

Disappointment and the Resurrected Christ

John 20:11-18; Isaiah 41:10

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There is not a greater prize for the enemy of your soul than to use whatever means he can to discourage your faith in the resurrected Christ—to take your eye of faith off of your living Savior. He wickedly delights in your despair when you grow weary of pressing on in the midst of spiritual trials that seem endless, when you fall into that besetting sin once again, when you feel deserted by Christian friends, when physical afflictions are painfully unrelenting, when the death of a loved one or the heartache of another marital conflict would seem to drown you in sorrow, or when fears and worries about the future paralyze you.

Dear struggling child of God, the resurrected Lord Jesus comes to you today (right now) to lift up your faith that you may behold Him in all of His resurrection glory and power. There is nothing more effective to cast away discouragement than to behold by faith your resurrected Savior coming to you to encourage you in His sovereign love and power. It was not a dead Savior that brought hope to Christ's most devoted followers, but a living Savior. The death of the Lord Jesus was used by the enemy as a great tidal wave of discouragement because they could not yet see the resurrected Lord in His death. Mary Magdalene was one such struggling follower.

Let us now turn to our text in John 20:11-18 as we consider together two main points from our text: (1) Mary's Weak Faith Is Strengthened by the Resurrected Christ (John 20:11-17) and (2) Mary's Strengthened Faith Runs with the Good News of the Resurrected Christ (John 20:18).

I. Mary's Weak Faith Is Strengthened by the Resurrected Christ (John 20:11-17).

A. Before looking at today's text, let us consider events leading up to the encounter of Mary with the resurrected Jesus Christ.

1. Mary Magdalene and a small group of women arrived at the empty tomb on that first resurrection Lord's Day while it was yet dark in order to anoint the body of the Lord with spices (Mark 16:1). John 20:1 focuses only upon Mary Magdalene.

a. These women were the last to leave the cross of Christ, and the first to arrive at the tomb of Christ. Their great love for the Lord Jesus is evidenced by their wanting to be with him in his death and in his burial. The apostles of Christ (except John) had fled from Jesus in fear, but here are courageous women, whose boldness was energized by their love for the Lord.

b. Likewise, our love for the Lord Jesus is most evidenced in our desire and longing to be with Him and to commune with Him now and for all eternity. Mere talk and mere profession is cheap. Our love for Jesus Christ shines brightest when we want to spend time with Him (throughout the week, but especially on the Lord's Day). Our boldness for the Lord suffers when He is a stranger to us.

2. When Mary sees that the tomb is empty, she doesn't wait around with the other women, but immediately takes off to find Peter and John, thinking that someone has stolen or removed the body of the Lord Jesus from the tomb (John 20:2). His resurrection is not on her mind. Had Mary stayed with the other women around the tomb, she would have witnessed the announcement of the angels (Luke 24:4-7).

3. Upon hearing from Mary of the missing body of the Lord Jesus, Peter and John ("the other disciple, whom Jesus loved" John 20:2) ran to the tomb to investigate this matter (John 20:3). John is the first to reach the tomb, but Peter enters the tomb first followed by John (John 20:4-6). What did Peter and John see in the empty tomb? Note what is said they saw (John 20:7). The Scripture tells us that John at that

precise point believed that Christ was raised from the dead as he beheld the linen wrappings of Christ that had been wound about His body (John 20:8). There was something about the strips of linen that convinced John that Jesus was raised from the dead. What was it?

a. First, John saw the linen wrappings were there and not missing as one would have expected if the body of Christ had been stolen. A thief would not have carefully unwound the many linen strips of cloth from around the body of Christ and then removed the body from the tomb. No, the body wrapped in the linen strips would have been quickly removed.

b. Second, John would have also noted that the linen cloths were not ripped or cut off of the body of Christ and lying all over the tomb or even bunched up into a pile. Rather they were lying there yet in a bound and orderly state with the body of Christ missing from them. The linen wrappings had simply collapsed when the resurrected body of Jesus passed through them without taking them off one piece at a time.

c. Third, the strips that had been wound about the head of Christ were not unwound and thrown into the same pile as that of the other linen wrappings, but were yet rolled up in a place of their own, separated from the other linen strips. In other words, there was a definite separation between the wrappings that had been around the body and those that had been around the head of the Lord. John could see in the linen strips where the body and head of the Lord Jesus had been. These were the convincing signs that testified to Christ's resurrection (even apart from hearing angelic announcement).

4. But John testifies here that "he SAW, and believed" (John 20:8). John like Thomas did not believe the mere promise of Christ that He would be raised from the dead, but also was convinced (like Thomas) by a sign given to him by Christ. The Scripture does not hide the weakness of the apostles' faith. The apostles did not believe the women who brought the angelic message to them (Luke 24:11).

a. Do we actually realize how weak we are without the Spirit of God giving illumination to our understanding (even after coming to faith in Jesus Christ)? We still struggle to cling to the promises of God as did John and Thomas: a seeing-is-believing kind of faith. At times, we sinfully fall into such discouragement that we cannot see by faith the promise of God that our resurrected Savior is with us and is in control. We won't believe until we see the promise realized. We so often walk not by faith in the promises of God, but walk by what we see and feel. John writes this for our instruction in the faith. "I, too, had to see before I believed. Don't be like me. Take Christ at His word, for He is absolutely trustworthy and cannot lie." Yet, observe the mercy of our Savior in condescending to John's weakness! The Lord did not cast John aside (or Thomas) but led them by the hand (as it were) to Himself.

b. Your baptism is an outward sign and confirmation that the promises of Christ are true—your faith in Christ is not in vain.

c. The Lord daily sends us His linen wrappings to encourage and strengthen our faith in Christ through answers to prayer, through the encouraging words of others, through the provision of all our needs, through His providence (if we only eyes to see these linen wrappings). We should believe all of the promises of Christ on the mere authority and faithfulness of Christ (and there is no legitimate excuse for us not doing so), but Christ so loves us in spite of our weakness and sin that He gives us many aids to our faith like the linen wrappings. Praise God for His patience with us who are weak children of faith.

B. Now to our text. After Peter and John leave the tomb, Mary Magdalene returns alone to the tomb where she is weeping in sorrow because she does not know that Jesus is alive (John 20:11).

1. As she arrives at the tomb her eyes are filled with tears as she peers into the empty tomb and sees two angels (John 20:12). The angels ask her, "Woman why weepest thou" (John 20:13)? To which she responds in discouragement and sorrow, "Because they [i.e. the Jews or the Romans] have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him" (John 20:13).

2. Mary then turns away from the angels and the tomb and sees the figure of a man

through her tears, but does not recognize him. It is her resurrected Savior. He has come to dry her tears and to give to her the honor of first seeing Him alive from the dead. Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener and pleads with him to tell her where the body of Christ is if he knows (John 20:14-15). To which the Lord simply says, “Mary.” She hears and believes (John 20:16). Whereas she saw Christ and did not recognize Him, she hears Him and then believes—Jesus is alive!

a. Dear ones, in the final analysis, it is not the signs (whether the empty tomb or the angels of God or even the sight of Christ) that gave Mary faith. It was the work of the Spirit of God in opening her ears to hear the promise of Christ that granted to her faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus. For how many people saw the miracles of Christ during His earthly ministry? How many people heard with their outward ears the blessed sermons of Christ, and yet did not personally lay hold of Christ as their only righteousness and hope of everlasting life? Mary was a Christian, but she was a struggling Christian. The Lord Jesus Christ came to this doubting Christian in the midst of her struggle and sorrow and removed her doubts by His resurrection power. Faith is God’s gift to us, not our gift to God (Ephesians 2:8-9).

b. Isn’t it remarkable that Mary (who had been delivered from the satanic power of seven devils, Mark 16:9) is the first to witness the resurrected Christ? Why wouldn’t that special honor be given to Mary, the mother of the Lord, or to Peter? The place given by the Church of Rome to Mary as a co-redeemer with Christ and to Peter as the first pope would cause us to wonder why this woman (delivered from demons) would be the first one see the resurrected Christ. I would suggest that Christ is demonstrating that it is not one’s mere familial relationship nor one’s mere ministerial relationship to Him that He blesses, but rather one’s faith in Him and one’s loving relationship to Him that He blesses. Mary, who had been forgiven so much and had been delivered from so much, loved her Savior so much. Has your love for Jesus Christ waned because you have forgotten the sin, misery, and condemnation from which He has delivered you? Has your joy in the Lord been overshadowed by discouragement because you have been thankless and forgetful of all of His mercies to you? Has your hope in Christ become despair because you have taken the eye of faith off of Him and all you can see are your desperate circumstances? Mary was weak in faith, but Jesus came to her in her sorrow to encourage her faith as her living Savior. And so He comes to all who trust in Him by faith alone.

c. The Lord Jesus commands Mary, “Touch me not” (literally, “stop clinging to me” John 20:17). Why? Not because He could not be touched in His resurrected body; for He allows other women to touch Him after His resurrection (Matthew 28:9), and commands Thomas to touch Him (John 20:27). But rather because her clinging to Him indicated she wanted everything to be like it was before Christ’s death and resurrection. However, Christ had a mission to fulfill wherein He would ascend and appear at God’s right hand as Mediator for all who will trust Him by faith alone.

d. Many times we want things to be just like they were at a previous time in our lives. We live in the past. We do not always like change. Change reveals our own insecurities and fears. Change is uncomfortable, and we like our own comfort zones. But Jesus knows what you need. And when He brings change into your life, He does so because He loves you, and wants you to see Him as your resurrected and ascended Savior and Lord who is able to meet all of your needs. Mary may have wanted everything to be the same, but Christ knew what was best for Mary. He knows what is best for you in all of the ups and downs and changes which you find so uncomfortable. He never changes—He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

II. Mary’s Strengthened Faith Runs with the Good News of the Resurrected Christ (John 20:18).

A. Mary gives feet to her faith and hastens to tell the apostles that Jesus had appeared to her (and so must we all). We are not told in John 20:18 what the response of the apostles was to Mary’s testimony, but we have already seen that the apostles considered the testimony of the other women to whom the angels had

given the announcement of Christ's resurrection to be foolish talk, and they would not believe them (Luke 24:11).

1. The Lord Jesus bears testimony to His resurrection through these women in order to shame the unbelief of the leaders of the church, who are so discouraged and unbelieving. What a sad state when apostles (or pastors and elders) lead members of the church by way of their discouragement. This shows again that without Christ (whether it be apostles, pastors, teachers, men, women, or children), we can do nothing. Without the Lord constantly upholding our faith, we would immediately fall into despair and give up. But we can't give up, because it is God who works within us both to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).

2. How we must realize in our various callings the effect we have on those about us. Our discouraging, faithless, and fearful words will have its effect in the home, in the church, or in the workplace. It is likely that it was this very thing that discouraged Mary and sent her back to the tomb in sorrow before the Lord appeared to her.

B. What a sad testimony this is—the ministers of Christ discouraging the flock of Jesus Christ. The ministers of Christ who should have been there to encourage and strengthen these dear women in their faith were rather stumbling blocks to their faith.

1. This reveals so clearly the weakness in all of us. Unless we as ministers and elders are living in communion with the resurrected Jesus Christ, we will not be able to give encouragement, comfort, and hope to struggling Christians—hope in a forgiving and merciful Savior—hope in a faithful Savior who cannot lie—hope in an all-powerful Savior who can and will keep His Word. We will rather set stumbling blocks before them (Luke 17:1-2).

2. How you parents must also carefully consider your calling—not only to point out to your children their sin and need of Christ, but also to point your children to Christ as their only hope of peace, contentment, joy, forgiveness, and everlasting life. Parents, you are called to encourage the faith of your children—to be a stepping stone to Christ not a stumbling block to keep them from Christ or to keep them from walking in faithfulness to His holy commandments.

C. Dear ones, I would have you see where a hopeless discouragement will lead you. The apostles should have believed the testimony of Mary and the women. The apostles should have been waiting in confident hope for the resurrection of Christ simply because He told them He would arise from the dead on the third day. But they continued in their doubt and unbelief. Why? Because their hearts were overcome by sorrow, discouragement, and disappointment. They expected things to turn out differently. They expected Christ to crush the Romans and take up His throne in Jerusalem. They expected to immediately reign with Him in Jerusalem. Their unfulfilled dreams led to their discouragement which then led to their unbelief.

D. Dear ones, if we do not nip in the bud our disappointment and discouragement over unfulfilled dreams, we will soon be paying for it with unbelief in the most obvious promises of Christ. That which is most obvious and foundational to our faith we will begin to question: namely, the faithfulness of Christ to save us, the power of Christ to provide for us, the justice of Christ to keep His Word, the love of Christ to be near us and not forsake us. One of the greatest enemies of the Christian is unchecked discouragement. It is devastating and will cripple you if you do not turn from looking at yourself and your circumstances to looking in faith to your living Lord. Have your unfulfilled dreams led you away from Christ today? Why are you discouraged today? It comes down to unbelief—not trusting the resurrected Jesus Christ to save you, love you, forgive you, comfort you, guide you, convict you, correct you, and provide for you. Jesus Christ lives and reigns over all! Dear ones, repent of your unbelief and discouragement. He is more willing to forgive than you are to

receive it. Make not this world your life—make Jesus your life and you will have nothing to lose in this life and everything to gain when you face death.

Discouragement will come to all of us, but it will not stay as a welcomed guest when the resurrected Christ comes to us and says, “Why the discouragement, sorrow, and tears? I am here with you.”

Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness (Isaiah 41:10).

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