



The Dawn of Living Faith

Easter Sunday 2020

John 20:1-18 | April 12, 2020

Modern people sometimes look at early Christian believers as naïve dupes, easily convinced of God and miracles because of their prescientific worldview. But history shows otherwise; the ancients were just as skeptical as we are. Even Jesus' closest followers—Peter, John, and Mary Magdalene—people who loved him and heard his resurrection predictions, were slow to believe. They probably saw resurrection only as a hope for the end of the age. Or only as a metaphor for the immortality of the soul. Or only as a kind of “super healing,” like when Jesus raised the dead to continue their current mortal lives.

Nobody expected a resurrection into *future* glory in this *present* age. But Jesus is full of surprises. When Peter and John go to the tomb, we see the dawning of the first rays of Easter morning faith. First they *see* the empty grave; then they *theorize* about the possibilities; then they slowly begin to *believe*.

Mary, too, starts out with a very naturalistic, scientific worldview. There is no body in the grave, meaning someone must have moved it. Someone other than Jesus himself. She expresses this singular possibility to Peter and John, the angels in the empty tomb, and even Jesus himself. Only when this *gardener* speaks her name, “Mary,” does she realize that it's her beloved Lord, alive and well.

Both the disciples and Mary reveal to us not only the natural skepticism we all hold toward resurrection, but also the key elements of true, transformative faith.

First we must believe. We must open our minds to new possibilities. Sometimes Christians are accused of being close-minded, but we're actually among the most open-minded of people. We believe in the natural world and the spiritual world; physical laws and divine truths; created order and miraculous intervention. To be a Christian means to be a *believer*.

But mere belief is not enough, not even belief that Jesus is the risen Son of God. Even demons believe that. No, we must embrace this truth from the heart, and experience the embrace of God in it. In other words, we must have a personal encounter with Christ, just like Mary Magdalene did.

We must “hear” Jesus in our soul, calling our name. We must come to know him personally, deep down on the inside of our hearts. It must dawn on us not only can we know him, but that *he knows us* and wants a personal relationship with us. (Galatians 4:9: “Now that you know him—or rather *are known by him*....”)

This relationship is so real and personal that Jesus calls us his “brothers and sisters,” and declares that his God is *our God*, his Father is *our Father* (John 20:18).

When this becomes the defining relationship of our lives, the truth that begins to shape everything else, the faith that we would express on our own gravestones—then we know we have it: true, transformative, saving faith. May living faith dawn on us all, so that we believe in and encounter the risen Lord today.

Discussion Guide

1. Which of the characters in our Easter morning story—Peter, John, or Mary Magdalene—do you relate to the most? Why?
2. On a scale of 1—10, how much do you believe in God and miracles? Are you more inclined to be skeptical of the miracles you read about in the Bible or the miracles you hear of today? Why?
3. The sermon today said that belief in the resurrected Jesus is necessary for salvation; but by itself, it's not enough. We also need a personal encounter with Jesus. Do you agree? What is a personal encounter with Jesus? How would you explain this to someone who wonders if they've had one?

How does this sync up with Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved"?

4. If you're a Christian, share the story of your personal encounter with Jesus.
5. What does it mean to you that Jesus is your brother and God is your father? (John 20:17)
6. Imagine designing your own gravestone. What images or inscriptions would you want on it? What would sum up the passion and meaning of your life?
7. Share prayer requests and take a few moments to pray together.