

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 31
Postmortem Appearances of Jesus

In our survey of the Gospel resurrection narratives, we've looked at the burial account of Jesus and at the discovery of his empty tomb. Today we want to turn to a discussion of the postmortem appearances of the risen Jesus.

These appearances are already foreshadowed in the Gospel of Mark 16:7 in the prediction given by the angel. In Mark 16:7 he says, "Go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him as he told you." Even though in the canonical Gospel of Mark (Mark as we have it today) there is no narration of this appearance in Galilee, clearly Mark knows of such an appearance of the risen Lord to the disciples and perhaps a wider group including the women that took place in Galilee.

When you look at the Gospel According to Matthew it is, as it were, a continuation of Mark's account. There we do have a narrative of this Galilean appearance. This is found in Matthew 28:16-20.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

We have in both Mark and in Matthew a reference to a Galilean appearance to the disciples and perhaps others gathered with them on the mountaintop in Galilee. In Matthew's Gospel this appearance in Galilee, however, is preceded by an appearance to the women as they rush from the empty tomb to tell the disciples of what they have seen. Matthew 28:8-10.

So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

As the women rush from the tomb to tell the disciples they are met by Jesus who basically repeats the message of the angel that they are to go to Galilee and there they will see Jesus. The only difference is that in Jesus' terminology he refers to the disciples as his brethren - "tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me" - whereas

the angel says, *Go and tell Peter and the disciples that they are to go to Galilee and there you will see me.*

You also have an appearance to women in the Gospel of John 20:11-18. This is one of the most beloved of the Gospel accounts – the appearance to Mary Magdalene.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.¹ They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

I think it is plausible that this appearance is John's shining the spotlight on Mary Magdalene for dramatic effect, but in fact this is the same appearance to the women that is described in the Gospel of Matthew. We saw earlier that there is the presence of other women acknowledged when Mary says, for example, in verse 2, “they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and *we* do not know where they have laid him.” This is referring to a plurality of persons. Moreover, the command to Mary to “do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father” seems to make sense in light of Matthew's account where the women have fallen at Jesus' feet in worship and have grasped his ankles worshipping the Lord and Jesus says, *do not cling to me, I've not yet ascended to my Father*. The idea is not that it would be inappropriate to cling to Jesus or worship him prior to his ascension to heaven. Rather, the idea, I think, here is, *I haven't left yet. I've not yet ascended to the Father. You don't need to cling to me as though you want to keep me here. Go and tell the disciples what I've said to you*. Notice that Jesus also uses that same word “go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father.” I suspect that what we have here is in fact the same appearance to the women that you have in Matthew 28, but that John, for purposes of dramatic effect, has shone the spotlight on Mary Magdalene and focused on her.

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In Matthew that is all the appearances you have of Jesus. You have the appearance to the women, and you have the appearance in Galilee. But in John's Gospel as well as in Luke's Gospel there are additional resurrection appearance stories. For example, in the Gospel of Luke chapter 24 we have the account of an appearance of Jesus to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, a village probably around seven miles or so outside of Jerusalem, and also a special appearance to Peter, the chief disciple. We find this in Luke 24:13-35. Let's read that together.

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him.² But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see." And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has

appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

This appearance features this non-recognition motif that is also found in the appearance to Mary Magdalene and also in the story in John that we will read by the appearance on the Sea of Tiberias. In these three resurrection accounts you have this motif of the risen Lord not being immediately recognized by the person to whom he appeared. I think it would be incorrect to try to explain this through some natural means. For example, that Mary saw Jesus from the back and so did not recognize him, or her tears had blurred her vision, or these Emmaus disciples didn't look Jesus fully in the face and so didn't know him. Rather, Luke makes it pretty clear that this was a supernatural blindness in verse 16. He says, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” This was a supernatural inhibition or constraint that God had imposed upon them. Then at the moment of the breaking of the bread immediately the scales fall away and they recognize Jesus. So I think this is a kind of supernatural inhibition imposed by God that then is supernaturally and immediately removed at the moment of disclosure.

What is the purpose of this motif? It is difficult to say, but one suggestion that I think is plausible is that this motif is meant to emphasize that Jesus is now in a new mode of existence and is therefore not going to be continuing with the disciples in the same old earthly mode of existence that they once knew him during his earthly lifetime. He is now risen in a glorious, supernatural, immortal, resurrection body. They will not know Jesus now in the same way as they did during his earthly life. This non-recognition motif serves to underline in a sense this other worldly nature of the resurrected Lord.

Notice as well that when the Emmaus disciples get back to Jerusalem they find the eleven disciples gathered together and you have this report that the Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon-Peter. We have no narrative of the appearance to Peter anywhere in the Gospels. We have simply this brief reference to it that Luke knows about and that he weaves into or inserts into his Emmaus story. So we don't know exactly when this appearance to Peter took place, but it was sometime during that period of time that these disciples were walking to Emmaus and Jesus appeared to them. By the time they get back he had already appeared to Peter as well.³

The next appearance to be narrated is the most important, I think, of the resurrection appearances, and that is the appearance to the Twelve in Jerusalem. We have narratives of the appearance to this group known as the Twelve (with a capital letter, if you will). It doesn't mean that there were numerically twelve people there. The Gospels are aware that obviously Judas had fallen away and so wasn't present. But this was the group called the Twelve – the original disciples that Jesus had selected to be his inner circle and to

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accompany him. We have narratives of the appearance to the Twelve in Luke 24:36-42 and in John 20:19-23. Let's read those passages. First Luke 24:36-42:

As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.

We have a similar narrative of this appearance in John 20:19-23. Let's turn to that passage:

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

The thing that is most striking about this appearance to the Twelve in Jerusalem is undoubtedly the physical demonstrations of showing the disciples the wounds in his hands and feet, and eating before them in order to show his corporeality. These physical demonstrations, I think, serve two purposes. Number one, they show the materiality of the resurrection body. This is not some sort of ghostly spiritual body, some sort of ethereal substance. This is a body, as Luke says, of flesh and bones. This is a resurrection body such as the Jewish hope anticipated when the bones would be raised from the dead and clothed anew with flesh. The physical demonstrations are meant to indicate the corporeality, the physicality, materiality, of the resurrection body. But secondly they are also meant to indicate the identity of the risen Lord with the Jesus who was crucified and buried in the tomb. The wounds on the glorified, resurrection body of Jesus show that this is the same Jesus that was crucified and buried. This is not a replacement Jesus. This is not a resurrection body different from the body that was laid in the tomb. This is the same body that was laid in the tomb now transformed and bears these signature marks of his crucifixion.

It is remarkable that even in his glorified body Jesus' still bears the scars of the crucifixion and the spear wound that he suffered.⁴ We might wonder at that. We might

⁴ 20:01

say, *Aren't we going to be healed in our resurrection bodies of every infirmity, scar, and disease that we ever had.* I think that is true. But in the case of Jesus, these wounds, I think, are, as it were, the trophy of his atoning death on the cross for the sake of our redemption. These are eternal reminders of the atoning self-sacrificial death of Jesus by which our redemption was won. How appropriate that the risen Lord would carry these wounds into eternity in his glorified risen body!

The other thing that is evident in this appearance to the Twelve is that even though this is a material body that is the same body that was crucified and buried, nevertheless it is now a supernatural body. It is not just a revivification of the old body. This is the body that the apostle Paul, I think, would describe as glorious, immortal, powerful, and spiritual. Notice the resurrection body of Jesus just appears in the room where the disciples are meeting. It is not as though he had to knock at the door and they had to open it. Rather, he just appears in the room where they are. Very often people will say Jesus came through the door or he came through the walls. That is incorrect. That is not in the narrative. Rather, Jesus just appears in their midst in the room. It is as though he had the ability to step in and out of this four-dimensional spacetime continuum as he willed. He vanishes in Emmaus, and then appears in the upper room in Jerusalem without traversing the distance in-between. The Emmaus disciples had to run all the way back; Jesus didn't. He could step out of our spacetime manifold in Emmaus and then enter back into it in Jerusalem without traversing the distance in-between. So this is clearly a supernatural resurrection body that is described in these narratives.

The next appearance to be described is the one to Thomas and the Twelve in John 20:26-29:

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Here the disciples are gathered together in the same room, and this time Thomas is with them. He was not with them on the previous encounter. You might ask yourself, *What in the world are the disciples still doing in Jerusalem? Hadn't they been commanded by the angel and by the risen Lord himself to return to Galilee in order to meet Jesus there?* What we need to keep in mind is that the Feast of Passover was followed immediately by the Feast of Unleavened Bread which lasted seven days. The resurrection appearances appear to follow the pattern of these pilgrimages to these feasts in Jerusalem. There is the

Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread. The disciples remain in Jerusalem for the duration of the feast. Then they return to Galilee and at the appointed time they go to the mountaintop described by Matthew and there they see Jesus. So there is this appearance eight days later to Thomas and the disciples as they are still in Jerusalem for the duration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Again, we have the emphasis upon the materiality as well as the supernatural nature of Jesus' resurrection body.

The final appearance is narrated in John 21:1-14. This is the appearance by the Sea of Tiberias, or the Lake of Galilee.⁵

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing.

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any fish?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, for the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his clothes, for he was stripped for work, and sprang into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Very often you will hear people say that this story represents the disobedience of the disciples to Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all nations. Instead they had returned to their old way of life of fishing in Galilee. So Jesus had to appear to them and recommission them. But I think that that is not at all what this story is about. Notice anything unusual about the list of disciples in verses 1 and 2? Not all of these disciples

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were fishermen. Peter was, and the Sons of Zebedee. But Nathanael was from Cana, which is a landlocked city. So these were not all fishermen. This was not just a return to the old way of life on the part of these disciples. Rather, what is going on here, I think, is that the disciples have gone back to Galilee and they are waiting until the appointed time to rendezvous with Jesus on the mountaintop in Galilee that is described in the 28th chapter of Matthew. Unlike all of the other resurrection appearances, the one in Matthew is unique in that it was by appointment. They went to the mountain which Jesus appointed them to go to and met with him there. So while they are waiting for that rendezvous with Jesus on the mountaintop in Galilee, Peter says, "I'm going fishing" and some of the other disciples who aren't fishermen say, "We will go with you." So they are out toiling fruitlessly trying to catch fish spending time while waiting for the resurrection appearance described in the Gospel of Matthew.

This appearance story is undoubtedly meant to be reminiscence of the call of the disciples as it is described in the Gospel of Luke 5:1-11:

While the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. And he saw two boats by the lake; but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them.⁶ And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

At the very beginning of their call to become fishers of men, Jesus had given them this miraculous catch of fish to symbolize the mission to which they would be called by Jesus. Now in this resurrection appearance story in John they have a similar miraculous catch of fish to symbolize the mission to which he has called them. Do you notice the significant difference between these two stories? In the first story, the nets tear open, the fish are

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flopping all over the place, escaping out of the boats, the nets are destroyed. But in the second story John makes a point of saying that even though there were so many the nets were not torn. This time the nets did not tear open. This symbolizes the success of the mission to become fishers of men to which Jesus had called them. So in this resurrection appearance, we have this poignant reminder of the mission call of the disciples to become fishers of men, and especially the symbolic representation of the success of that mission in the fact that the nets did not tear.

There is more that I want to say about this, but that will have to wait until next time.⁷