

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XXIII

INTRODUCTION TO THE APPEARANCES OF THE RISEN CHRIST

I. In John, the Resurrection appearances focus very much on Jesus establishing a new creation.

A. In chapter 20, all of the appearances occur on Sunday, the first day of the week, indicating a restored creation.

- Jesus also appears as a gardener, indicating a return to Eden.

B. In chapter 21, the appearance of Christ is in the context of the world being fruitful again.

C. In both cases, there is a common pattern: (1) a scene of sorrow or frustration; (2) the appearance of Jesus, usually to puzzled disciples ; (3) the recognition of Jesus; and (4) a commissioning.

- There is also, in various ways a notion of forgiveness of sins.

D. Except in the context of forgiveness of sins, there is an absence of evil in the resurrection accounts. The scenes reflect more bringing about order and goodness from a vague, amorphous situation. Those who participated in the crucifixion are ignored.

E. In all cases, there is very much an emphasis that the risen Jesus is the same Jesus with a real body, but a glorified one. The wounds are still there, but now are causes for belief.

- As with the resurrection appearances in the Gospels generally, there is an earthy reality and an emphasis on detail (e.g., the burial cloths, the name of Mary Magdalene, the wounds of Jesus, the exact number of fish.)

F. The narrative seems to end at chapter 20, but then continues on in chapter 21. The style does also change somewhat between the chapters, with chapter 21 less like the rest of the Gospel. Many scholars are of the view that the initial Gospel ended at the end of chapter 20, but that the other resurrection appearance was added later to emphasize the commissioning of Peter, along with the special role of John, "the beloved disciple."

- Still, there is a real unity between the two chapters. They both emphasize new creation themes, agricultural analogies, the real, glorified body of Jesus, the cooperation of Peter and John, and a conclusion with the theme of promoting belief.

II. As with the other Gospels, the first vision is of the empty tomb, but here the emphasis is on Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John.

A. John begins by emphasizing the idea of the week beginning again in the darkness, reflecting the first day of Genesis 1.

1. The other Gospels indicate that it was about daybreak when Mary Magdalene and the other women came. There are two possibilities: (1) Mary Magdalene came alone first, and only later with the other women after speaking with Peter and John alone; or (2) the difference is simply one of perspective, the time being shortly before sunrise, with a little light, but still largely darkness.

2. The view that Mary Magdalene came alone first would explain why Mary Magdalene does not seem to realize at first that Jesus is risen. On the other hand, she says to Peter and John, "We do not know where they have put Him," indicating that others are with her.

3. In any case, she sees the stone removed, but does not seem to understand the full implication. The stone would have been extremely large, and would ordinarily not be removed, either by Jews or by Romans.

B. The role of Peter and John is emphasized.

1. John arrives first. On a literal level, this fact would make sense because he is younger. On a more spiritual level, it reflects the greater intuition of John.

2. Nevertheless, John waits for Peter. He may well be recognizing Peter's role as the leader. In any case, he wants Peter's cooperation. It is noteworthy that here the term "Peter," which reflects his office, is used alone.

3. They see the burial cloths neatly rolled up. On a basic level, the presence of these cloths would indicate that there had not been a grave robbery. (Such robberies were a capital crime under Roman law, but sometimes occurred as a means of insulting the dead.) Spiritually, it indicates that the symbols of death are now left behind. The fact that the burial cloths were left behind distinguishes the Resurrection of Jesus from the raising of Lazarus.

- There is also perhaps a desire to leave a relic behind as Elijah left his mantle behind with his successor Elisha. Such a view would indicate that the preservation of the Shroud of Turin was intended by Jesus right from the beginning.

4. John, the most perceptive of the Apostles, finally understands the implications of the empty tomb and, therefore, can believe fully in the risen Christ.

II. The scene then switches back to Mary Magdalene at the tomb.

A. This exact scene is not described in any other Gospel. Mary could have stayed behind when she came with the other women, as described in the other Gospels. Or Mary could have come with Peter and John, or possibly on her own.

B. In any case, two angels appear to her, similar to the angels described in Luke. (Matthew and Mark describe one angel in that context. It is likely that there were two angels, but only one spoke.)

C. At this point, she still believes that someone has taken the body. She may not have seen the burial cloths inside. From her response, she does not appear to understand that it is two angels, for angels are usual terrifying to humans.

- There is, however, also a deeper meaning that the angels, which had hitherto excluded sinful humanity from Eden, now welcomes Mary Magdalene back.

- The angels also refer to her as "Woman," the same term Jesus gave to His Mother. Part of the idea is that she too is a sort of new Eve because of the redemption won by Christ.

- The angels also ask her why she is weeping. There is perhaps a reflection of Jer. 31:16-17 regarding the restoration of Israel. See also 1 Sam. 1:8; 2 Kings 8:12.

D. Jesus then appears to her as a gardener. On the basic level, given that she was in a garden, it makes sense for her to conclude that one who is apparently in charge is the gardener.

- However, Jesus must have chosen to appear as a gardener in order for her not to recognize Him. There is another

implication of the innocence and friendship with God present in the garden of Eden being restored.

- She recognizes Jesus when He calls her name. At a natural level, a recognized gesture, perhaps the first word she had heard Him say when He cured her long ago, would make her recognize Him, even if appearances did not. On a deeper level, it is an image of Jesus calling each person by name. See, e.g., John 10:3.

E. Jesus tells her to stop clinging to Him in His visible form. Rather, she is to go forth in her mission to announce the news of the Resurrection.

- Part of the idea is that, as with the Transfiguration, one is not merely to stay with what is visible and obvious about Jesus, but also to deepen one's understanding of Him and to witness to Him.

- Jesus here refers to the disciples as "my brethren," indicating a special relationship with them. On one level, that statement emphasizes His true humanity. At another level, it emphasizes that the relationship broken by sin is now restored. See, e.g., Eph. 1:5; Rom. 8:29. Jesus is fulfilling the promise of the prologue that He would give the power to become children of God to all who believe. See John 1:12.

- Emphasizing the difference between them and the new adoption, Jesus says He is going to "My Father and your father, My God and your God." There is a difference here, for no disciple would refer to God as "my Father" or "my God" but rather our Father and our God. But there is also a reflection of adoption, as occurred when Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, joined the Chosen People. See Ruth 1:16.

F. Unlike the other Gospels, there is no record of doubt at her words.

III. Jesus then appears to the disciples on two successive Sundays.

A. His first greeting in both cases is "Peace be with you." Part of the idea is that He has restored all things to their primordial order. See, e.g., Eph. 2:14-17; Zech. 9:10.

B. In both cases, Jesus appears through a locked door, indicating that His risen body is not bound as the earthly body is. But He also shows them His wounds, indicating that the one comes from the other.

C. Jesus then commissions the Apostles and gives them the Holy Spirit, especially in reference to the forgiveness of sins.

- This commissioning reflects the account in Genesis 2 of God breathing the spirit into Adam in order to give him life. Jesus' actions also reflect the spirit coming into the dry bones in the prophesy of Ezekiel. See Ez. 37:1-14.

- Jesus instructs them that they too are to confer the Holy Spirit upon others and forgive their sins, as Jesus has given them the Holy Spirit and forgiven their sins.

D. The doubts of Thomas and the next appearance reflect Jesus' willingness to draw people further as they need assistance.

1. Thomas in general has a pessimistic outlook, but also has courage. It appears that he does not want to invest hope in the witness of the other Apostles and then be disappointed. However, he stays with them all the same. He wants tangible proof of the Resurrection.

2. Jesus again appears through locked doors, indicating that His body is now glorified. As before, He offers peace and then tangible evidence that He is the same Jesus who was crucified.

3. It is not clear whether Thomas actually does touch Jesus' wounds, or whether the appearance is enough. In any case, the doubts are resolved and, for the first time, an Apostle unambiguously declares that Jesus is God, reflecting a recognition of the fact declared in the Gospel's opening line.

4. Jesus recognizes that Thomas' declaration is a real belief, but as with Mary Magdalene, he and all disciples are challenged to go further and believe in what they cannot see.

IV. The Gospel ends with a plain statement of its purpose, i.e., to recount some of the clear definite things that Jesus did, as witnessed by those who were with Him, that the reader may believe in Jesus as the Anointed One and the Son of God, who will give eternal life to His people. See, e.g., John 1:12-13, 3:16-17. The idea is that the life promised is eternal life in the fellowship of the company of heaven beyond death. See 1 John 3. One is promised a share in eternal life even now, to be fulfilled in heaven.