

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

C. THE REDEEMER.

31. He is Risen!

Utter despair. Utter darkness. The young girl who had born immaculately that very special Baby, who had loved and nurtured Him, who had held such high hopes for Him as the One who would save Israel – had now lived to see Him die like a criminal on a cross. John tried to comfort her, but in his devastation he had little comfort to give. He had been so sure that this special Jesus had been the Son of God: he felt that he understood the Master rather better than the rest: he *knew* He was the Messiah. He wasn't meant to die. What had gone wrong? As for Peter, it was the end of the world. He had loved Jesus, fiercely, passionately – and the last thing he had done for Him was to declare he didn't even know Him! He could still see the look that Jesus had given him – those eyes would follow him to the grave.

Can you imagine how you would feel in their shoes? Bad enough to lose faith in God?

Help from the Sanhedrin!

John 19:38-42. Two other men were devastated. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were members of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, and men of wealth and high social standing. They too had believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but their conviction had to be kept under wraps if they did not want to be thrown out of the Council. They had tried to put in a good word for Him a couple of times but were drowned out by the rest, who had seen to it that Jesus was disposed of. Now they were feeling bitter remorse. Victims of crucifixion were normally thrown onto a heap by the Roman soldiers, the last indignity handed out even in death. Joseph and Nicodemus could not bear to think of Jesus' body being treated like that. Something had to be done. And now, at last, fear was conquered and faith erupted into action.

Going boldly (**Mark 15:43**) to Pilate, Joseph asked to be given the body of Jesus and Pilate, no doubt in a hurry to see the end of this matter, granted his request. Too late to minister to Him in life, Joseph and Nicodemus took down the body from the cross, wrapped it tenderly in a burial shroud with about 34 kilos of myrrh and aloes – a huge amount, such as was used for royal burials – and placed it in a tomb which Joseph had just newly hewn out for his own family vault. (**Matthew 27:60**) The entrance was closed with a large stone. Sorrowfully, the two men walked away: if only, if only, they had shown their bravery when it was needed, Jesus might not have died!

But what seemed a tragic failure to them, God was able to use for the fulfilment of His plan. Granted, it would have been great if Joseph had stood up boldly for Jesus during His life, but then he might well have been thrown out of the Sanhedrin by the Jewish religious leaders who were so much against Jesus. There is, in fact, a tradition that he did later lose his position because of his faith in Jesus. But because Joseph had such a social and religious standing, he had enough clout with Pilate to request Jesus' body and have his request granted. According to Roman law, the relatives of a criminal might claim his body for burial: if it was not claimed, it was simply left to rot until the scavenger dogs dealt with it. None of Jesus' relatives were in a position to claim His body, as they were all Galileans and none of them possessed a tomb in Jerusalem.

But what they could not do, Joseph was only too glad to do, and now, because the body was in a grave all by itself rather than in a common heap with other corpses, there could be no doubt about whose body was resurrected when it did happen! As it says in **Isaiah 53:9**, Jesus did indeed die in the company of the wicked, but in his death He was with the rich.

Joseph and Nicodemus, for all their slowness to take action on their faith, had a vital part to play in the great drama of our salvation. Do our past failures rule us out of doing service for God? Can God actually use our weaknesses for His glory ?

Matthew 27:62-66. Ironically, while His disciples were convinced that they had lost their Jesus for ever, the chief priests and Pharisees remembered that Jesus had said, “After three days I will rise again.” Of course it could not really happen, they reasoned, but His disciples might steal His body and pretend that He had risen and the religious leaders would have no chance of proving them wrong. So even though it meant breaking yet more of their laws, they went to Pilate on the Sabbath and presented him with their problem. To this Pilate replied cynically that they could have a guard of soldiers to make the tomb “as secure as you know how.” So a seal was set on the entrance stone and the guards put in place.

But what none of them could understand, was that no tomb on earth could imprison the Risen Christ. No schemes of men could thwart the plans of God. Jesus who had said in **John 10:17** that He would lay down His life of His own accord, also said in the next verse that He had the authority to take it up again, adding as the reason, “This command I received from My Father.” It was all in God’s plan. Jesus was soon to burst forth from the tomb and that night of despair would give way to the glorious dawn of eternal hope.

Do we look at the world today in despair? We need to remember that no schemes of man can thwart the plans of God!

Matthew 27:55,56. One dynamic difference Jesus brought in His mission on earth, was the place He gave women in society. **Luke 8:2-4** tells us of the women who had been touched by Jesus’ ministry and had shown their gratitude by travelling along with Him and His disciples, ministering to His needs. Some of them, like Joanna, wife of Cuza, manager of Herod’s household, were well able to supply the little band out of their own means. Matthew speaks of these women still faithfully watching at the Cross. In point of fact, this band of women were the only consistent witnesses to Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. They alone saw the whole drama as it unfolded. If, as some would have us believe, the disciples simply conjured up a story about this great act of redemption, they would never have put women into the story: the testimony of a woman was regarded as unreliable and not valid in any court case!

Ladies, do you thank God for what Christ has done for you socially? And gentlemen, do you thank God for the support and assistance that comes from the ministry of women?

Matthew 28:1-10. (Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-8) But what happened, in fact? After they had rested on the Sabbath, some of these faithful women came to the tomb where Jesus had been laid, bringing the spices and perfumes they had prepared for more embalming of the body. These were practical women, not afraid to deal with a dead body: they were no shrinking violets. The gospel writers give several names, among them Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, Joanna, and others. (Salome, presumed to be the sister of Mary, would want to do what she could for the sake of her bereaved sister, not knowing that before long she too would lose a son, as King Herod would decide to do away with James, the brother of John.) Brave and faithful, these dear women still had forgotten to arrange for someone to roll away the stone for them! A bit late to think of that when they were nearly at the tomb!

But they had no need to worry. Matthew tells that suddenly there was a violent earthquake, as an angel of the Lord with the brightness of lightning, came down from heaven, rolled back the stone and – with the ultimate gesture of victory - sat on it! What wonderful drama!

The guards were terrified and could not move. But the angel had nothing to say to them. It was to the women he spoke. “Don’t be afraid, for I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; He has risen, just as He said.” ***What understated TRUTH!*** In **Luke 24:6** the angel said to the women, “Remember how He told *you*....” (not, “told His *disciples*, who then told *you*”.) This was another revolutionary statement: women were never included in the teaching sessions of the rabbis, there being the prevailing belief that their intelligence would not be equal to the task. Yet Jesus was different: He welcomed women among His followers and taught them just as much as He taught the men. The angel invited them to come and see for themselves where Jesus had lain, and then to go quickly and tell His disciples the great news.

Bubbling over with a sort of fearful joy, the women ran from the tomb – and as they ran, Jesus met them! “Greetings,” he said – the understatement of the year! Completely wrapt, they bowed to clasp his feet and worship him – *women*, the first people to worship the Risen Christ! “Don’t be afraid”, Jesus assured them. “Go and tell *my brothers* (“brothers” meaning the disciples who had deserted him in his greatest need) “to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” *Women*, again, the first people to deliver a message from the Lord! **Mark 16:7** goes further - the angel told the women to “tell his disciples *and Peter*....” How well Jesus understood Peter’s feelings of failure at this time!

Have you ever had an “unbelievable” answer to prayer and found it hard to believe it actually happened? Yet God remains patient with us.

Meanwhile, as **Matthew 28:11-15** goes on to tell us, the guards recovered their senses and went off to tell their story to the chief priests. Truly there is none so blind as he who does not want to see! It must have cost those chief priests quite a lot to bribe the guards to spread the story that the disciples had stolen Jesus’ body while they, the guards, had been asleep! The penalty for sleeping on duty was death, so it must have been a hefty bribe for them and maybe another one for Pilate if the news ever reached him! Paul has a comment to make in **Colossians 2:15** which fits well here – “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, He (Jesus) made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

John 20:1-18. It seems that Mary Magdalene made the journey to the tomb on her own, because all she saw was the opened tomb, and fearing the worst, raced off to tell Peter and John the bad news. The two men went to have a look for themselves and discovered a phenomenon – the graveclothes were lying neatly, with the burial cloth for the head separated a little from them, as if the body of Jesus had simply risen straight up through them! (The linen and spices used on Jesus’ body were extremely expensive: no grave robber would have taken the body and left the “valuable goods” behind!) Peter went away wondering how this could have happened, but the mystic John at last believed – in **verse 8** he says so. He adds that those blinkered disciples still did not understand from the Scriptures that Jesus had to rise from the dead!

Mary, meanwhile, shed tears of distress and when she saw a gardener standing there, she rather illogically asked him to tell her where he had taken Jesus’ body so that she could take it away herself! We can only imagine the exquisite drama as Jesus uttered the word, “Mary!” and her glad cry of “Rabboni!” as she recognized Him. Back she raced to the disciples with the headline news - “I have seen the Lord!”

–Have your tears sometimes blinded your eyes to the real Christ? We need to listen to His word!

Amazingly, the disciples still had not the courage to believe the tale of those “hysterical” women! Far from obeying Jesus’ word and moving north to Galilee, they stayed paralysed in Jerusalem behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews” as John says in **John 20:19**.

Luke 24:13-35. Of course there were many others who had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and who now were completely shattered. Luke gives us the delightful story of two of them – Cleopas and (I am sure) Mrs. Cleopas, who were walking sadly home from Jerusalem trying to make some sense of this tragedy. It was quite customary for strangers to link up with other walkers for company and safety on the road, but these two were far too depressed to recognize who it was that joined them. What a sermon that must have been, as Jesus went through the Old Testament from Moses to the prophets, explaining to their wondering minds how the details of His story had already been forecast throughout the Scriptures! Of course they wanted to hear more, and invited Him in for supper. As He gave thanks and handed them the broken bread, did they at last see His hands? Frustratingly, in that moment of recognition, Jesus vanished from their sight. There was no way they could have slept that night: gobbling down their meal they raced back, a whole 11 kilometres, to Jerusalem, to tell the disciples the wonderful news.

When they got there, though, the disciples – more than the original eleven, **verse 33** - had their own news – yes, Jesus had indeed risen and had appeared to Peter! The two travellers would have found it hard to get a word of their own in edgeways! **Verses 36** and onwards continue the delight of this story. Suddenly, amid all the excited babble, Jesus Himself was standing there amongst them! And even now, the sight caused panic and puzzlement! Everyone knows that dead men don't rise! Was this just an hallucination?

Jesus, patient as always, gently rebuked them. His body, even though able to negotiate a locked door, had flesh and bones, and the nail wounds to prove that He was indeed the One who had been crucified. But it was all too much for the disciples' limited vision: "they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement," **verse 41**. So Jesus gave them another proof. He asked for something to eat! Can't you imagine the humour of it all – the disciples stumbling over each other to produce a piece of cooked fish, and then watching Him with eyes out on stalks as He actually sat down and ate the fish in front of them! I guess He was smiling to Himself. Was God smiling too, in Heaven?

And once again, as He had done with Cleopas and his companion, He opened the eyes of their understanding, in **verses 44-49**, in the gentlest way of saying, "I told you so!" "You are witnesses of these things," He added significantly: Jewish law laid down that a prior acquaintance with a person was necessary for a testimony about that person to be accepted as reliable: the resurrected Jesus appeared only to those who had known Him before the crucifixion.

John 20:19-29 relates the same incident, but mentions that Thomas was not present at that historical time. It is not fair that we have dubbed him "Doubting Thomas" just because he would not believe his friends: they had shown just as much disbelief with the news the women had brought them. Just as they had not believed until they saw Jesus actually eating, Thomas would accept only the evidence of his own eyes: they had seen His wounds; he must see them too. For all his scepticism, Thomas was keen to be counted among the disciples of Jesus and was with them a week later when for the second time Jesus came through locked doors to stand amongst them. I can just see Him looking lovingly at the gob-smacked Thomas – and Thomas's eye-popping look back at Jesus – as he was invited not just to see, but to feel, the wounds that Thomas had demanded as proof! But now Thomas didn't need that – in a great statement of faith he declared, "My Lord and my God!" In **verse 29** Jesus has an encouragement for us today - "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Can you remember what it was that convinced you that Jesus was for real?

John chapter 21. Restored completely, Thomas threw his weight into the subsequent work of building the church: tradition has it that courageously, unselfishly, he went to India with the gospel message. But in the meantime, he also went with some of the others when they at last had the courage to go back, as Jesus had told them, to Galilee. It is a beautiful story. We don't know how long they waited in Galilee for Jesus' promised appearance, but the ever-restive Peter declared he'd go fishing to fill in the time. Six others went with him.

They had a long and fruitless night. In the morning, tired and hungry, they approached the shore and saw a man standing there watching them. "No fish?" he asked. "Not a one," they answered dolefully. "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you'll find some." They took his advice and now they could not lift the net into the boat for the weight of the 153 fish they had caught!

For John, the penny suddenly dropped. "It is the Lord!" he cried to Peter. In a flash Peter was out of the boat and wading to the shore, heedless of the other fishers' predicament. It would be weeks later, at Pentecost, before the Holy Spirit would transform his life. Meantime, Jesus reminded him of his duty and Peter ran back to help the others drag the bulging net ashore. "Bring some of the fish you have caught," directed Jesus.

And it was at that moment that the disciples witnessed surely the most magnificent, the most gracious touch of compassion given to them by their Lord. Here was Jesus, Who had on the Cross just some days ago, fought the once-in-eternity drama of vanquishing evil for all mankind by His own pure sacrifice, now standing over a fire, no doubt with coal dirt on those pierced hands, cooking some fish for His friends! The smell of fresh bread rose enticingly as Jesus said, "Come and have breakfast." He even served it up to them! What an unbelievably beautiful moment! When they had eaten, Jesus had a special gift of therapy for Peter: in place of his three denials, Jesus gave him the opportunity to declare three times that he really did love his Lord. Peter was lovingly restored and recommissioned.

Sometimes we are asked to do lowly jobs that we feel are beneath us. Who is our example?!

John leaves the story there: he could have written reams more, to fill the whole world with all the wonderful stories about Jesus, but these are enough to convince us to put our faith in Him.

In **Matthew 28:16-20** the eleven disciples gathered to the Galilean mountain where Jesus had told them to rendezvous. There was a reason for this: back in **Matthew 10:5-8** it was in Galilee that Jesus had given these men a commission, but a commission that was limited to the Jewish nation. It was necessary that Jesus come to His own people first and so He told His disciples to "go to the lost sheep of Israel." But now all that was changed: Jesus had died for the whole world and He had received all authority in heaven and on earth.

"Therefore, go and make disciples of *all nations*," He commanded, "baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." As at the beginning of His ministry, here at the finish was a direct reference to the Trinity – one name (the grammar is singular) yet three people – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus finished with those wonderful words, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Luke 24:50-53. It is left to Luke to tell us of our Lord's triumphal entry back into Heaven. At Bethany, that significant spot for Him on earth, He lifted up His hands and blessed His disciples, promising them His presence, His power and His Spirit. And even as they worshipped Him, His Father took home His victorious Son, yet leaving His followers with an everlasting joy as they continued to worship and praise their Lord and Saviour, Jesus, the Messiah, the risen and eternal Son of God.