

## The personal touch

Two men in clothes gleaming like lightning asked the women who had come to anoint the body of Jesus, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He is risen! Remember how he told you while you were still in Galilee? "The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again." Then they remembered his words.' (Luke 24:5-8)



Not quite as spectacular as the heavenly host that filled the heavens with praise, thirty three years earlier, proclaiming the birth of Jesus to the shepherds watching their sheep on the Bethlehem hillside – but nevertheless, so frightening that the women fell down with their faces to the ground.

The eleven disciples thought it was nonsense as they heard the incoherent words of these women as they attempted to convince them of their story. Maybe theirs was a typical male response – except for Peter and John who ran to the tomb and found it empty, except for the grave clothes.

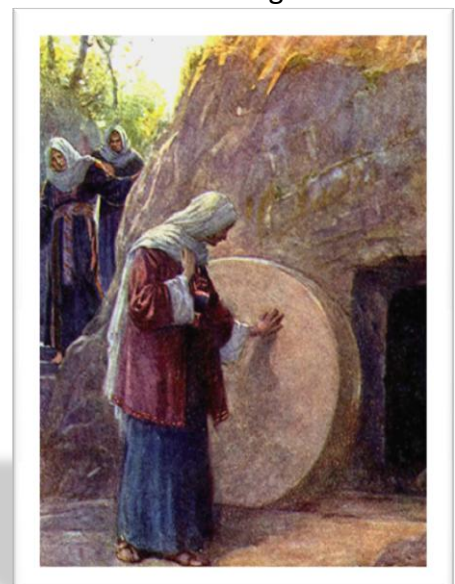


Resurrection Sunday must surely be one of the most miraculous and exciting days to have been recorded in the history books of the time. There are no records of a public pronouncement of the resurrection of Jesus. There is no grand ceremony with Jesus' followers assembling from all parts of Galilee and Judea to establish Him as the

conquering king. Instead, we find Jesus appearing to a selective group of people.

**Grief** – for those who have experienced it, grief can be an experience next to death itself, for something deep inside seems to die too. A loss which leaves behind a feeling of the end of the world, nothing left to live for, with an accompanying panic, anger or guilt of I can't cope or I don't want to. That was Mary Magdalene's inconsolable state of grief. Where was Jesus' body? 'Tell me where you have put him and I will get him back', she asks of the man she thinks is the gardener. He replies by saying just her name, 'Mary'. What a poignant scene as she turns, recognising the voice of Jesus and she clings to his feet – never wanting to lose him again. John 20:10-18.

He continues, 'Do not hold onto me, for I have not returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and to your God.' So sensitively put, don't you think – Jesus stating his family connections, though not by birth, to the disciples? Indeed, we all, as believers in the salvation of the cross, belong together because we are God's family – they were then and we are



now. This man who had broken the power of sin and overcome the sting of death touches one of his devoted followers as she grieved? Jesus wanted to give them so much more than the comfort of his coming back to life. He wanted to give himself by filling them with the Holy Spirit, the presence of whom they could never be robbed of. This could only be done after he had returned to heaven himself at his ascension forty days after the resurrection. Pentecost followed ten days later. (John 14;1-6. 16:5-16.)

We long for things to be different, something to change our circumstances – relieve painful, difficult situations, such as loneliness, poverty, limited education and emotional ties of family responsibilities. When that wonderful event does happen, everything changes enabling us to pick up where we left off or to make a brand new start. We anticipate that life will be better than we could ever have imagined. Nothing, in all our wildest dreams would make us anticipate anything going wrong. But it can and does happen and then what do we do? How do we handle ourselves when, after a while everything begins to disintegrate further or the very thing we have so longed for is cruelly taken away?

Jesus touched the life of Mary so sensitively to give her a hope and peace that would keep her until such a time that he could, by his Holy Spirit, always be with her. This would not just be for her alone but for everyone throughout the years to come until the present time so as to include you and me. There would never be a disappointment, disillusionment or sorrow so great that we could not bear it because we can have the indwelling Christ, by his Spirit, within us.

It was a transformed Mary, grief translated into unspeakable joy, who raced to tell the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord.'

**Failure** - we all make mistakes. Telling lies to save our skin is a common childhood ploy. When the culprit professes to be the most worthy and trusted friend or colleague, painful and permanent damage can be done to a relationship. Peter, with his 'act first and think afterwards attitude' is probably a disciple with whom many of us quickly identify. He meant so well but his impetuous exuberance was his downfall and unfortunately many people remember him for his denial of Jesus (Luke 22:54-60).



In the court yard of the High Priest's house stood Jesus with trumped up charges of blasphemy laid against him. It was dark and cold. Lanterns and a hastily built fire did little to relieve the tensions aroused by the capture of Jesus of Nazareth. A court had been hastily convened to silence him for good. During the night on three separate occasions three bystanders suggested that Peter knew the accused. This he vehemently denied. Has anyone looked at you and without a word being said you realise that you been found out? The Lord looked straight at Peter, and with shame he recalled Jesus' words to him earlier in the evening. With the pressure on, Peter had denied any knowledge of knowing Jesus - then the cock crowed! What a comedown for a man who aspired to such great things in his relationship with Jesus.

'I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows today, you will deny

three times that you know me' (Luke 22:34). A far cry from Peter's last words to Jesus, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death'!

What bitter tears of shame and remorse Peter shed when he got outside.

In the same conversation Jesus had also said to Peter, '.....I have prayed for you, Simon that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:31).

Making and learning from mistakes is a normal, healthy process. That is how our character is formed and we become better fitted to handle life. However, it is not unusual for us to put to one side all the good advice and nurturing in our child hood, as we endeavour to prove that 'of course we can manage, or know best, and you can't possibly be right and of course you don't mean it do you?'



Maybe, years later, we find, or will find, that someone has faithfully prayed for us – a parent, sibling, friend or relative. They have carried our wellbeing in their hearts and, seeming to know us better than we know ourselves, have prayed us through the difficult times. Jesus knew Peter so well and knew too that this was a necessary lesson for the learning. If Peter was to be a key figure in the early church there was no room for cowardice and Jesus was going to pray for him as he learnt it. |

The painful and humiliating experience of Peters' miserable failure and its strengthening of his purpose and resolve are a great encouragement to us. Isn't it better to stare your weaknesses in the face and work through them so that we can experience the liberation which comes when we accept forgiveness and acceptance? Wonderful too that we need not put ourselves on the back burner because we see ourselves as no good for anything. Jesus gave Peter the job of caring for those who believed in Jesus then - and in the days ahead – a job which required wisdom, patience and courage (John 21:15-25).

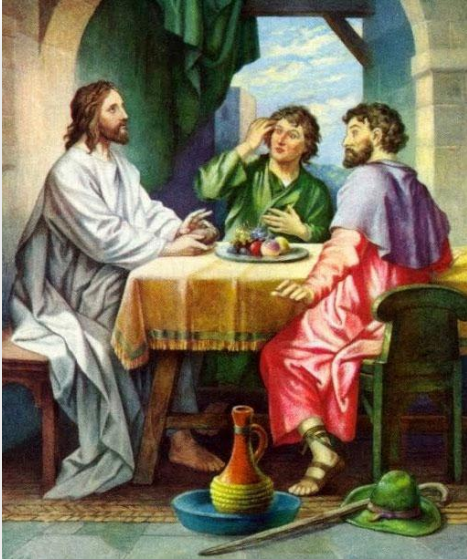
**Confusion** – on that first Sunday afternoon Cleopas and his friend left Jerusalem to walk home to Emmaus. Their hearts were so heavy, as they sifted through the whys' and wherefores' of the horrific events that had rocked Jerusalem over the weekend, that they failed to look up when a stranger joined them. They included him in their conversation and he sought to bring an understanding of the situation by reminding them of what the scriptures said concerning everything that troubled them. 'Don't worry. You knew this was going to happen and it is going to be all right'.

As it was the end of the day they 'strongly urged' the stranger to stay with them. Perhaps they were being polite or hospitable? Whatever, Jesus accepted the invitation to join with them. At the meal table he gave thanks for the bread, broke it and gave it to them – he had done this with them many times before. They recognised who he was straight away and then Jesus disappeared from



their sight.

What a contrast in the two men's pace and conversation as they retraced their steps back to Jerusalem – no longer bogged down with negatives but buoyantly carried along with positives. 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures?' It was as though the depths of despair had evaporated into thin air. Why, if their hearts were burning within them had they not stopped long enough for reality to register? What if they had not invited Jesus to stay longer? Jesus, when he gave thanks for the bread took them



beyond the questionings and reasonings of their minds to the disappointment and pain that they were feeling. They needed to have a much more meaningful experience – one of the heart – which they could have had earlier as Jesus walked with them on the road - if they had listened to what their heart was telling them (Luke 24:13-33).

It is so easy to excuse the downward spiral. Life always has ups and downs and at times it would appear that there are more downs than ups or that the dark place we are in is never-ending. Just as these two men found, we help ourselves when we make good decisions, slow down, listen with different ears - ears tuned in to what our heart is saying – and look up so that our eyes can see right perspectives.

**Doubts** – do you ever find yourself believing something and almost in the same instance find yourself doubting what you have seen or heard? Such was the experience of the disciples and those with them when Jesus appeared to them after he had accompanied the two disciples on the Emmaus road.

He greeted them with the usual greeting of 'Peace be with you'. They thought that he was a ghost! Unbelievable, considering they had seen Mary Magdalene, Peter and the two disciples from Emmaus as well as seeing the empty tomb.

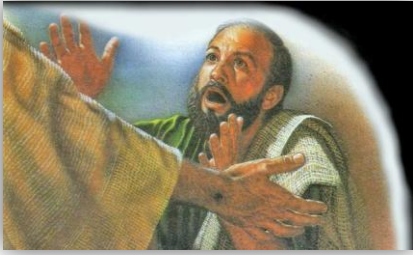
'Why are you troubled and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see, a ghost does not have flesh bones as you see I have' (Luke 24:38,39).

Filled with joy and amazement they still did not believe so Jesus ate a piece of broiled fish - 'in their presence'. After this he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures:

'That Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness will be preached in his name to all nations.....' (Luke 24:46,47).

Thomas was not with the others that evening and said he would only believe in the risen Jesus if he saw the marks in his hands and put his hand in his side. When Jesus appeared to him one week later he said:

'Because you have seen me you have believed, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (John 20:25-29).



Where was Thomas that evening? Preferring his own company, wrapped up in his own thoughts rather than supporting the others? It is so tempting to withdraw from people – even those closest to us who may need us and we them when things go wrong for us. Thomas withdrew and one whole week passed by before he saw Jesus. That delay was so unnecessary and all the tangible proof that Thomas insisted he needed became totally irrelevant as he

acknowledged that Jesus was, 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:18). He was in no doubt who the risen Christ was but what a humiliating experience to go through to realise the truth. While the other disciples were enjoying the return of their beloved Master, Thomas was muddling in his self-inflicted predicament.

Jesus touched those closest to him personally on resurrection Sunday. He knew and understood what they were going through and what they needed. His attitude shows us an example and gives us a challenge – do we know and understand what people need, can we feel their pain, disappointment, disillusionment? Will we stick with them, no matter how long it takes, until they find relief from whatever it is that is troubling them? Will we be gracious, straight forward, dependable and love them into being different? Are we able to give what is of value for them and not for ourselves? There is no record of what Jesus thought and felt that resurrection Sunday. Perhaps that is our greatest challenge – to give and not count the cost, and seek out another's joy and wellbeing rather than our own and therein we will find the greater joy.