

# JESUS CHRIST IS RISEN TODAY!

## John 20v1-29.

There is a famous story from Czechoslovakia before the collapse of Communism. A Party official was lecturing a large silent audience at length on the theme of the falsehood of the Easter message. An Orthodox priest in the crowd asked if he could say something. He was given 5 minutes but said he only needed 5 seconds. Turning to the audience he greeted them "*Christ is risen*". Back with a roar came the reply "*He is risen indeed*"

The most compelling argument for Christ's resurrection has always been the evidence of people whose lives have been changed by the risen Jesus. This is at the heart of the Christian faith and it is what the Church has to offer the world – the hope of inward change, the transformation of people's lives. Life looks very different when you realize that Jesus is alive & you encounter Him for yourself.

This was true for a variety of people on the day Jesus rose from the dead. This must surely have been the most extraordinary day in human history.

### 1. Mary Magdalene. (v1-18)

Let's be clear about the sequence of events leading to Mary seeing Jesus. She had gone to the tomb very early, between 3.0 and 6.0 am. Arriving before anyone else, she found the heavy stone rolled away & the body of Jesus gone. She hurried back to tell Peter & John, who then ran to the tomb.

The apostle uses three different words for "seeing" in the text. In **v1** we read that Mary "**saw that the stone had been removed.**" The Greek here is BLEPO, which is the word for physical sight. The stone was physical evidence for the eyes of witnesses like Mary. It was not primarily to let Jesus out of the tomb; later in the day He appears in a locked room without using the door! In **v6** Peter "**saw the strips of linen lying there**". The word here is THEOREO which describes scrutiny and enquiry and close inspection. Peter was considering the evidence of the linen that had been wrapped around Jesus' body. That is the kind of looking we encourage on Alpha Courses; i.e. looking into the evidence. Finally in **v8** John himself "**saw and believed**". The word now is EIDON which was used for understanding something. "Oh, I see!" It is a moment of revelation for John. His eyes have been opened.

But back to Mary. She has followed Peter and John back to the garden tomb but lingers when they leave. She is distraught. Tears are streaming down her face. It is all too much. Entering the tomb she sees two angels. They ask "**Woman, why are you crying?**" Turning round Mary sees a figure she mistakenly thinks is the gardener. It is Jesus. It takes her a few moments to catch on. Perhaps she is blinded by her tears. But when He speaks to her personally & tenderly she realizes who He is.

Mary is the first disciple to see and meet and talk with the resurrected Jesus. This is a compelling proof of the authenticity of the resurrection account. *No one would make up the story of a woman being the first, and sole, witness.* A woman's testimony was not valid in a Jewish court. Jesus could have appeared first to Peter and John - two of the inner three among His disciples. As two male witnesses their joint testimony would have carried weight. Yet it is to Mary, by herself, that Jesus appears. She was also the first to announce the good news of the resurrection! **"I have seen the Lord!"**

What transformed this distraught woman? She encountered the risen Christ for herself.

## 2. The "Eleven" (v19-23)

The "Eleven" is shorthand for the apostolic band. They had been known as the Twelve; now they are reduced to the Eleven by the betrayal & death of Judas. In fact another of the apostolic band was missing (Thomas), & according to Luke others were present.

The disciples are behind locked doors. They are in hiding. They are traumatized & paralyzed by fear. And then Jesus appears. The tomb could not keep Him in and locked doors could not keep Him out. Two times Jesus says the same. **"Peace be with you."** This is more than a Hebrew "hello!" Jesus does more than say "peace", He imparts peace. And what a change this brings. **"The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."**

Then Jesus breathed His own resurrection life into them. Jesus exhaled and said **"Receive the Holy Spirit."** This is unique to the apostles. We do not experience Jesus appearing & breathing on us. But we do receive the Spirit when we are "born again". Jesus said we all need two births - a physical birth, and a spiritual birth. The first is by a human father & mother; the second is by the activity of the Spirit of God. The Hebrew word for Spirit is breath. So Jesus breathes on them. The Spirit of God is the life-breath of the risen Jesus. These men are the first to receive the resurrection life of Jesus. But when we turn to Christ we receive His resurrection life too.

What transformed these traumatized men? What changed them into mighty, fearless lions willing to be martyred for their faith? Answer: they encountered the risen Christ for themselves.

## 3. Thomas (v24-29.)

For some unknown reason Thomas was missing on that first appearance to the Eleven. When he hears their story he does not believe them, hence the term a "doubting Thomas". The question is, what kind of doubter was Thomas? Was he a cynic? I don't think so. Was pessimism part of his personality profile? Quite possibly. Was his doubt of the "too good to be true" variety? Almost certainly.

Thomas withholds faith and demands to see for himself. He will not accept the eyewitness testimony of others. He demands a physical encounter of his own. Thomas is throwing out a challenge! A week goes by. Jesus appears again, and this time Thomas is present. Jesus reveals that He knows all about Thomas' inner struggle; He knows all about his private conversations with the others. Jesus invites Thomas to reach out and touch Him and then says: **“Do not be an unbeliever, be a believer.”** This leads to one of the greatest Christological confessions in the New Testament. **“My Lord and my God.”**

The irony of the encounter between Jesus and Thomas is that, although Thomas *did* see his sign, the desire for signs in order to believe is dealt a devastating blow by the one giving the sign. Again this climaxes the treatment of signs in the gospel, where miracles are performed but the desire for such signs is resisted. Christ can, and does do, signs, but He doesn't want belief in him inextricably linked to signs. Jesus says: **“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”.**

Mary, Peter, John, and Thomas and the others were actually there when all this happened. They were eye witnesses. We were not there. We can never experience exactly what they experienced. This makes the phenomenon of faith in Christ through the centuries all the more extraordinary. Countless people have encountered the risen Christ without seeing Him. Their lives have been transformed. Many of them have been willing to die as martyrs as a result. Still today you and I can encounter Jesus for ourselves.

**John Wilthew. December 2005.**

