



NAC-USA
DEVELOPMENT
INSTITUTE

Witnessing
the Risen
Christ

Peter's
encounter

The Risen
Christ today

MIDWEEK SCRIPT

2017

May

Session 1 -- Witnessing the Risen Christ

Welcome to our small group discussions for the month of May.

We find ourselves in the midst of Eastertide. This season offers us the opportunity to consider, in depth, the experiences that the Lord had with the disciples and those close to Him during the days between Easter and Pentecost. Witnessing the Risen Christ will be the focus of our discussions this month.

Witnessing could mean to see and recognize, as was the case with Mary and the disciples who saw Jesus after He resurrected from the dead. Seeing Him allowed them to realize that what He had told them before His crucifixion had really happened. But, as we will learn throughout our sessions this month, witnessing the Risen Christ is more than just seeing and recognizing Him. To be a witness of the Risen Christ is to recognize Him and then to speak of Him and share your experiences of Him with others.

In this session, we'll consider the separate encounters that Mary Magdalene and the Emmaus disciples had with Christ after His resurrection. For me, the encounter that the Lord had with Mary Magdalene at the tomb is one of the most heartwarming accounts in the Bible. She had come to the tomb, but wept, because she did not find Jesus' body there. But then:

...she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" She, supposing Him to be the Gardener, 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!" (John 20:14-16)

Through the simple expression of her name, Mary's grief and confusion were transformed into profound joy because she recognized that it was the Lord. She did not recognize Jesus by His physical appearance, only when He said her name.

In Luke 24, we can read about another encounter with the Risen Christ, this time experienced by the two disciples who "wandered off" to Emmaus. They began their journey after Mary and the other women had returned from the tomb and shared their experiences with the disciples. For whatever reason, these disciples left Jerusalem and the fellowship of Christ's followers to travel to Emmaus, despite the wonderful news that the women had shared. While they walked, they discussed everything that had happened in connection with Jesus' crucifixion and that which the women had told them. Jesus appeared to them and walked with them, but, like Mary, they did not recognize Him by His physical appearance. He asked what they were talking about, which they shared. We can read Jesus' response in Luke 24:

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:25-26)

This was not a short discussion, and still the disciples only recognized Jesus when He broke bread and blessed it for the evening meal.

In both Mary's encounter with the Risen Christ and that of the Emmaus disciples, there are some common elements. **First**, Mary and the disciples were concerned with what had happened to and with Christ. Mary actively sought Him, and the disciples talked about Him. **Second**, they did not recognize Him by physical appearance. And **third**, recognition of Christ ultimately came through His words.

But this is not the end of the witnessing. Jesus instructed Mary to "go to the brethren." She did this, sharing what she had experienced and what He had said. The Emmaus disciples knew that they should have remained in Jerusalem, so when they recognized the Risen Christ, they immediately returned to Jerusalem and told the rest of the disciples what they had experienced. In one case, the Lord gave an overt instruction to Mary. In the other case, the disciples were aware of what they should have been doing. The Lord's teaching during their walk to Emmaus motivated and refocused them, so that they returned to Jerusalem and became witnesses of Him to those gathered there. In both cases, we can

see that the privilege of seeing and recognizing Christ carried with it the responsibility to be a witness of Him to others. Considering the societal norms of the time, Mary was not an obvious choice for one who should witness the Lord to others. But Jesus chose her. Sometimes we may feel ill-equipped for what Jesus calls us to do, yet He has chosen us because He knows that we are indeed capable. He equips us and He is always with us. This is the foundation for our confidence.

Sometimes life seems to be like our own “road to Emmaus,” where, even though we are talking about “proper” things, like matters of faith and our experiences with the Lord, we’re still confused. And then the Lord comes to us and talks, and talks and talks. Maybe the divine services seem to always touch on the same topic over and over again – there’s “nothing new.” But the Lord doesn’t give up. At some point, we recognize that it’s HIM talking to ME. Then we are wise to realize that this recognition carries with it the responsibility to share Christ with others and to be His witness.

Session 2 – Peter’s Encounter

Welcome back! Last session we started our look at the impact that the Risen Christ had on His followers. For this session, we will look specifically at Peter and the encounter he had with Jesus by the Sea of Tiberias after His resurrection. We can read in John 21 that Jesus questioned Peter three times, “Do you love Me?” Verse 17 reveals the response of Peter after being questioned the last time:

[Jesus] said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep....” (John 21:17)

Jesus asked Peter the same question three times. Do you remember a previous occurrence involving Peter, Jesus, and the number three? It was when Peter denied knowing Christ three times before the rooster crowed on the morning of His crucifixion (Luke 22:34). We can see a parallel between the three times that Peter denied knowing Jesus and the three questions of the Risen Christ. Do you think that this is a coincidence? In love and compassion, Jesus intentionally gave Peter another opportunity, a second chance, to declare his love and devotion to Him. Through this questioning, the Risen Christ emphasized that the fundamental thing that binds Him and His servant is love. Love is essential for serving Him and others. This should prompt us to ask ourselves: does my life revolve around Jesus Christ and do I serve my neighbor out of love?

Looking more closely at this encounter, we see that after Jesus had asked Peter the third time if he loved Him, Peter was grieved. We can imagine various reasons for this reaction. Perhaps Peter was hesitant or even impatient when he answered the same question a third time. Deeper consideration could bring us to the conclusion that this intimate conversation with the Lord touched Peter so profoundly that he was prompted to emphasize his conviction that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16) by professing, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Here again we see that love for Jesus is essential to serving Him. Jesus’ words and continued questioning penetrated Peter’s heart and caused him to perceive his own love for his Savior – and also his Savior’s love for him.

Does the word of God penetrate our hearts and cause us to perceive His love for us? When our dedication to the Lord is questioned, do our experiences bring clarity to how deep our love for Him truly is? Does Jesus’ sacrifice inspire us to tell Him repeatedly that we love Him? Does it also lead us to humbleness and recognition of how much we need Him? Are we touched when we perceive that He has gone out of His way to pursue us and give us a second chance? This second chance is offered each time our sins are forgiven. If we acknowledge our sins and are troubled by them, this is a sign that we love Him (Matthew 5:4). And since we are sinful human beings, we should not be surprised that the sincerity of our love is called into question.

Once Peter exclaimed his love for Christ, the Lord entrusted him with a fundamental task and a ministry with the words, “Tend My sheep. Feed My sheep.” Because of his love for Jesus, Peter was empowered to be a steward and was charged with the task of tending the flock of Christ. As a response to Christ’s care for us, we can share His love with others.

On Pentecost, Peter started his work of delivering Jesus' message of love and repentance to the world. To all who were willing to listen, he presented the same invitation that was offered to him and the Apostles: repent of your sin and leap into the loving arms of Jesus! Love for Jesus fueled Peter's activity as he carried out the mission of preaching the Gospel.

Peter's witness of the Risen Christ gave him the opportunity to openly declare his love for the Lord. We should also examine our love for the Risen Lord. Is it a secret love that we keep to ourselves? Or is our love for Christ one that we are excited to talk about and share with others? Let us always reflect on how Jesus' life and sacrifice have impacted us and what it prompts us to do: go out into the world and share His love with all.

Session 3 – The Risen Christ Today

Welcome back. As we've explored the theme of witnessing the Risen Christ this month, we've looked at the experiences of Mary at the tomb and the disciples on the road to Emmaus, as well as Peter's conversation with Christ by the sea. They all experienced Christ after His resurrection and before His ascension. In this week's session, we will discuss how Jesus' resurrection can still be felt today, thousands of years later, and our responsibility as witnesses.

Consider the small group session earlier this month about Mary. At the tomb, Jesus was with her, but said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'" (John 20:17). In His resurrected body, the divinity of Christ became apparent. For this reason, physical contact was not necessary to be close to Him. The omnipresent character of God made it possible that He would always be with His own. This was a momentous point for Mary. She not only saw and recognized the Risen Christ, she was called to become a witness of Him to others. We, too, can be such witnesses. Though none of us was physically present to see the Risen Christ, we have experienced His divine presence again and again in our lives. Do our encounters with Him have an impact on us? Do we change and live differently because of them? Do we, like Mary, share the miraculous effect of these encounters with others?

Let's get back to our Bible accounts and look at what happened in the time between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The book of Acts documents that before Jesus' ascension, He commanded the disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the promise of the Father, explaining that "John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5). Jesus then went on to say, "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). With that, Jesus ascended into heaven, and the disciples returned to Jerusalem as He instructed them to do.

While in Jerusalem, the disciples chose Matthias to replace Judas. Other than that, there isn't much written about the time between Ascension Day and Pentecost. The sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost fulfilled Jesus' promise to send the Helper and Comforter. However, the Holy Spirit was not *only* sent to give comfort. Jesus explained to His disciples before His ascension that there is power with the Holy Spirit that they would need in order to "be witnesses to [Him] in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). What they witnessed was Jesus' life, death, and especially His resurrection. Over the course of history, many people have lived and died. Jesus even raised a couple of people from the dead, but they eventually died again. No one but Jesus has conquered sin and death. **This** is the glory of the resurrection on Easter Sunday. The fundamental calling of all apostles, from those who personally witnessed the Risen Christ to those of today, is to preach this: that Christ died and arose from the dead for our salvation.

We do not want to simply view the resurrection as a historical event and keep it in the past. Nor should we simply view it as a foreshadowing of our own resurrection some day in the future. The resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for our lives today. Author Brennan Manning explains it this way - becoming more aware of the Risen Christ in the present, is a process of acknowledging Him more and more, both in the small, mundane routines of life, and in the big, life-changing moments. In so doing, we become "fuller, deeper, richer disciples."* Being aware of Christ's resurrection should be a living realization that, although Jesus may not be physically near us, He is always with us.

Another life-changing encounter can be seen with Apostle Paul. When we are first introduced to him in Acts, he is a Pharisee who is persecuting Christians and exhausting his energy trying to snuff out the start of the Christian church. In the midst of that activity, he had an encounter with Jesus that changed his life forever. He turned from being a persecutor to being a witness of the resurrected Christ. Paul's faith in the resurrection was not only based on the testimony of others, but also on his own experiences, as he expressed to the Philippians, "...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection..." (Philippians 3:10).

As we approach the celebration of Pentecost, think of what this day truly means for us. God's purpose at Pentecost was to equip His church with the mighty power of the Holy Spirit so that we could be His witnesses to all nations and ultimately bring glory to Him. Witnessing Christ not only means seeing His presence in our lives, but also being a witness of Him to others in every aspect of our lives, from how we interact with those around us to how we spend our time and money.

More than eloquence or book smarts, living a life that is a witness of Christ requires courage. It is nice to know how many books are in the Bible, or that Jesus was 33 years old when He died. But what truly fulfills our responsibility as those who have witnessed Christ and have been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, is to share with others, in word and action, how our lives continue to change as we experience Jesus. Let us do this not only at Pentecost, but in every day of our lives.

**Abba's Child, Brennan Manning (page 105)*