

Events Following the Lord's Resurrection

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." ~ Matthew 28:18-20

The accounts of the Lord's post-resurrection appearances occur in all four gospels and altogether come to 16 references, some unique to one or two gospels and some being different accounts of the same event, but every one contains at least some variations from the others.

We begin early in the morning on Easter Sunday, the day after the Sabbath when two, or maybe three woman came to the tomb where the Lord's body had been laid, and found that the stone had been rolled away and the body was gone. Matthew and Mark both report that they saw one angel, Luke and John that they saw two, but either way, as they wondered about what they had seen, or as they were going to tell the other disciples, He appeared especially to Mary Magdalene, who didn't even recognize Him at first. But then, when He called her by name she immediately knew Him and in fear and affection held Him by the feet.

John goes on to say that the Lord then told her not to touch him, or perhaps not to cling to Him, but to continue on and tell the other disciples He was alive and that they would see Him in Galilee. Even so, Luke tells us that He appeared to two of His followers that same day as they were walking from Jerusalem toward the little village of Emmaus, about 7 miles away. And even though He talked and reasoned

with them for a long time as they walked, they didn't recognize Him until finally, stopping late in the day at an inn, they knew Him as He broke bread with them. At this point John picks up the story and relates that He appeared to the disciples later that same evening as they sat, *hiding in a closed room* for fear of the Jews, and showed them the wounds in His hands and His side. You'll recall, of course, that Thomas was not there at that time and so when he was told of this appearance later he said he would never believe it unless he could actually touch the places where He had been wounded; hence the term, "doubting Thomas."

Now it's curious that Mark and Luke both reference this first meeting in the closed room, and they describe the disciples' disbelief, but without mentioning Thomas. It is only John who makes the special point that Jesus appeared to them again *eight days later* when Thomas *was* there, and invited him to reach in and touch His body. Of course in the event Thomas didn't need to do this since, like Mary on that first morning, he clearly recognized the Lord as He appeared to him personally and spoke his name.

Reports of the Lord's final appearances also include variations: Luke says that at some point "He led them out as far as Bethany" (maybe 2 miles south-east of Jerusalem) and there "was parted from them and carried up into heaven." But Matthew says He was parted from them on a mountain in Galilee (maybe 60 or 70 miles to the north). Mark doesn't say *where* He was when they last saw Him, and John never clearly mentions Him leaving them at all. And then there's the matter of the so-called "Great Commission," when the Lord told the disciples to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." Mark quotes the Lord saying this on Easter Sunday evening when He first appeared to them in that closed room. But Matthew says it happened on that mountain in Galilee most likely several weeks later. So what can we make of all this, and why does it matter?

Well, first of all, there's no good reason why any of the facts recorded

in any of the four gospels could not have been true exactly as stated. Just because Mathew, Mark and Luke reported two or more women going to the tomb and John only mentions Mary, or because Matthew and Mark reported the women seeing one angel at the tomb and Luke reported two, doesn't mean both stories aren't true. It's just a matter of emphasis (or selective awareness), especially since the gospel writers weren't actually there, but were reporting what they heard from others.

With respect to where Mary first saw the Lord, in the garden or on the way to tell the other disciples, just because they were "on their way" doesn't mean they weren't still in the garden. And if the Lord was parted from the disciples in one location it does not mean that He was not parted from them again at another location. It is similar with all the other variations. In fact historians tell us that because every witness to an event and everyone who reports on it has a different perspective, when two or more accounts match *too* closely the authenticity of one or the other is usually considered suspicious, or a case of copying.

In fact the most likely reason for all the variations is *for the sake of the spiritual sense*, each one speaking to a different spiritual state or need. For example, John particularly stands out as the most unique of all the accounts. He alone focuses on just one woman, Mary, at the tomb, he alone refers to "doubting Thomas," he alone recounts the incidents on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and he is the one who never mentions the Lord departing into heaven. New Church scholars have generally thought that John speaks more to a celestial state than other gospels, and he is certainly more focused on the Divinity of the Lord than others. He writes powerfully of very profound spiritual principles and while he often urges understanding, he more than all the others appeals to us to *love and follow* the Lord.

In contrast you may remember that Luke was a physician and his focus naturally calls attention to the Humanity of the Lord, so his inclu-

sion of the story of the walk to Emmaus calls particular attention to the human experience, including understanding, repentance and forgiveness, as Jesus taught them about Himself.

Matthew includes a special interest in the bribery of the soldiers to lie about what happened to the Lord's body, and so sustains a theme of doubt and betrayal to the end. Why? Well, this is just another part of OUR story, isn't it? And Mark, the shortest of all the gospels, always gets right to the point, emphasizing action in response to the Lord. So he summarizes each part of the story very briefly but is the only one who lists the five specific signs – five specific powers – that will be given to those who believe in the Lord. Matthew, then, speaks to our own skepticism and both he and Mark urge us to push through that and just do what the Lord teaches.

In sum, if Matthew and Mark speak to the natural mind, its knowledge and application, Luke asks us to think more deeply of human understanding and compassion, and John inspires us to persevere in real, deep love to the Lord, who is *always* with us.

But if all this sounds more like a class than a sermon, so be it. Printed copies are available and you can, of course, review the last chapter of each gospel for yourselves. For inspiration, however, let's focus in on the Lord's last words in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Here the Lord, still responding to the disciples' doubts and disbelief, *commands* them to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." We may wonder how the Lord could give such an order to men who still had lingering doubts about Him, but as we read and reflect on this two things become clear. First, if you want to understand something, teach it. If you want to believe something, prepare yourself and really dig into it. Don't shy away from conversations about it; don't bury your talent in the earth and hope it will still be there when the Master asks what you have done with it. "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put

into your bosom. For with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:380).

I have a wonderful book in my office called “Who Moved the Stone,” written by a man who set out in legalistic fashion years ago to prove, once and for all, that the whole story of the Lord's resurrection was a pure fiction that could not be sustained in the face of the evidence. But as he studied he realized that the book as planned could not be written. In fact he ended up writing nearly 200 pages confirming in detail exactly what was written in the Word.

The second thing that stands out is the evidence that confirms the truth *when we apply it*.

“...these signs will follow those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mark 16:17-18).

Of course we know that these are spiritual and not necessarily natural gifts – along the lines of the Lord's parable of the sheep and goats, where we are taught to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and so on, but they are in any case compelling instructions to USE what we know to help ourselves and others. And the truth is, when we really believe that we can, with the Lord's help, cast out demons, we will, especially from our own minds, and we'll feel better as a result. When we learn how to speak the truth in new ways that are truly helpful to others and not just critical or pessimistic, we'll feel better, and so will everyone around us. When we believe in the Lord's authority and power we will not let the allurements of a merely sensual life (the serpents in our world) or the poisons of falsity hurt us. We will show compassion to people who are struggling with evil or disorder in their lives, and that compassion will help them recover.

So the Lord said, "Go, and make disciples of all the nations" and again, "Preach the gospel to every creature." What exactly do these things mean in the spiritual sense of the Word?

Well, the word, nation, refers to the *good* that's in any person. It is the unifying principle of love or charity that binds us together in large or small communities. It is often distinguished from the word, people, which refers to the multitude and variety of *truths* we hold in our minds. To make disciples of all the nations, then, is to add specific disciplines to the general love or affection for what is good. It is to teach the truth so that good can be optimized and strengthened. It is to minister to the lost sheep of the house of Israel referred to earlier in Matthew 10. Likewise, to preach "to every creature" is to appeal to those whose *spiritual creation* is being addressed.

We all know people who love the Lord and the neighbor, and we can think of ourselves, too, wanting to do the right thing but for all our goodwill not having the best understanding of how to do it. What's needed is clear instruction from the Word about how to be truly helpful. Giving money to the poor, for example, may or may not do them any real good, but helping them to feel the Lord's love and understand the eternal purpose of life certainly will. Providing for the material benefits our children want may or may not help them in the long run, but teaching them and helping them to live according to the Commandments definitely will.

To baptize into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit also is to introduce to the truths that reveal the characteristics of the Lord's love, wisdom and power. But our responsibility is not just teaching folks the truth, it is as the Lord said "teaching them to *observe* all things that I have commanded you."

Obviously this cannot refer to bossing people around, least of all trying to compel belief in the Lord. The more we push, the more they will push back. Besides, "It is a law of Providence that a person not

be compelled by external means to think and will, and thus to believe and love the things of religion, but that he should persuade and at times compel *himself* to do so" (DP 129). How, then, can we effectively carry out the Lord's final instructions?

As everybody knows, there are two characteristics of an effective teacher: first is having the knowledge and ability to present the subject matter so that people can learn it. Second, though, and equally important, is the skill and affection for modeling what we teach. So, for example, if we want to teach repentance and forgiveness of sins, as Luke reports was the purpose of the Lord's life, then we have to *practice* that repentance and forgiveness ourselves, or our words will ring hollow and, even worse, the concepts themselves will not seem credible because there's no outward evidence that they contribute to a person's happiness. People need to see what they're learning exemplified – which is one of the key reasons for the Lord being born into this world, but until He becomes truly visible in His Word, people need the encouragement of other people to believe it's worth their time and effort even to consider Him as their ultimate authority.

There's an interesting passage in one of the posthumously published books of the Writings that says, "The Holy Spirit is not transferred from man to man, but from the Lord *through* man to man" (Canons, the Holy Spirit IV.5). This makes clear that the power to understand and live according to the truth comes from the Lord alone, but it comes through the influence of other people who teach and exemplify it. Therefore the Lord said, "Let your light so shine before men *that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*" (Matt. 5:16).

This is the burden of the Christian – and especially of the New Church person – in this world. It is the substance and force of all His final teaching in His post-resurrection appearances. It is His last word. It is what He wants us to remember most of all, and do. As He said,

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Amen.

Lessons: *Joshua* 18:1-10, with a talk on this Sunday School lesson
John 20:19-31 and *Doctrine of the Lord* #35:selections