

Sunday 4th May 2025 - Meeting the Resurrected Jesus

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[0 : 00] Easter was a couple of weeks ago now. So we're in this period of time between Jesus' resurrection! and what will be his ascension into heaven. It's a period of time which the book of Acts tells us lasted for 40 days when Jesus was on earth following his resurrection.

And 40 is a number associated in the Bible with the idea of completeness. Completeness. And this completeness idea of these 40 days, it implies that despite us not having a huge amount of detail about what Jesus did in these post-resurrection days of his, it seems what we do know from the gospel accounts may well actually be enough for us to be getting on with in terms of how we live out our faith.

You see, what I'd like us to do this morning is look at the handful of encounters with the risen Jesus that we're told about in the gospels. Very personal encounters that include Jesus meeting with Mary Magdalene, with a guy called Cleopas and his colleague on the way to Emmaus, with Thomas, and then with Peter too.

And I'd like to take just briefly each of these four because I'd suggest that when taken together, actually we catch a glimpse of the profound difference that the love of the resurrected Jesus can make in our lives.

For example, let's start with who John's gospel tells us was the first person to see the risen Jesus, which is this lady here, Mary Magdalene. And we looked a little bit at her on Easter Sunday.

[1 : 41] It's an encounter that happens in the garden just outside Jesus' tomb where Mary, understandably, because it's a garden, mistakes the risen Jesus for the gardener.

And it's a story of real grief very early on that Easter morning. As on reaching the empty tomb, Mary's sense of loss comes to the fore because she exclaims, they've taken my Lord away and I don't know where they've put him.

She fears that Jesus' body has been moved or even snatched. You know, a terribly upsetting scenario because in that culture, having the opportunity to anoint a dead body was an essential part of the grieving process.

So Mary's distress is very real and the absence of Jesus' body simply compounds the sense of loss that she's feeling. And yet, it's in this grief, in her grief, that Jesus meets her.

So we're told that Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't realize it was Jesus. Woman, he said, why are you crying? Who is it that you're looking for?

[3 : 01] And if we think about it, we might be familiar with these words from Easter over the years. But it's a fascinating couple of questions from Jesus because he knows full well why she's crying.

He knows full well who she's looking for. Why does Jesus ask these obvious questions that he knows the answers to? It seems that Jesus asks them because in his compassion, he understands how important it is in that moment to give Mary the chance to vocalize, to express her grief.

So he says, woman, why are you crying? Not as a rebuke as in, you know, come on, put yourself together. Not like that. Nah. Instead, I'd suggest it's Jesus' gentle way of saying, why are you crying?

Come on, tell me about your sadness, your grief. Tell me about these feelings you're carrying. It's a kind of classic counseling technique, an open question that starts with where the person is at.

And Jesus follows it up with this second question. Who is it that you're looking for? Again, as I say, he knows full well who she's looking for. But there's something important, something, I might say, therapeutic being offered here.

[4 : 24] An invitation from Jesus for Mary to remember her friend, to name him perhaps, to express the reason for her grief.

Who is it you're looking for? That's interesting. Mary doesn't directly answer Jesus' questions. She chooses instead to neither name Jesus or explain her tears, but instead a focus on her need to have his body returned.

Because thinking he was the gardener, she said, sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him and I will get him. You know, although her grief means she's unable to verbalize perhaps, unable to explain her tears or even say the name of Jesus.

It's interesting. Jesus responds to her state by saying her name. Jesus said to her, Mary. And it's Jesus' use of her name, this intensely personal identifier that enables her to see through her tears, if you like, through her grief and recognize that the gardener is in fact the risen Jesus.

Now, it's interesting that for all the ways that we might imagine Jesus could have revealed the fact he'd come back to life, he chooses, first off, a very personal conversation with an individual who was lost in grief.

[5 : 57] That, I'd suggest, is pretty revealing about the nature and character and priorities of Jesus. The one who, in the first act, really, of his resurrected life lives out his teaching that blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

You know, here, in an albeit incredibly concentrated manner, I think Jesus offers Mary some superb bereavement, counseling, comforting Mary in her grief but also leading her through her grief.

And that, is how she's blessed because Jesus helps her to see that because of his resurrection, her grief, no matter how profound it is, doesn't have the final word and that death is not and never will be the end.

Now, through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus, life wins. We might say love wins. Now, with this in mind, I wonder for some of us here who are living with grief, and I know looking around, that's a number of us.

I wonder what the risen Jesus would say to us, would say to you this morning in your grief. Equally, I wonder how Jesus, in light of his resurrection life, might be offering to help you work through your grief.

[7 : 28] for example, it might be an invitation from Jesus to talk about with him and name your loved one to him, you know, to use that naming, that recalling, both as a comfort and as a prayer, perhaps giving thanks afresh for their life that you've shared with them, while also acknowledging the pain that comes with their absence, you know, tell me who you're looking for, tell me how you're feeling, who is it that you're missing?

Perhaps it might be that in our grief, just like Mary, perhaps the reverse is true. Perhaps above all, we might need to hear Jesus say our name to us.

A profoundly personal way for us to know that Jesus sees us and knows us and loves us. I mean, just imagine when we're at our lowest, just imagine Jesus quietly, lovingly saying your name to you, you know, saying my name to me, just your name.

How beautiful would that be? How reassuring, how healing might that be for us that Jesus says and knows our name. You see, from this first risen encounter onwards, I think we see Jesus revealing his resurrected life in deeply personal ways.

You know, for Mary, that meant meeting her and comforting her in her grief before helping her to see his resurrected reality. And maybe it's Mary's counter that might resonate with where we're at, with what we might need from Jesus this morning.

[9 : 17] That's one. But then for others who the risen Jesus meets, I'd suggest they also have an equally personal encounter with Jesus. But actually on each occasion, Jesus meets them at their own individual particular point of need.

For example, if we turn to these two pair of companions who Luke's gospel tells us also met the risen Jesus later on that same Easter Sunday, these two, they were followers of Jesus but were now walking the seven miles home from Jerusalem, a kind of quarter marathon I guess, from Jerusalem to their village of Emmaus but they're walking in confusion and they're walking in despondency after Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

We're told one is called Cleopas, the other one isn't named though so we don't know, could be his wife, could be his friend, could be his brother, could be a son or a daughter, we don't know.

What we do know is that they're walking along discussing everything that's happened in recent times about Jesus only for Jesus to himself appear and start walking alongside them.

As with Mary, they don't initially recognize him but again, just as with Mary, this gives Jesus a chance to ask them an open question. He says, what are you discussing together as you walk along?

[10 : 44] Now that might be a bit nosy, we might think, just this stranger coming up and saying, what are you talking about? It's a bit of a bold question maybe but really, it's an invitation from Jesus for them again to share their feelings and while for Mary those feelings were shaped most profoundly by grief, I think I'd suggest that for these two, their feelings are shaped most profoundly by disappointment.

Now we, talking they say about Jesus of Nazareth, he was a prophet powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. Chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death and they crucified him but we had hoped that he was the one who's going to redeem Israel.

We had hoped. Three words which I think revealed their sheer disappointment at how things had turned out. Where they once had optimism, expectation, passion, excitement even at what might be in store now, suddenly their hopes had been dashed.

Yes, as they also shared, they'd heard from some friends that the tomb was empty and that maybe Jesus was somehow alive but I guess their very act of leaving Jerusalem and walking home reveals that they'd effectively given up certainly for the day.

We had hoped. Hoped in the past tense, you know, as a faded rather than living hope. Wonder for you if some of them resonates with you perhaps.

[12 : 26] Perhaps if their lack of hope figures with where you sometimes find yourself at. Hope in general, is often hard to maintain especially when life, if we're honest, can be sometimes pretty disappointing.

For example, I was talking with someone the other day who just turned 40 and she was saying, you know, I sometimes think to myself, is this it?

Is this it? Is this the life that I've got now? You know, kids, work, slowly getting older, things beginning to creak, you know, it's not all bad but it's not what I thought it would be either.

We had hoped, she's saying, in other words. And maybe there's disappointment in your life, in our lives, maybe with career choices, health, relationships, security, maybe adventure or the lack of it.

Maybe you want to do the race across the world kind of thing and we never quite got around to it or had the means. Maybe there's disappointment with our country, with its political direction, with the government, with Thursday's election results.

[13 : 36] Maybe there's disappointment with yourself that generally just life feels a plod rather than a pleasure. Maybe things of faith are a disappointment to you, that Jesus, that church, that your sense of God isn't giving you the answers.

Maybe you hoped it would. If so, I think whatever disappointments we might carry, the good news is that once again, the risen Jesus wants to listen to us.

He's asking, what are you thinking about? What are you discussing? I wonder what you'd say in response to that question from him. But then having heard us share, the equally good news is that Jesus doesn't simply leave us in our disappointment.

With these two companions who he meets, we're told Jesus then responds by shifting their perspective and helping them to see the bigger picture of which their lives are a part.

So we're told that beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself. As these two later remarked, when they heard this, they said, where are our hearts not burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us.

[15 : 03] See, I'd suggest that the resurrected Jesus brings us hope because in him we can see the bigger picture, that in all of life's ups and downs, we can know the constancy of God's living, loving presence with us.

but at the same time, I'd suggest the acknowledgement of God's bigger picture, that can actually renew our appreciation of the small but significant things in life, things like a shared journey, a shared meal, a shared friendship.

Why? Well, because it seems the God of this bigger picture, he chose to spend his first resurrected day simply walking and talking and eating with these two companions.

You know, it's such a small act, such a personal act, a smaller picture, if you like, but in that small act, the fire of the bigger picture, the bigger hope, if you like, was lit.

So yes, we might crave adventure or significance, we might long for depth or meaning or renewal, you know, all good things perhaps, but I think Jesus seems to demonstrate that we actually find those bigger things, we find that meaning by engaging with smaller things, with people, with conversation, with journeying together.

[16 : 32] That, I would suggest, is the antidote to disappointment and the catalyst for hope, seeking and finding God in the ordinary, everyday stuff of community life.

and they haven't had their hope rekindled by meeting Jesus. It's interesting that the first thing these two companions do then is rush back to Jerusalem, 14 mile round trip for them on that day, to reconnect with their fellow disciples, their friends, their community, their church, you know.

Maybe for you, maybe for us, it's actually getting stuck into community life, church life. maybe that might be the best way that God renews our hope because it's through sharing our lives with each other that actually we can get the best knowledge, the best witness of what the resurrected Jesus is doing.

That's the two on the way and the way back from Emmaus. What else though? Well, another who encountered the resurrected Jesus in a personal way is this guy, Thomas, one of the twelve disciples who wouldn't believe that Jesus had risen until he'd seen him with his own eyes.

And I talked about Thomas a bit on Monday's service, which is up on YouTube if you want to listen to that. So we won't dwell too long on Thomas this morning. But I think it's worth mentioning that just as the risen Jesus meets Mary in her grief and the Emmaus companions in their disappointment, so the risen Jesus meets Thomas in his doubts.

[18 : 08] Jesus didn't have to make a special point of appearing to Thomas, but he did. He did. He chose to. And that to me says that the living Jesus is more than willing to engage with us in a very personal way in all of the things that we might struggle with in our faith.

So again, just thinking if that resonates with us. We might struggle to believe that God exists or is as loving and kind as people say when there's so much that's wrong with the world.

We might doubt that God hears or answers our prayers or that God can transform our addictions or habits. We might doubt the wisdom of Jesus telling us to be generous when all of our common sense tells us to keep hold of what we need and store it up.

There are all sorts of ways in which we might struggle in our own faith. But just as Thomas' doubts actually revealed that his faith in his own understanding and logic was greater at the time than his faith in Jesus and his resurrection, so too our own doubts can reveal I think where we're placing our greatest faith.

I'll say that again. Our own doubts can reveal where we're placing our greatest faith. In the risen Jesus though, we see someone who's willing to meet with us in order to reassure us that we can indeed place our deepest faith and our ultimate trust in him.

[19 : 48] Because as Jesus says to Thomas, again, not I think in a harsh way, but I'm sure characterized with a little twinkle in his eye almost, he says this, he says, stop doubting and believe.

In other words, look, trust me, I mean, properly trust me and see what difference that renewed faith makes in your life. I wonder what doubts, what other things we place our ultimate faith in, might we need, might I need, might you need, to hand over to Jesus so that his resurrection life truly shapes our own.

And then fourthly, finally, let's turn to this guy, Peter, he's a disciple who on the night before Jesus' crucifixion denied three times that he even knew him, but who then some weeks later had the opportunity to meet with the risen Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Having cooked and shared breakfast with his disciples on the beach, Jesus then makes a point of turning specifically to Peter. And once again, in a deeply personal way, the risen Jesus meets Peter, not hearing his grief or his disappointment or his doubts like the others, but more it seems he meets him in his shame, in his regret.

If you're familiar with this story, you'll recall that three times Jesus asks Peter, do you love me? Three questions that offer Peter the opportunity to effectively undo the three times that he had previously denied knowing Jesus.

[21 : 35] And it's a cracking story, one of my favourites, and there are lots of layers to it that we could go into, but for today, I just want to focus on the way in which this encounter illustrates the way in which the risen Jesus helps us to face and deal with the times when we might have let God down, whether that's through what we thought or done or said.

You see, Jesus is clearly aware of Peter's denials of him. It even predicted at his last supper that Peter would deny him three times that evening before the cock crows stuff.

And that's the thing, you see, whatever we've done, however well hidden we might think it is, Jesus knows, Jesus knows. And that divine knowledge of Jesus, that might freak us out, it might mean we run away from God, it can cause us to make excuses or try to ignore our failings, try to cover him up, all of which are understandable, but they're ultimately pointless responses, because we can't hide from God.

You know, where can I go from your spirit, says the psalmist. And Peter knew this, Peter knew ultimately he couldn't hide, because despite the shame of his denials, not only is he one of the first ones at the empty tomb, he's there when Jesus initially appears to the disciples that same day, he's there when Jesus appears to Thomas, and now he's here on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus cooks him breakfast, Peter doesn't run away, no, Peter isn't hiding from Jesus, but there's no doubt he's deeply ashamed of his actions. And yet in that shame that he's carrying, what's great is that Jesus doesn't run away either, Jesus doesn't hide his face from Peter.

[23 : 31] Despite Peter's sins, Jesus still meets with him, still cooks him a meal, still eats with him, still shares with him. Again, small things that revealed a bigger picture, and gestures offered with such tenderness that Peter is reassured of his place in Jesus' love.

You see, that's what the risen Jesus does, holds out his bread to us. He generously, tenderly, meets us in our shame, forgives us our sins, and helps to restore our relationship with him once again.

And what's fascinating here is that Jesus doesn't even ask Peter to say sorry. No, he simply asks Peter three times if he loves him.

I'd suggest that's an insight into the way Jesus is at work. Yes, often confession and the act of saying sorry is important, but here with Peter, Jesus seems to already know how sorry Peter is, so much so that it doesn't need saying in helping us to face our sins.

Jesus has no interest in making us squirm. No, rather his motivation is to help us grow in our love for him because it's through love, not guilt, and not shame that our sinful ways can be overcome.

[25 : 03] So I wonder for you, I wonder for me, if we were sat like Peter on that beach with Jesus, I wonder what would be the sins in our lives that both we and Jesus would be aware of even without saying a word.

You know, what shame might we, are we carrying that the risen Jesus longs to meet us in? But then having met us in our shame, in our sin, by way of confession, by way of restoration, by way of if you like resurrecting our relationship with him, I suspect Jesus would ask us the same question that he asks of Peter, do you love me?

And that's a personal question, it's up to each of us to work out our own response. And perhaps it might need Jesus to ask us that same question a good few times before we're ready to respond.

But if we can get to the place where we can answer in the way that Peter did, yes Lord, you know that I love you, then I'd suggest we'll truly experience the forgiveness and the freedom that comes from knowing the love of the risen Jesus in our lives.

That, I want to suggest, is the good news of Jesus' resurrection, that the living Jesus longs for us to know him personally in our lives today, to know him eating us, yes, in our grief, in our disappointment, in our doubt, in our shame, but then more importantly, to know him sharing with us all of his comfort, all of his hope, all of his truth, all of his love.

[26 : 53] And so in all of these, whether we take our lead from the very personal way in which Jesus meets with Mary, or with Cleopas and company, with Thomas, or with Peter, my prayer is that we would know, trust, and build our lives on the loving presence of the living, resurrected Jesus.

Amen. Amen. Amen.