fish. This was the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from death.

Did you get that? *"The disciples did not realize who he was... But none of the disciples dared ask who he was..."* And, to top it all off, *"This was the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from death."* Three times, and there is still some uncertainty there.

So, what's going on here? Well, it seems as though something about Jesus has changed. Something that prevents even the people who know him best from immediately recognizing who it is. And to understand just what that might be, we have to turn from the Gospels, and to the Apostle Paul.

Paul's epistle to the church he founded in Corinth – the letter we call First Corinthians – is earlier than the Gospel accounts, but it deals with the very mystery we're facing this evening. And in the great 15th chapter – the chapter on Jesus' resurrection, and ours – Paul explains what is going on.

People in Corinth are having trouble with this whole Resurrection thing. They know that dead people just don't come back to life, and they speculate that maybe Jesus didn't either – not really. But Paul, who has personally seen the Resurrected Jesus; Paul, who has spoken with the Resurrected Jesus; Paul, who was kicked off his horse and struck blind by the glory of the Resurrected Jesus, knows different. After listing the hundreds of people to whom the Resurrected Jesus appeared, Paul writes (1 Cor 15:12-20):

If we preach that Christ was raised from death, how can some of you say that the dead will not be raised to life? If they won't be raised to life, Christ himself wasn't raised to life. And if Christ wasn't raised to life, our message is worthless, and so is your faith. If the dead won't be raised to life, we have told lies about God by saying that he raised Christ to life, when he really did not.

So if the dead won't be raised to life, Christ wasn't raised to life. Unless Christ was raised to life, your faith is useless, and you are still living in your sins. And those

people who died after putting their faith in him are completely lost. If our hope in Christ is good only for this life, we are worse off than anyone else.

But Christ has been raised to life! And he makes us certain that others will also be raised to life.

And with the certainty of Jesus resurrection and ours out of the way, he addresses this mystery about Jesus' appearance being changed. Giving many examples, he concludes, *"That's how it will be when our bodies are raised to life. These bodies will die, but the bodies that are raised will live forever. These ugly and weak bodies will become beautiful and strong. As surely as there are physical bodies, there are spiritual bodies. And our physical bodies will be changed into spiritual bodies."* Like Jesus, we, too, shall be changed.

Ever wondered about whether the Resurrection of the Dead was such a hot idea, if it meant being stuck with this imperfect, creaky old thing? What Paul so gently refers to as these "ugly and weak bodies?" These bodies so vulnerable to aches, to pains, to sickness and disease, to age, to infirmity, to death? No, writes Paul: *"As surely as there are physical bodies, there are spiritual bodies. And our physical bodies will be changed into spiritual bodies."*

And that is why Jesus wasn't so immediately recognised. Thirty-three years of hardship, of wandering, of giving himself for others, of wear, of tear, of harsh Middle Eastern climate and harsher Roman punishment, were wiped away, and the body which was raised was raised incorruptible. Changed. As *"we too will be changed, in a moment,"* says Paul, *"in the twinkling of an eye."*

It turns out the Gospel writers were just being honest. People didn't, at first, recognise Jesus when he was raised, for Jesus was changed. His Resurrected Body was changed from the beaten wreck of a thing which they dragged down from the cross just three days before, into a body reflecting the glory of the Resurrection.

And the good news is, as it was with Jesus, so, by His grace, shall it be with us. We too shall be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, from perishable to imperishable, from mortal to immortal, from death to life, as finally we realise - in full – what it truly means *"to be like him."*

Bonus Video – National Geographic, "The Secrets of Christ's Tomb" – the 2017 story of the restoration of the Edicule, containing the remains of the tomb in which Christ's body had been laid, and from which the Resurrection occurred.