

The Risen Christ

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—John 16:22

IN A TOUCHING PROPHECY

which concludes with our opening verse, Jesus had forecast the feelings of his disciples over his crucifixion, and also the great joy that would follow when they learned of his resurrection.

Quoting the entire context, the Master said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”—John 16:20-22

We can well understand the deep anguish of the disciples when Jesus was taken from them and cruelly put to death. They believed with all their hearts that he was Israel’s Messiah of promise, but their understanding of his mission was limited. They did not know that before he would rule the

world in righteousness, as foretold, he first had to die as the Redeemer of the human race. Not knowing this, they doubtless felt that his death might mean that he was not in reality the Messiah, yet they had loved him too much to readily admit this possibility. Though confused and sorrowful, they waited and wondered.

A LITTLE HOPE

In those critical faith-testing days between Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection, his disciples probably remembered certain things he had said concerning the fact that he would be raised from the dead. These statements, however, had not been considered too seriously by them. He had also foretold his death, but this they did not wish to believe. To the disciples, Jesus was to be a world ruler, and the idea that his enemies would be permitted to put him to death even before there was any evidence of his kingdom being set up, was incredible. As a result, they did not think seriously of his dying, nor try to understand what he meant about being raised from the dead.

Although bewildered by what had taken place, their great love for the Master kept alive a flickering hope which was quickly fanned into a glowing flame of conviction and rejoicing by the news that the one whom they so dearly loved, and to whom they had devoted their lives, was no longer dead. Mary Magdalene was first at the tomb, even while it was yet dark, on that memorable first day of the week. She noticed that the stone had been taken away from the sepulchre, and she hurried to tell Peter and John.

These two ardent disciples ran to the sepulchre. John, who outran Peter, arrived at the tomb first, and he boldly looked inside. The body of Jesus was gone. Only the grave clothes and napkin remained. Then Peter arrived and, being even more bold, he entered the sepulchre and confirmed what John had seen from the outside. Jesus was not there. John then followed Peter into the sepulchre, and after examination, confirmed that their Master's body was gone. "As yet," the account says, "they knew [understood] not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead."—John 20:1-10

GO AND TELL

Peter and John returned to their home, but Mary lingered and Jesus appeared to her as a gardener. Only when he spoke her name, however, did she know who it was. (vss. 11-16) She would have embraced him, but he said to her, "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." (vs. 17) An angel also said to the "women" at the tomb, "Go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him."—Matt. 28:7

There was a sense of urgency in the commission to inform the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead. His entire ministry had been very brief—only three and one-half years. Now that he was alive again, his stay with his disciples was to last only for a little over a month. Even during this short time he was to converse with them only on a few brief occasions. One of the chief objects of these appearances was to present them with

“infallible proofs” that he was no longer dead.—
Acts 1:3

Another object of Jesus’ brief appearances to his disciples after his resurrection was to impress upon them the responsibility which was now theirs of being his ambassadors in the world. The first time he met with them was in the evening of that first day when he had talked to Mary, after which she had taken the news to them of his resurrection. They were assembled behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. Then, suddenly, Jesus appeared in their midst, and said, “Peace be unto you.” To allay their doubts, he showed them his hands and his side, and they were “glad, when they saw the Lord.”—John 20:19,20

“Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” (vs. 21) They were not to suppose that their work as his disciples was finished. Indeed, it had been interrupted, and they had been confused and discouraged. They were to arise from this situation, however, and with the understanding of the fact that their beloved Master was no longer dead, and that all power in heaven and in earth had been given to him, they were to face the world with the message of the risen Christ.

Thomas was not present that evening when Jesus first appeared to his apostles. When the others told him about it, he said that he would not believe unless he could see certain evidence for himself. Jesus heard this remark, although the apostles did not know that he was then present with them, so he appeared again under similar circumstances, that Thomas also might be convinced. He did not condemn

Thomas, but referred to the blessedness of those who would be able to believe without seeing this visible evidence of his resurrection.—vss. 24-29

“SIGNS”

John, referring to Jesus' appearance for the purpose of convincing Thomas, observed, “Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.” (vs. 30) The display of the nail prints and spear wound was a “sign.” The apostles did not see Jesus' divine body. They saw only the bodies in which he appeared to them. Actually, he had given his flesh for the life of the world, but as yet, the apostles did not understand this. They could understand only earthly things, so as “signs” he appeared to them in various fleshly bodies, as the circumstances indicated the need.

To Mary at the sepulchre, Jesus appeared as a gardener. (John 20:15) On the shore of Galilee, he appeared as a stranger. (John 21:4) None of the bodies in these manifestations were Jesus' new, divine body. Years later the Apostle John, who saw these various appearances, and understood them to be signs, wrote, “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” (I John 3:2) If John believed that the body which they saw in the room when the doors were closed, the body with nail prints in the hands and feet and a spear wound in the side, was Jesus' real body after his resurrection, he would have written, “We know what we will be like, for we will be like him who

has wounds in his hands and in his feet and in his side.”

Such was not the case. Jesus had been put to death in the flesh. His humanity had been given in sacrifice to redeem the sin-cursed world from death. Now he had been raised to power and great glory, but appeared to his disciples in the only manner they could as yet comprehend. Indeed, and as we have noted, at this time they did not really understand why he had died. They were overjoyed that he was no longer dead, but wondered why the tragedy of his crucifixion had to occur and interrupt his mission.

ROAD TO EMMAUS

The disciples did not understand fully the answer to this question until the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, although Jesus explained the matter to two of them in considerable detail. These two were Cleopas and another disciple to whom Jesus appeared while they journeyed to Emmaus. (Luke 24:13-32) As they walked, these disciples “communed together and reasoned.” How earnest their discussion must have been. They had received the report brought by the women that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but they had not seen Jesus, yet hoped that the news brought to the disciples by the women was true.

They did not recognize the “stranger” who joined them, and upon inquiry from him, they explained the cause of their perplexity. Jesus replied, “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?”

Then, the account continues, “beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”

These two disciples did not recognize that it was Jesus who was expounding the Scriptures to them. Not until at their journey’s end, when, at the evening meal, “he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them,” did they realize that this stranger was in fact their beloved Master. Now they knew for a surety that Jesus was no longer dead. The good news brought to them by the women early at the tomb was now proven to be true, for they had not only seen Jesus, but had conversed with him at considerable length.

They also now knew, as clearly as they could understand prior to receiving the Holy Spirit, why it had been necessary for Jesus to die. They learned that it was in fulfillment of prophecy, and because it was part of the plan of God that the Messiah had “poured out his soul unto death” to redeem fallen man from sin’s penalty. Otherwise his rulership would be over a dying race, and not over those returning over the “highway” to everlasting life.—Isa. 53:12; 35:8

FEED MY SHEEP

Another appearance of the Master to his disciples was on the shore of Galilee. (John 21:1-17) By now they had become convinced of his resurrection, but in his various appearances he had not outlined any special course of action for them. They could no longer follow him from place to place and assist in his ministry as they had done before he was crucified. He could come and go as the wind, unseen by

them except when he miraculously appeared in their midst. This meant that, seemingly, they had no leader, and did not know how to continue in his service.

Consequently, although glad that Jesus was no longer dead, Peter and John, and some of the others, decided that they would go back into the fishing business. They procured equipment, and had spent an entire night on the lake, but had caught no fish. At the break of day, a stranger appeared on the shore and inquired how successful they had been. When told that no fish had been caught, he suggested that they cast their nets on the other side of the ship. Perhaps reluctantly, they did this, and to their surprise the net was filled with fish.

John, quick of discernment, said to Peter, "It is the Lord." A similar miracle had been performed when they were first called to be his disciples, to be "fishers of men." John deduced that this was the method Jesus was now using to reveal himself to them. Peter plunged into the water and swam ashore, and "the other disciples came in a little ship." Jesus had started a fire, and had fish and bread ready for the disciples, and he said to them, "Come and dine." After they had eaten, Jesus began to question Peter. "Lovest thou me more than these?" he inquired. Three times Jesus asked Peter this same question, and three times Peter affirmed his love and devotion. Each time Jesus instructed him, "Feed my sheep" or "Feed my lambs."

This must have been reassuring and comforting to Peter, for it was only a short time before that he had denied his Lord. To those less loving in their hearts than Jesus, this denial might well have

brought permanent estrangement, or at least a lack of confidence, but not with Jesus. He could read Peter's heart, and he knew that his love was genuine, and that he could be trusted as an ambassador. He knew that the very experience which might disqualify Peter in the minds of some, would serve as a valuable background of experience, and enable him the more effectively to "feed" the Lord's "sheep."

In verse 14 we are informed that this was the third time Jesus had showed himself to his disciples. The reference, apparently, is to the group as a whole. He appeared to them in the room with the doors closed, and on a mountain in Galilee. (Matt. 28:16-20) It was here that Jesus announced to his disciples, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." Here also he commissioned them to go into all the world and "teach all nations," but with no instructions as to just how they were to proceed. He did tell them, however, that he would be with them. How reassuring it must have been for one who had all power in heaven and in earth to say, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world," or age.

FINAL APPEARANCE

When Jesus appeared for the last time, the disciples boldly asked him a question which was very close to their hearts: "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) To them, Jesus was still the great Messiah of promise, the one who had come to sit and rule on the throne of David, to rule over Israel, which to them meant that he was to reestablish their kingdom.

Before Jesus was taken away from his disciples and crucified, he had related a parable in which he likened himself to a nobleman who would go into a far country and receive a kingdom, and return. (Luke 19:12) Since they had seen Jesus very little in the past forty days, the apostles may have concluded that he had been away in that “far country,” and now had returned to set up his kingdom. The king would, indeed, return to set up his kingdom, but then it was not yet the due time.

By faith, and through the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, we now also enjoy the blessings of being “risen with Christ.” (Col. 3:1-3) While we do not know just when will be the completion of the “little flock” of Christ’s footstep followers, we do know that the work of the Gospel Age is nearing its completion, following which the kingdom will be established. How wonderful it is to be of those that continue to proclaim the “gospel of the kingdom” to a distraught and dying world.—Matt. 24:14

The message of the risen Christ to us, therefore, even as it was to the women first at the tomb after Jesus was raised from the dead, is to “go and tell.” Now, however, it is not merely telling of his resurrection, but also of the nearness of his kingdom. It is telling one another of our privilege of dying with him, and of our hope of being in the likeness of his resurrection. Indeed, our message to one another and to the world embraces the entire plan of the ages, which is about to reach its consummation in the blessing of all the families of the earth with peace, joy, health, and everlasting life. ■