

Message #63

Kurt Hedlund

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THE RESURRECTION AND FAITHFULNESS TO A GREAT GOD

JOHN 20:11-18

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is one of the central pillars of Christianity. What do people in the world around us think about that truth claim? In 1996 the Lous Harris company polled US adults and asked them: "Do you believe in the resurrection of Christ?" 87% said yes. In 2005 the polling company found that 70% said yes. In 2013 they found that 65% said yes. The Rasmussen pollsters found a similar response in 2013. 64% of respondents said that they believed in the resurrection of Christ. So it is encouraging that almost two-thirds of Americans believe in the resurrection of Christ, but it is disappointing that there is a trend away from that belief.

What is more disturbing is what pastors think about the resurrection of Christ. Several years ago a sociologist by the name of Jeffrey Hadden surveyed 7,441 Protestant ministers in the US. He asked them, "Do you accept Jesus' physical resurrection as a fact?" 51% of Methodist ministers said no. 35% of Episcopalians said no. 33% of pastors in the American Baptist Churches-USA said no. 30% of Presbyterians said no, and 15% of American Lutheran pastors said no. (PrayerNet Newsletter, 11/13/1998) How do you suppose that this failure to believe in a central doctrine of the faith will affect the people of their churches over time?

Last week we looked at the Biblical evidence from John's Gospel concerning the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The text says that Jesus truly was dead and buried, but He came back to life. When He came back to life, it was with a different kind of body. This has tremendous implications for us. We saw from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians in #15 that we Christians can likewise look forward to a physical resurrection from the dead. This will happen at the rapture of the church.

This resurrection of the dead for Christians is not as well understood in our culture as is the resurrection of Christ. A national survey in 2006 (Scripps Howard) found that only 36% of Americans believe that they

will experience a bodily resurrection. About 75% of Americans describe themselves as being Christians of some type. But only half of them believe in a bodily resurrection.

Today we will continue our study of the resurrection of Jesus as described by the Apostle John. We will look not only at the historical information that we are given about it, but also at the effect that the events involving the resurrection should have on our lives.

Last Sunday we looked at the beginning of #20. We saw that John focused on the resurrection of Jesus as experienced through Mary Magdalene. She showed up on Sunday morning at the tomb with other women. She was hoping to make additional preparations of the body of Jesus, but she discovered that the stone blocking the entrance of the tomb was removed, and the tomb was empty. Her immediate thought was that the religious leaders had taken the body away, maybe to be placed in the grave of the criminals. Mary ran to tell Peter and John what she had discovered. They arrived and saw that the tomb was empty. John seems to have believed at that moment that Jesus was alive. Neither Peter nor John grasped the significance of that. They both returned to wherever they were staying in Jerusalem. Mary Magdalene lingered around the tomb. We pick up the story from there.

I.

In vv. 11-13 of #20, which is found on p. 906 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we encounter THE RESURRECTION AND THE PROBLEM OF A TOO SMALL GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE RESURRECTION AND THE...) According to v. 11, **“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.”**

The Gospel writers mention a number of Marys who were connected with the Jesus movement. “Mary” was a common name among Jews in the first century. Probably this name was based upon the sister of Moses in the Old Testament. Her name in Hebrew was Miriam.

This Mary was from Magdala, which was a town on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. She was among the four women who were at the site of the crucifixion, according to #19 in this Gospel. John was the only one of the twelve apostles who was present at the scene. The rest of them were in hiding. They were afraid. Mary and the other women had enough courage to show up in support of Jesus. One other detail that we learned about this Mary comes from Luke #8. There we saw that Jesus had cast seven demons out of her. Mary Magdalene was part of a larger group of women who followed Jesus around,

at least in the latter part of His public ministry. Now she was one of the women who showed up at the tomb.

Apparently she followed Peter and John back to the tomb after she went to get them and to describe what she had found. Verse 10 says that the two disciples departed. Mary Magdalene remained there. Now she looks inside of the tomb.

(TOMB 2) This is the kind of scene that she would have found, except without the body. There were typically several ledges in these first century Jewish tombs. The bodies were placed there, wrapped up with linen and spices. The spices minimized the smell. A year later, relatives would return and take the remains of the body and place them in bone boxes, usually made of limestone. The bone boxes, or ossuaries, would be placed in niches like these. In #19 we were told that this was a new tomb, recently carved out by Joseph of Arimathea and his workers. So there was nothing else in it, except the linen remains in which Jesus' body had been wrapped.

Verse 12: **“And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.”** How did Mary know that they were angels? Were they wearing wings? I don't think so. I doubt that she knew that they were angels at the time. Luke describes them as two men with dazzling clothing. Mark speaks of a young man with a white robe. Mary was upset. She was crying. She was dealing with emotions of grief and confusion and shock. I suspect that it was only later that she concluded that these two guys were angels. Perhaps Jesus Himself identified them to her.

The position of the angels on either end of the bench may be noteworthy. Perhaps readers are intended to be reminded of the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant. Exodus #25 describes what was to be placed on the top of the ark of the covenant. (EXODUS 25:18) According to v. 18, **“And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat.”** Cherubim were high ranking angels.

In v. 22 of Exodus 25 God (EXODUS 25:22) adds this, **“There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.”** Blood was to be sprinkled on the mercy seat between the two cherubim, or high ranking angels, on the Day of Atonement. Jesus has just sprinkled His blood on the cross. Now the two angelic messengers in our story are communicating a vital message to the people of God through Mary Magdalene. They are meeting with the people of God through her.

In v. 13 of our passage we read, **“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.’”** In the New Testament Book of Hebrews we find a general description of the purpose that angels serve. (HEBREWS 1:14) The author writes, **“Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”** The angels in our story are seeking to minister to Mary and to communicate a message to her.

Religious Jews had strong concern about the proper disposition of the bodies of the deceased. Mary Magdalene reflects that concern. She has a special devotion to Jesus, given what He has done for her. These angels respond to that concern with a question of their own. It is probably intended as a gentle rebuke. The implication behind the question is that she does not need to be weeping. She should be rejoicing. But she does not yet get it. The possibility that Jesus has risen from the dead does not seem to have even entered her mind.

This slowness to grasp the truth is not limited to Mary. Mark says in his Gospel that Mary Magdalene went and told other disciples of Jesus about the empty tomb. (MARK 16:10-11) According to #16 vv. 10 & 11, **“She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.”**

We should keep in mind that His death and resurrection were not events that Jesus kept hidden from His disciples. There are several references in the four Gospels to statements that Jesus made to prepare His followers for His death and resurrection. In Mark #8 vv. 31-32 (MARK 8:31-32A) the Gospel writer says this about Jesus: **“And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly.”**

One chapter later (MARK 9:31) Mark says this, **“...for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.’”**

On the night before His death Jesus addressed His disciples in what has become known as the Upper Room discourse. In John #16 v. 16 (JOHN 16:16) Jesus told them, **“A little while, and you will see me no**

longer, and again a little while, and you will see me.” On the next day Jesus died. On the third day His tomb was empty. But none of the Jesus followers seemed to get it.

Throughout their time with Jesus, the disciples were slow to catch on to who Jesus really was. (PROJECTOR OFF) Eventually they seemed to understand that Jesus was the Son of God, but it is hard to know what that meant in their understanding. They knew He was from God. They had witnessed His miracles. They had been given power by Him to heal people themselves. They heard Jesus talk about His coming death. They didn't want to accept that. None of them anticipated that He would rise from the dead.

From one perspective, we could say that they had a too small God. Their picture of Jesus and God the Father was too small. They did not understand the authority and power of the Triune God. So often that is our problem, too.

Years ago a British Anglican by the name of J. B. Phillips wrote a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. (PROJECTOR ON--- YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL) In it he argues that we Christians have a problem of failing to understand the majesty and power and love and sovereignty of the God who is really there. We have a tendency to develop false pictures of God.

J. B. Phillips rightly points out that as children when we hear God described as our Heavenly Father, we naturally make comparisons with our earthly fathers. If we have fairly decent earthly fathers, that comparison works out OK. But in our culture we have children that too often come from families with absent dads, or dads who have major issues. The result is that we can develop a picture of a God who is untrustworthy. The extreme example of the effect that this can have is the three worst dictators of the twentieth century. Mao tse-Tung, Joseph Stalin, and Adolph Hitler all had absent or abusive fathers. They ended up as atheists and as murderers.

J. B. Phillips in his book lists thirteen false pictures of God that he saw people develop. I will mention just a few of them. One is that God is a policeman. We consciously or unconsciously view God as primarily a heavenly policeman who is watching us to make sure that we follow the rules. These rules may or may not be Biblical. But if we have a policeman God, it is difficult to relate to Him as a Heavenly Father who desires to have a close relationship with us.

There is also what Phillips calls the “Grand Old Man” God. This God is like a kindly old grandfather who loves us, but really does not keep up with what is going on in modern society. He is a bit out of touch. So His rules and principles can’t be taken too seriously in the scientific and modern world in which we live.

Another false picture of God is the God of perfection. God is holy and perfect. He does call upon his children to be holy. But this limited view of God can produce guilt and shame and depression. For even mature Christians can never be perfect on this side of heaven. Phillips writes, **“The tragedy is often that the ‘one-hundred-per-cent god’ is introduced into the life of the sensitive by the comparatively insensitive, who literally cannot imagine the harm they are doing.”** (p. 31)

The false picture that Mary Magdalene and the other disciples had was a limited power God. They had seen Jesus perform great miracles. But nobody rises from the dead. Jesus had told them that it was going to happen. They didn’t want to listen to statements about His coming death. So anything beyond that went over their heads. Then once He did die, it seemed not to enter into their list of possibilities that an empty tomb meant that Jesus was alive from the dead.

In a similar way today so many in our culture may have a vague belief in God. But this God is a too small God, a limited power God. Miracles are not really possible. Scientific laws cannot be violated. Virgins cannot conceive children, and no one can rise from the dead.

If we didn’t have a limited power God, perhaps our prayer life would be different. Maybe we would be less inclined to panic when we encounter difficult situations. Maybe we would not give up on our relative or friend who is resistant to the gospel. Maybe we would be more serious about personal Bible study.

II.

In vv. 14-16 of #20 we come to THE RESURRECTION AND THE REWARD OF FAITH. (II. THE RESURRECTION AND THE...) We read in v. 14, **“Having said this--- that is, having expressed frustration to the angels in not knowing what happened to the body of Jesus--- she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.”**

Part of the reason for her failure to recognize Jesus may have been due to her tears and weepiness. But it is worth noting that Jesus was not immediately recognized in a number of His post-resurrection

appearances. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus when He walked with them. (MARK 16:12) In Mark #16 v. 12 we are told, **“After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country.”** Something was different about Jesus in His resurrection body. Perhaps all of His physical imperfections were gone. Yet we also know that His wounds were later visible to His disciples. So we don’t know what was different about Him that sometimes made Jesus not immediately recognizable. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 15: **“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.’”** Jesus asks the same question that the angels asked. “Why are you weeping?” It is the same kind of gentle rebuke. She does not need to be crying.

“Whom are you seeking?” He also asks. Jesus knows whom she is seeking. The answer to her question is standing in front of her. Mary is seeking a what--- a corpse. She should be looking for a whom--- a living Person who has risen from the dead.

They were standing by a rich man’s tomb in a rich man’s garden. It was reasonable to think that a gardener might be working there in the early morning. Perhaps he has had some kind of involvement with the removal of Jesus’ body.

Mary then makes a generous offer. She may be lacking in understanding, but she is not lacking in love and devotion for Jesus. She is concerned about a proper burial for her Lord. It is doubtful that she could move the body for herself. But perhaps she had servants upon whom she could call, or friends that she would get to help. The fact that she showed up at this place with spices for burial may mean that she had financial resources of some significance. Perhaps she intends to spend money to make sure that Jesus has a proper burial. Mary Magdalene is still thinking that she needs to do something about the death of Jesus. The reality is that He has taken care of everything. She wants to carry away His body. He has just carried away her sins.

Verse 16 tells us, **“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned and said to him in Aramaic. “Rabboni! (which means Teacher)...”** Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus when He asks her questions. But when He says her name, then she recognizes Him. This might remind us of what Jesus said about His shepherding of His followers back in #10. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 10:27) In v. 27 Jesus said, **“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”**

The Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name, and they know Him. Mary responds by calling Jesus by the name which she has used of Him. In this instant Mary begins to realize the truth of His resurrection.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

In John's recounting of the story, Mary Magdalene is the first person to discover the empty tomb. She is also the first person to whom Jesus reveals Himself after the resurrection. It was not any of the apostles of Jesus who had these firsts. It was a woman. I pointed out last week that first century Judaism did not accept the testimony of women in legal situations. But Jesus thinks that Mary's testimony is appropriate. The author John recognizes that as well.

Not only was this first witness a woman, she also had a sketchy past. She had seven demons cast out of her by Jesus. Probably there was something bad about her behavior that led to that situation. She was not necessarily poor. Consider this additional information that we have about Mary from Luke's Gospel. (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 8:1) Beginning in v. 1 of #8 we are told, **"Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, (LUKE 8:2) and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, (LUKE 8:3) and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means."** The impression that this leaves us is that not only were these women able to provide for their own financial needs while following Jesus around, they also financially supported the overall mission. Mary Magdalene was involved with this.

Mary was a faithful woman. She had a dark past. But she had experienced deliverance that Jesus provided. Often the worst sinners become the most devoted Jesus people. That devotion was demonstrated in following Jesus around in His public ministry. She probably gave financially to help support the Jesus movement. She was present at the crucifixion when most of the apostles were in hiding. She was first at the tomb on Easter morning. She may have had a view of Jesus that was too small, but she had commitment and devotion to Jesus that was second to none.

She was rewarded with revelation from Him. Back in #14 v. 21 Jesus was speaking in the Upper Room on the evening before His arrest. (JOHN 14:21) He told the disciples, **"Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."** Does Jesus promise His devoted followers that they will not be persecuted? Does He promise that they will experience material prosperity? Does He promise that they

will be healed of diseases? No. He promises that faithfulness will be rewarded by Jesus showing Himself to them.

Mary Magdalene was undervalued as a woman in her first century Jewish culture, as women were in most of those ancient cultures. Still today they are often undervalued. Jesus shows here that the reward of faith is not limited by gender or position in culture. Faithfulness to Jesus is rewarded by a deeper relationship with the God who is really there. Jesus promises to show Himself to us.

III.

In vv. 17 & 18 we learn about THE RESURRECTION AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF WITNESS. (III. THE RESURRECTION AND THE RESPONSIBILITY...) Look at v. 17: **“Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.””**”

Soon after this incident with Mary Magdalene, Jesus seems to have encountered other women who were at the tomb. (MATTHEW 28:9) According to Matthew 28:9, **“And behold, Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.”** Such was the kind of response that Mary may have had in our passage.

The interpretations of v. 17 vary. (PROJECTOR OFF) My sense is that Mary is hanging on and afraid of having Jesus disappear again. Jesus says that He is not leaving yet. He will be around for a while. She should let go. His final departure from the Jesus followers is not happening yet.

Mary is instructed to pass along this message to the other disciples. The apostles are the ones who have deserted Jesus. They fled from Gethsemane when the arrest party showed up. They failed to show up at the crucifixion site. The last time that Peter saw Jesus, he denied that he knew his master. These disciples had to be dealing with shame and guilt. But Jesus is still calling them His brothers.

The message is that He is ascending to My Father and your Father. He does not call God “our Father.” The relationship is different. God is the Father of Jesus by eternal generation. These disciples have God as their Father by adoption. But there is a certain brotherhood between the followers of Jesus and Jesus. This had to be a comforting message to these disciples who were painfully aware of their failure.

The message that Jesus is ascending to His Father will hopefully bring to the mind of these disciples what He had told them a short time before in the Upper Room discourse. He told them that He had to go away so that He could send the Holy Spirit to them. The Holy Spirit would give them new power. He would convict the world of its sin. He would teach the disciples and help them to remember the things that Jesus did and said.

The other Gospels tell us that an angel told the other women at the tomb to bring a message to the apostles to meet Jesus in Galilee. Again it is fascinating that Jesus uses women to convey this important message.

Verse 18: **“Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’--- and that he had said these things to her.”** She does the job assigned to her by Jesus. What is the response of the disciples? (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 24:10) According to Luke #24 vv. 10 & 11, **“Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, (LUKE 24:11) but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”**

Notice that Jesus did not tell Mary to convince the other disciples that He was alive. Her responsibility simply was to tell them what she heard and saw. Such is the responsibility that we Christians have in regard to Jesus. Our job is simply to tell others about what we know about Jesus. We saw in our study of the Upper Room discourse that it is the responsibility of the Holy Spirit to convict people of their sin, and their need for Jesus.

It was surprising in that culture to use women in such an important role. We saw in #4 that the disciples were shocked to see Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman. Yet this woman was an effective witness for Jesus in her village. Many there became followers of Jesus.

We find later in the Book of Acts that the early church is shocked to learn that Paul, a persecutor of the church, has become a Christian and an outspoken witness for Jesus. If the Lord can use these unlikely candidates to be witnesses for Him, there is hope that He can use us as well. We just have to tell others what we know about Jesus, seeking not to portray a too small God. As we are faithful to do that, we can look forward to the reward of faith, to a deeper relationship with Jesus.