

From Faith to Faith

Opening

'Good Friday'

Am I a stone, and not a sheep,
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath Thy cross,
To number drop by drop Thy blood's slow loss,
And yet not weep?

Not so those women loved
Who with exceeding grief lamented Thee;
Not so fallen Peter, weeping bitterly;
Not so the thief was moved;

Not so the Sun and Moon
Which hid their faces in a starless sky,
A horror of great darkness at broad noon—
I, only I.

Yet give not o'er,
But seek Thy sheep, true Shepherd of the flock;
Greater than Moses, turn and look once more
And smite a rock.¹

Introduction

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was an event which did not and does not permit simple classification.

It was an historic event. It happened in the midst of real people, and a real place, and during real history. Yet, it shattered every human framework of what we know about reality.

¹'Good Friday' was published in Christina Rossetti's 1866 collection *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*.

We cannot blame the disciples for their initial responses. They were ordinary people living in the midst of and responding to circumstances that were far outside the ordinary, completely defied all logic and everything they thought they understood about God was suddenly accelerated to light speed! There is no wonder that their first responses are halting, fearful, doubting, dismissive.

We're going to look at those responses and then see two things from them:

- Believing is seeing.
- Keep your head in the game.

Varying Responses

Mary Magdalene's Response

Mary had come for the purpose of anointing the body of her dead master. She came prepared to see death, not life.

Remember, Jesus explicitly had foretold his own crucifixion *and resurrection* at least four times.² And yet, when confronted with an empty tomb, it doesn't seem to occur to her that what Jesus had promised could have come to pass. We read starting in vs. 11:

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

She saw and spoke with two *angels*. In a parallel passage, the angels chide the women for not remember what Jesus had said about his resurrection.³ But for all that, she still couldn't grasp what was happening! After speaking with the angels, the text continues.

²Matthew 16:21, 17:22–23, 20:17–19, 26:2. I think we may also include Luke 13:32 for a fifth prophetic statement. See also the parallel passages of Luke 9:21, 18:32, 24:6.

³Matthew 28:5–7.

Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”⁴

Seeing is believing? Not in Mary’s case! Only after Jesus called out her name does Mary finally recognize him. Her eyesight wasn’t faulty; but her faith-sight was very dim!

Simon Peter’s and John’s Responses

John’s and Simon Peter’s responses are externally similar.

Having heard from Mary and the other women that the tomb was empty, the initial responses of the disciples was disbelief. Luke even wrote that “[the women’s] words seemed to [the disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe them”.⁵ That’s a dismissive response, even rude!

But the two disciples closest to Jesus decided to check the matter out for themselves. So Peter and John ran to the tomb. John outran Peter, peered into the cave tomb and stopped there. Peter, ever the impulsive one, entered the tomb straight-away. He saw the cloths in which Jesus had been wrapped neatly put aside. Right after that, John also entered the tomb and he saw what Peter saw.

The difference is in how Peter and John respond to what they see. Luke wrote that Peter marveled/wondered at what he saw.⁶ Of course Peter wondered at what he saw! He had seen Jesus die with his own eyes. Now the tomb was empty. If any one of Jesus’ followers had been responsible for taking the body, Peter or John would have certainly known about it! So we can imagine his thoughts to have been spinning as he tried to put the pieces together. But we see no evidence yet that understood the moment correctly.

John’s response, however, shows us that in a moment of clarity, John’s faith-sight become 20-20!

⁴John 20:11–15.

⁵Luke 24:11.

⁶Luke 24:12.

The Common Response

Finally, vs. 10 tells us, “the disciples went back to their homes”. What else was there to do? Should they start running around Jerusalem, calling out Jesus’ name? Should they who were being sought by the authorities go to the authorities and file a missing person report? Their lives were still in danger from the Jewish leaders. The Roman soldiers—wherever they were at the moment—could have returned at any time. Going home was the most logical thing to do.

Analysis

In addition to what we have already seen, when the four gospels are knit together, we see that there are several other proofs of Jesus’ resurrection in the hours following.

- Jesus appeared to 2 of the disciples as they are leaving Jerusalem for Emmaus and has an extended conversation with them.⁷
- Jesus appeared to all of the apostles together at once, except for Thomas. Of course, we know that he did appear to Thomas about a week later.⁸
- Jesus appeared to the disciples while they are fishing.⁹

All in all, don’t the responses of Jesus’ followers seem muted, strangely subdued?

Let’s remember that the disciples were witnessing an event that truly changed all the rules. The divine became human and the human, divine. Death became life. The conquered one became the conqueror. The priest, who was also the sacrifice, becomes the king. The prophet is the one about whom the prophets prophesied.

Dead people don’t rise from the dead by themselves, death is unconquerable. That Lazarus had been raised from the dead was very astounding, of course, but at least there was an agent: Jesus. Here, there was no visible agent. The source of resurrection power had itself—so it seemed—been snuffed out!

But there Jesus was, more alive than ever!

⁷Mark 16:12, Luke 24:13-35.

⁸Mark 16:14, also Luke 24:36, John 20:19, 26.

⁹John 21:1 and following.

This is not the way the world is supposed to work! What they were seeing makes the splitting the atom look like scratching pictures in the sand. They had no categories into which to sort the things they were experiencing. It seems perfectly understandable that their spiritual dials simply went off the scale. Their minds shifted into that nice safe place of saying, “no way!”, just like Thomas did.¹⁰

What can we gather from the disciples responses to these events? Two things.

Believing is Seeing

Let’s start with a definition of faith/belief. In the Bible, faith is both the understanding of factual statements, propositional truths *and* absolutely reliance on those truths.¹¹ There’s neither anything blind about Biblical faith, nor anything abstract about it’s exercise. One has both components of truth and reliance, or it’s not Biblical faith.

It wasn’t until the disciples had totally entrusted themselves to the truth that they began rightly to understand what was going on around them. It was not until their faith was strengthened that their eyesight improved.

This is an important idea, especially today in our culture. We are presently driven by feelings and personal experience. If I identify myself in a certain way, then that is my reality. If I feel a certain way, that is truth. For example, if I feel offended, then even if you are kindly and gently warning me about some line of reasoning, I can say that you’re simply being offensive.

But feelings and experiences need the grid of truth to be rightly understood. Experiences are limited in their ability to inform, or encourage, since experiences usually only serve as a rear-view mirror. Consider the fact that the women and the other disciples had basically the same experiences and yet responded differently.

Vs. 9 explains this: “as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead”. They hadn’t believed the Scriptures and they didn’t believe what Jesus had said, so they were unequipped to rightly understand their experience.

¹⁰John 20:25.

¹¹See, for example, Acts 6:7 in reference to factual statements and Matthew 8:10 in reference to reliance on truth.

Jesus said to Thomas, “because you have seen me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.”¹² Faith isn’t something we possess or have, it’s something that has and possesses us.

As long as the disciples—and we—put our dependence in what we can grasp, comprehend, and control, we will never be able to see truly. It’s faith which is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen.¹³ This faith is forward looking, able to step out with assurance and conviction, because it sees what the natural eye cannot see: the sovereign Lord above, behind, and over everything. It’s this faith that motivated Jesus himself, who “for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God”.¹⁴

It’s faith rooted in the truth that enabled Paul to write:

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight.¹⁵

“We walk by faith, not by sight”, because believing is seeing.

Keep Your Head in the Game

The second thing we can learn from the disciples responses is to keep our head in the game—of faith. What does that mean? Here we turn to the epistle reading: Colossians 3:1. The answers are:

1. that we recognize who we are by faith, and,
2. that our faith be constantly exercised.

¹²John 20:29.

¹³Hebrews 11:1.

¹⁴Hebrews 12:2.

¹⁵2 Corinthians 4:16–5:7.

Recognizing our Identity

If faith has possessed you,

- you are a raised one with Christ,
- your life is hidden with Christ,
- Christ is your life, and,
- his glory becomes our glory.

Our lives themselves breath Jesus. Our conduct emulates Jesus. His glory becomes our glory. And if our lives don't reflect Christ, then we are not in Christ. There is no middle path, no "guest membership" in the kingdom of God, no Switzerland between heaven and hell, no demilitarized zone.

That fact leads us to the second part of keeping our head in the game.

Faith, Constantly Exercised

The second thing is that faith must be exercised.

If then you have been raised with Christ, *seek the things that are above*, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. *Set your minds on things that are above*, not on things that are on earth.¹⁶

If it's true that faith owns, has, and possesses us, then we seek the things above, where Christ is. The corollary is, if we aren't seeking the things above, then we don't have faith. Faith is exercised; it isn't a feeling.

What does Paul mean by seeking the things above? He defines it for us in two ways. First, he defines the "things that are on the earth".

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ...¹⁷

¹⁶Colossians 3:1-4.

¹⁷Colossians 3:5-9.

If these things characterize and define your life, then you are not seeking the things above and you are not growing in faith.

On the other hands, if you are in Christ, it looks like this.

Put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you ... And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.¹⁸

When God's gracious gift of faith owns you, it necessarily changes you, and that's how we grow in faith—by exercising it! And that's what the Collect for today means when it says “by your special grace going before us ... put into our minds good desires, so also by your continual help [following after], we may bring the same to good effect”.

Conclusion

You are confronted with an empty tomb today. There is more than sufficient evidence that the tomb was empty, so the facts are well-established. What do you see?

- Are you a Mary or a Thomas who couldn't believe until the evidence stood right in front of them and demanded acknowledgement?
- Are you a Peter who walked away astounded, but initially uncommitted?
- Or are you a John who got it?

¹⁸Colossians 3:10–17.

Without faith, you see lilies, pretty dresses, candy, and various traditional rituals of western Christians. By faith you can see that the holy one of God has paid for your sins, given all for you. And by faith you can understand that he requires all from you. Believing is seeing.

And what will you do? Without faith, you will walk away from here today to your various occupations and entertainments. With faith, you will get and keep your head in the game, setting your hearts and minds on the things above.

What will it be?

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.¹⁹

¹⁹Hebrews 12:1-2.