

Christ Appearing to His Own

a Pentecost sermon

In the *Acts of the Apostles*, chapter one, verse three, Luke wrote,

After [Jesus] had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3)¹

We have noted these past weeks that not many details of that time, nor of those conversations, have been provided in the Bible. Nevertheless, we have explored together what we can, and have speculated on what Jesus may have taught the disciples to upgrade them into apostles. The metaphors and motifs of sheep, children, and the hour of Christ have been helpful in this and provided some clues.

Now we come to the most mysterious part of that time: the *Acts of the Apostles* records the Holy Spirit filling the gathered disciples in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost—and we take that moment to be the birth of the Church— BUT the *Gospel of John* reports this extraordinary moment with the Holy Spirit at an earlier time and a different place. What the heck?!

The fact is, the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke-Acts* are quite different to that of *John*. Where Luke “investigated everything ... to write to you in an orderly sequence” (Lk 1:3), John “[wrote these things] so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31).

Luke reported facts, where John told a story. And commentators tell us,

For John, the church’s ongoing life as a community of faith, as the people who continue Jesus’ work in the world, derives from Jesus’ Easter promises and gifts. (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volumes I–XII Reflections)

What & Why?

What we know then is this: for Luke, the Church began at Pentecost, but for John it happened at the beginning of those 40 days between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, with his first appearance to his disciples.

Did both events happen? Of course they did, but to make sense of this apparent discrepancy or difference of opinion, bear in mind Pentecost was neither the first nor the only time believers were filled with the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:15, 41, 67; 9:1).

Your head is probably spinning now, so let’s look a little more closely at what John believed to be the commissioning moment for the disciples, the moment which gave birth to the Church’s life and mission.

May we too respond to Jesus’ call and commission, that we too may step up to be filled with the Holy Spirit.²

Explanation

For John, the call and commission and enduing of the first disciples, that marked the birth of the Church, happened in two stages, both of which are equally important.

Mary at the Sepulchre

Our story begins on the day of Jesus' resurrection, what we now call Easter.

In the early hours of the morning, Mary Magdalene went to the sepulchre, the place of Jesus' tomb, to find the stone had been rolled away. Without going in, she ran to tell the shocking news to Peter and John, who themselves ran to the tomb and found it empty.

The two male disciples returned to their lodgings, but Mary Magdalene remained, as it is written,

But Mary stood outside the tomb, crying. As she was crying, she stooped to look into the tomb. She saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus's body had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "Because they've taken away my Lord," she told them, "and I don't know where they've put him." (John 20:11–13)

Up until this point, we have an empty tomb. Mary remained behind, weeping, then ventured to look into the empty tomb herself.

When she looked into the tomb, God opened Mary's eyes to see two angels. What was it about Mary that she could see the angels, yet the male disciples could not? All three were shocked and afraid at the news of the empty tomb, yet it was her love persisting and progressing to grief that opened Mary's eyes and heart to hear and see something extraordinary, for the angels addressed Mary, "Woman, why are you crying?"

Could it be because Mary wanted to know more, to understand why they had taken away her Lord, that prepared her to be satisfied?

If you are uncertain or doubt anything about the story of the Bible, don't just walk away, as did the male disciples, but strive for understanding. Ask questions of others, for that is the purpose of our community. Do not be satisfied with ignorance and doubt, but "be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).

Christ Revealed Himself to Mary

Mary's eyes were opened because despite her grief, she sought understanding. To such as her, the resurrected Jesus revealed himself, as it is written,

Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus. "Woman," Jesus said to her, "why are you crying? Who is it that you're seeking?" Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." Turning around, she said to him in Aramaic, "*Rabboni!*"—which means "Teacher." (John 20:14–16)

Mary's grief at first clouded her mind, for she saw Jesus but didn't recognise him.

Isn't it interesting, though, how it was not the normal conversation that opened Mary's eyes to recognise Jesus, but when he spoke her name, likely with affection and intimacy. Mary Magdalene knew Jesus, for she had seven demons exorcised from her by Jesus (Mk 16:9; Lk 8:2). She was known by him and so was a follower and friend of Jesus.

It was the uttering of her name, with such grace and love as could only come from Jesus, that opened her eyes and mind.

Oh, how we all long for such intimacy. That intimacy will only develop from time spent with Jesus in Bible reading and in prayer and in community with other friends of Jesus, developing trust and obedience.

Christ Commissioned Mary

Having been seen by Jesus, and recognising her friend and master, what else could Mary Magdalene have wanted to do but grasp him? It is written,

“Don't cling to me,” Jesus told her, “since I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them what he had said to her. (John 20:17–18)

Jesus put a stop to Mary's natural inclination to touch him not because this would not have been welcome under normal circumstances, but because **these were not normal circumstances**. That first Easter Sunday was a packed day, with much to do! Jesus had to catch up with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, after all, then get back to Jerusalem—but I'm getting ahead of myself now.

Something extraordinary happened. Jesus was resurrected! There would be time for intimate reacquaintance later, but now was the time to spread the news. So Jesus commissioned Mary to tell the disciples what was happening and what was going to happen.

In obedience, Mary told the disciples what she had seen, and very likely did so with great joy.

Don't we all want to share good news when it happens to us? Even more so when that news affects your family, your friends, your acquaintances, your neighbourhood?

Just as Mary wasn't allowed to keep Jesus to herself, we all should be filled to the brim with joy and excitement at the good news we have come to know, and so to share it far and wide, with much enthusiasm.

The Disciples in the Upper Room

Mary was the first *commissioned* evangelist³ and her witnessing to the event of Jesus' resurrection set in motion the birth of the Church, for the story continues,

When it was evening on that first day of the week, the disciples were gathered together with the doors locked because they feared the Jews. Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” (John 20:19)

Note the time was Sunday evening, the same day as Jesus' resurrection.

The male disciples, Peter and John, knew the tomb was empty, for they had seen it themselves. Rather than grieve over Jesus' death and that his body had been stolen, as Mary did, the gathered disciples were instead filled with terror "because they feared the Jews".

This does not mean they feared Jewish people generally, for they were themselves Jewish men and women, but they feared the *authorities*, those who would accuse them of stealing Jesus' body. They feared for their own safety, which was not entirely unreasonable, but unfortunate given what Mary Magdalene had experienced.

Nevertheless, the resurrected Jesus appeared to them too, to speak tender words of comfort, "Peace be with you".

Christ Revealed Himself to the Disciples

Another indication of the difference in the state of their hearts and minds, compared with that of Mary, is the fact that for her all it took was Jesus saying her name and she recognised him. It would take more for these disciples, as it is written,

Having said this, he showed them his hands and his side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. (John 20:20)

Speaking directly to them was not enough, so Jesus revealed his wounds to the disciples gathered in that place. Only then was the disciples' grief turned to joy, for then they "saw" the Lord.

Some people want more and more so-called 'evidence' before they will believe, but as Jesus said to Thomas a week later,

Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. (John 20:29)

Check your heart. Are you applying an unreasonable expectation on the Holy Spirit before you will place your faith in Jesus? What will it take before your eyes and ears become open, so that you too will hear his voice and see his presence?

Here we have stories of two groups of people who both heard and saw the resurrected Jesus. It is not he who is hiding from you, but perhaps you are not willing nor ready to see him.

Christ Commissioned the Disciples

The story continues: having encountered the unexpectedly risen Jesus—even though he had told them at least three times this would happen (Mk 8:31; 9:30-32; 10:32-34)—he then commissioned the community of his disciples:

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you." (John 20:21)

Jesus sent Mary to the other disciples; then Jesus sent the community of disciples to the world. THAT is the birth of the Church for John the Evangelist.

Christ Endued the Apostles

Of course, continuing Jesus' mission would require more than joy and excitement and enthusiasm, for as it is written,

After saying this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:22–23)

The verb “to breathe” (ἐμφυσᾶω *emphysaō*) occurs only here in the NT, and its usage clearly evokes the description of God breathing the breath of life into the first human in Gen 2:7.⁴ By breathing on the disciples Jesus filled them with his life and endued them with his Holy Spirit (cf. Eze 37:9).

To “endue” is to “endow or provide with a quality or ability”. With the breath of life, Jesus filled the disciples with the power of the Spirit. He endued them that they might continue his mission and fulfil their ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18).

Application

So what do we know that will help us understand Jesus’ commission? Understanding Jesus’ real intent here is important for the commission in verse 23 alone has done much damage throughout Christian history.

Both Mary Magdalene and the other disciples grieved Jesus’ death by crucifixion, in their own ways. The resurrected **Jesus** then appeared to each and, after ministering to them, **commissioned them to continue his mission with the Holy Spirit**.

This gathering of disciples represents the faith community in general, not just the leadership of the apostles, for we know there were more disciples than the inner circle present in that place. Thomas was not present, yet he was later included in this commission (Jn 20:24–29). **Jesus’ commission then was and is to the *community* of his friends, not just a chosen few or even one person.**

The gift of the Holy Spirit is presented as that which empowers the community to continue Jesus’ work. Therefore, it is the community of the disciples which is given the power to forgive or retain sins, but *what does this mean and what does it not mean?*

Any discussion of verse 23 must be grounded in an understanding of forgiveness of sins as the work of the entire community. And, the community’s enactment of Jesus’ words depends on both the sending and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the forgiving and retaining of sins must be understood as the Spirit-empowered ministry of continuing Jesus’ mission in the world.

Because the community’s work is an extension of Jesus’ work, verse 23 must be interpreted in terms of Jesus’ teaching and actions about sin. In John’s gospel,⁵ sin is a theological failing, not a moral transgression or mistake of behaviour. For John, to have sin is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus. The Holy Spirit brings people to judgment by Jesus’ revealing work and presence in the world.

The community of Jesus’ friends then continue the work of making God in Jesus known in the world and to thereby bring the world to the moment of decision and judgment with regard to sin.⁶

The community of Jesus’ friends do this through its prophetic witness, which is to represent the values of the kingdom of God by living the values of the kingdom of God. When we forgive, it means something, it means the person we have forgiven is forgiven. When we refuse to forgive, that too means something, it means we have not forgiven them.

What forgiving and not forgiving does NOT mean is they are not saved, for that level of forgiveness is the power of God alone! (Mk 2:7–11; 1 Jn 1:9) God forgives the sin against him, where we forgive the offenses against us, or not.

The problem is when we don't forgive. While those who offend us may not receive our forgiveness, what also happens is they are not challenged or confronted with their sin against God. When we do not represent or live out the values of the kingdom —and make no mistake, God wants us to forgive others!— when we do not forgive others are not afforded a glimpse into the greatness and goodness, the grace and generosity of the loving God who is ready and willing to forgive them their sins.

The friends of Jesus start by forgiving one another, for if we cannot forgive those who share our faith, then we cannot forgive our family; if we cannot forgive our family, we cannot forgive our friends; if we cannot forgive our friends, we cannot forgive those in our teams or clubs, our workplaces or are schools, our neighbours or those who we pass in the streets. And those all desperately need to catch a glimpse of the greatness and goodness, the grace and generosity of the loving God who is ready and willing to forgive them their sins.

Jesus loved the disciples, ministered to them, spent time with them, taught them more directly and pointedly. He breathed life into them, so that they might reveal Jesus *in community*, that we would be known as Jesus' friends by our love for one another. When we forgive each other, God's grace and forgiveness is demonstrated. When we refuse to forgive, we become disconnected from each other, our community fractures, God is embarrassed by us and for us. Our neighbours then are not challenged by our hypocrisy and they remain in their sin because are not shown a better way to live.

Conclusion

May we respond to the call and commission of Jesus and be filled with the Holy Spirit, that our love for one another would then overflow into our families, our schools, our workplaces, our teams and clubs, into the very lives of our neighbours and the systems of our city. With our demonstration of God's greatness and goodness, grace and generosity, they will then be challenged and confronted with their own sin, not that they would feel bad about themselves, but that they would be freed from darkness, disconnection, and the curse of death.

May we here experience another Pentecost, that this local expression of the Church worldwide and eternal be reborn!

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 This sermon is based on an outline by Charles Webb, "Christ Appearing to His Own", ed. Maze Jackson, *Golden Nuggets* 6 (1970).
- 3 Arguably, the Samaritan woman, whom Jesus met at a well outside her town, was the first *actual* evangelist (Jn 4:28–29).
- 4 It also recalls the description of the breath of life in Ezek 37:9 (see also the description of God in Wis 15:11: "and breathed a living spirit into them" [NRSV]).
- 5 See John 3:19–21; 8:21–24; 9:39–41; and, 15:22–24.
- 6 Consider John 15:22–24.

