

Come and See: Encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John
Part 11: What is Faith? Mary and the Resurrected Jesus

November 19, 2023
By Pastor David Fields

John 20:1-18

I. Christian Faith Is Impossible (Without God)

Despite Jesus' predictions, despite what Mary has seen Jesus do, she has gone searching for a body. And none of the other disciples are in better shape. They don't start up a search party. They aren't out looking for the living Jesus. They're in hiding, full of fear.

Christians across the spectrum all agree on this: we can't have Christian faith *solely* through our own ability. There is an act of God, of His Holy Spirit, working in our hearts, helping us overcome our spiritual blindness.

"All the compelling arguments may be laid out in front of us. The message might be as clear as can be. But there is in every human being an inherent spiritual blindness. We can't see the truth. We can't connect it to ourselves." - Timothy Keller, *Encounters With Jesus*

When Jesus is discussing with a rich young ruler how to enter the kingdom of God, he walks away sad. After this discussion Jesus' disciples say, "Who then can be saved?" And Jesus replies: "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." – Mark 10:27

Thomas Nagel, a philosopher who identifies himself as a secular atheist, he is very honest about his own motives regarding the question of God. He writes:

"I want atheism to be true, and I am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God.; I don't want the universe to be like that. My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition...I am curious...whether there is anyone who is genuinely indifferent as to whether there is a God." – Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*

We all have a vested interest in the outcome of our search into the question of God. Total objectivity is never open to us.

What do we do?

1. We need to slow down in coming to our conclusions. We need to recognize that we have biases or reasons we don't *want to believe*, and at least take the time to be aware of them and examine them. To "doubt our doubts," to be suspicious of our skepticism.
2. We need to pray. We have to take the Christian claims for what they are. Christian faith is not a set of ideas, not a philosophy to buy into or not, but a relationship to enter. There is a truly "spiritual dimension" to it. Because of that, you do need to be open to dealing with the person of Jesus as the Living God. Ask: "God, if you're really there, I'm carrying reasons why I just don't *want to believe* in Jesus, help me break through that. Help me to see you."
3. If you worry that you don't have enough faith, that itself is evidence of God at work in you, giving you a desire for himself! If you care if you know him, then he's at work in you. If it's "grace that's brought me safe this far," it will be "grace that leads me home." *God is working in you.* "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" – Mark 9:24. You can pray the same thing today.

II. **Christian Faith Is Reasonable**

We don't believe the claims of the Christian faith because they are "relevant", because it "appeals to me," or because they "work." No. Christianity insists that you believe because it's true.

"You can only face the suffering and questions ahead of you, if you believe that Christianity's not just relevant and exciting (which it is!) but that it is also true."
– Timothy Keller

[Note: you can find my more extensive description of Jesus' Resurrection in this [message](#) in our "God Question" series that you can access on our website, email me for a copy, or pick up a print copy from the Info Desk]

The Resurrection of Jesus

1. The Empty Tomb

The Christian claim was that Jesus was alive, but that claim could have easily been disproved by recovering and displaying the body. And there was enormous pressure to find and display his body to quell the early Christian movement. But even non-Christian historians in the first century attest that the tomb was empty – no body was ever recovered.

2. Women are Named as the First Witnesses

All the Gospel accounts point out that the first people to witness Jesus alive are...female. Now, women weren't allowed to bear witness in court at that time and place in history –

they were seen as unreliable. If you were 'making up' this story this is the last thing you would have said if they wanted it to be seen as credible, believable. So, why would *all* of the Gospels report that women were the first to see Jesus alive? Only if they felt bound to tell the truth.

3. Many of the Witnesses Died to Share This Message

This early church is this small group of poor, marginalized followers of Jesus who are so galvanized by what they experience that they go into the world, proclaiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Almost all of these first witness to Jesus' resurrection would lose their lives to make this claim. You don't die for a hoax that you know isn't true.

What could explain all of this historically? If you don't rule out miracles out of the gate – the best, most plausible historical explanation is that Jesus really and truly was God the Son, who was raised from the dead, and hundreds of people saw him.

III. Christian Faith is Based on Grace

Real Christian faith is *personal*. It's not that we believe Jesus just died for people *generally*, but that we can say, as Paul does in Galatians 2:20: "I live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved me* and gave himself *for me*." – Galatians 2:20

Jesus calls Mary by her name. In John 10, Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd, and says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." - John 10:27. Christian faith is deeply personal.

At the moment Mary realizes Jesus is alive, and she meets him face to face, he then sends her with a message "Go to my brothers and tell them..." – and in a sense she becomes the first Christian. Why? Well, what is a Christian? A Christian has had an encounter with that risen Christ. And at this moment, Mary is the only person in the world of whom those things are true.

"Now, is this an accident? I don't believe so. Jesus could have easily arranged for anyone to be the first messenger. He chose her. And that means Jesus Christ specifically chose a woman, not a man; chose a [person with a checkered past] ...not a pillar of the community; chose one of the support team, not one of the leaders, to be the first Christian. How much clearer can that be?

"He's saying, "It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. My salvation is not based on pedigree, it's not based on moral attainments, raw talent, level of effort, or track record. I have not come to call those who are strong [or think they are], but to call those who are weak. And I am not mainly your teacher but your savior. I'm here to save you not by your work, but by my work."

And the minute you understand that the minute you see yourself in Mary Magdalene's place, something will change forever in you. You'll be following the first Christian."

– Timothy Keller, *Encounters with Jesus*

Jesus' Continuing Presence Through the Holy Spirit

How do we have an encounter with the living Jesus?

Mary is clinging to Jesus, trying to hold on to the way she related to Jesus in the past, but that has to change as well. She no longer relates to Him simply as "Teacher", but he says – "I am ascending to the Father." He is taking His rightful place on the throne of the universe.

And this is all according to His promises and His plan. Jesus is restating what He promises in John 14 – that He will not leave us as orphans. He's saying, "when I ascend to the Father, I will send the Spirit to make me present to all of you, to live in you, day and night." See, real faith *connects you to Christ* – gives us an ongoing love relationship with Him.

Life Group Discussion and Reflection Questions

Open Up

How do most people you know define "faith"? How would you define *Christian* faith?

Dig In

1. Read over the interaction that Jesus has with Mary in **John 20:11-18** twice, slowly. Take some time to consider what it would be like to be Mary that day.
 - a. As you consider her experience, what questions or thoughts does this raise for you?
 - b. What questions would you like to ask Jesus about this interaction if you could?
2. Jesus speaks Mary's name, and it's in that moment that she comes to realize who Jesus is. **Read John 10:3-4**. Compare Jesus' teaching with Mary's experience.
 - a. Together, what do these texts tell us about the Christian faith?
 - b. Why is prayer such a key part of Christianity? How has it been important to you?
 - c. Based on John 10:3-4, why might reading Scripture, especially the Gospels, be an important part of the Christian faith?

3. Mary may seem to us like an unlikely candidate to be the “first Christian” – the first person to encounter the risen Jesus. She has the privilege of being, as some have called her, “the apostle to the apostles” as she is sent by Jesus to announce his resurrection. The “unlikeliness” of Jesus choosing her helps us see that our salvation is totally a work of “grace” – it’s not something we earn or achieve but is a gift God gives us.
 - a. How does the fact of Mary’s unlikeliness, and God’s graciousness revealed through this story, encourage you?
 - b. How might this change how you see other people, or how you go about sharing the news of Jesus with people in your life?

Pray

Take some time to thank God for his work of saving us and working in us by sheer grace. Pray for the needs of your group. Take time to ask God to work in the lives of your co-workers, neighbours, friends. Ask for opportunities to share how you have experienced Jesus personally.