

Resurrection Rewards

John 20:10-23

For centuries, faithful Jewish families have observed the Feast of the Passover, commemorating that time long ago when God freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. You will remember that part of the observance of Passover involves the eating of unleavened bread, a symbol of the haste with which the Hebrews left Egypt.

Of course, observing the Passover also involved the sacrificing of a lamb. But after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, animal sacrifices could no longer be practiced. In order to continue observing the Passover, even without a Passover lamb, the rabbis decreed that a certain piece of the unleavened bread would represent the Passover lamb. That designated piece of unleavened bread would be broken in half, representing the sacrifice of the lamb. The practice continues to this day.

At the appropriate time in the ceremony, the host of the meal takes out that designated piece of unleavened bread, and breaks it in half. The Hebrew word for this piece of bread is *aphikomen*, which means “that which is eaten after.” While the children at the meal cover their eyes, the host wraps one of the halves in a white linen napkin and hides it beneath a pillow or under the tablecloth.

At the end of the meal, the children begin a search for the *aphikomen*, the broken, missing piece of unleavened bread. The custom is that when one of the children finds it, he or she is to return it to the host of the meal. The host in turn will “redeem” the piece of unleavened bread with a small gift or sum of money. The head of the feast then quietly, reverently, unwraps the broken piece of bread and gives a small piece to everyone present at the meal. It is to be eaten last so that the taste of the unleavened bread and the memory of the sacrifice of the lamb would linger after the meal has been completed.

Modern Jewish Christians break the unleavened bread, too. But for them it represents not only the Passover lamb, but also Jesus, the Lamb of God. They break it to signify the death of Christ, foretold by the prophets. They hide it to signify His burial, and then toward the end of the meal, they “resurrect” it to remind themselves of how Christ rose from the dead. The children still go through the excitement of looking for the *aphikomen*, and they still receive a reward when it is found.

I believe that the Scripture teaches us that all who discover the Resurrected Christ can receive certain rewards in their lives. When Christ comes into a person's life, change begins to take place. Paul described that change in these words:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John, something happened to the followers of Christ—they were changed! We find that the disciples of Jesus received some immediate rewards when they discovered the Resurrected Christ. When He became real to them, their lives were flooded with certain spiritual benefits which could come from no one else.

Those who know Christ as their personal Lord today can have these same rewards in their daily lives. Today we examine only one of those rewards, but it is one which is foundational to everything else.

The Resurrection of Jesus Gives Us a New Purpose, vv. 17-18

Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb of Jesus early on the morning after the Sabbath. That was as early as she could go to finish anointing His body for burial. She had wondered about how she would move the heavy stone in front of the entrance to the tomb, but when she arrived, she saw that the stone had already been moved away. Not quite understanding what had happened, Mary went running back to Simon Peter and John, to tell them *"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"* (20:2)

Peter and John had come and gone. They had entered the tomb, and had seen the empty strips of linen cloths lying there. John 20:8 tells us that John *"saw and believed."* But in verse 9 we read that *"they still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."*

Now Mary was left alone in the garden. The traumatic events of the past several days had drained her of emotional strength. She probably had not slept since Jesus had been crucified, perhaps seeking solace with the other women who had been close to Jesus. She was weeping even now as she bent over to look into the tomb.

For the first time she saw two angels in white, but did not realize who or what they were. She turned from the tomb, and saw Jesus standing there, but did not realize it was Jesus. He asked her, *"Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"* Mary thought He was the gardener, so she said, *"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."* When Jesus called her

name aloud, Mary breathlessly cried out, “*Rabboni!*” which in the Aramaic language means “Teacher.”

What Jesus said to Mary Magdalene next has been misunderstood. In verse 17, Jesus said to her, “*Don’t hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father.*” In the King James Version it reads, “Touch me not.” Either way, Jesus’ words seem to contradict what He told Thomas later in verse 27, “*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side.*” Neither did Jesus rebuke the other women, who, when they saw Him for the first time after His resurrection, fell down, clasped His feet and worshipped Him (Matthew 28:9).

So what did Jesus mean when He told Mary Magdalene, “*Do not hold on to Me?*” The Greek word used here literally means “Stop holding on to me.” Mary was so caught up in the exhilaration of seeing Jesus alive again that she not only grabbed Him, but she continued holding on to Him, as if she were afraid that if she relaxed her grip, He would vanish from her sight. Perhaps she held on to Him to convince herself that what she was seeing was real.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter had experienced such a great spiritual feeling that he had tried to capture the moment. We have had times right here in our own church when the Spirit of God was so evident, and His power so real, that we didn’t want to leave.

Those spiritual highs are good, and we need them from time to time as a boost to our relationship with Christ. But there is more to living for Christ than selfishly clutching Him to ourselves. The Resurrected Jesus gives us a new purpose for our lives.

William Barclay paraphrased the words of Jesus to mean, “Do not spend so long in worshiping Me in the joy of your new discovery. Go and tell the good news to the rest of the disciples.” Jesus knew that His remaining time on the earth was limited, and that there was so much to share and tell His disciples before He left. “Mary, stop holding on to Me. Things will never be the same again. I have returned to you, Mary, but not as before. You must not hoard the news that I have risen from the dead. Instead, go tell the others! You have a new purpose now!”

Verse eighteen records that “*Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news, ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her.*” The very essence of Christianity is to be able to say without reservation or hesitation, “I have seen the Lord!”

It is good to share those special times alone with God, but the Christian life is not to be lived in seclusion. It is to be shared. If God has blessed you with a special relationship with Him, He does not intend for you to practice your Christianity in isolation. The joys you experience with Him and the insights into His Word which He gives you are to be shared with other Christians in the family of faith.

The purpose of the Christian church has never been simply to come together to sing a few songs and hear a sermon. We make the mistake Mary Magdalene made when we drink from the Fountain, but tell no one else where they can find the Water of Life.

Please notice that Jesus did not tell Mary to go live a good life in front of the other disciples, and see if from her good example they could catch on that Jesus was alive. Yet in our day too many believers in Christ seem to think that the totality of sharing Christ with others consists of living a good life and being a good example for others.

To be sure, Jesus did hold Himself up as an example for us, when He said, *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”* (Matthew 11:29). He had told His disciples earlier in the Gospel of John, *“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you”* (John 13:15). There are other references in Scripture which command us to follow the example of Christ.

And there are places in God’s Word where we are challenged to be careful of the kind of example we set for others. For instance, Paul had written Timothy *“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity”* (1 Timothy 4:12). Paul also wrote to Titus, *“In everything set them an example by doing what is good”* (Titus 2:7).

Yet those times where we are commanded to be careful about the example we set for others are counterbalanced by the times we are told to *“Go tell.”* Paul challenged Philemon, *“I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ”* (Philemon 6). It was not for nothing that Jesus commanded, *“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19).

It was not for nothing that Jesus told His disciples, “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses....*” (Acts 1:8). This power promised to them was not given merely that they might live a good life in front of others, though certainly that would be a key factor. It was a power which gave them a new purpose—“Go and tell.”

Even today, whenever anyone discovers the Resurrected Christ, there is a new purpose which falls upon that life. It is not merely a purpose to be good, or to live a good life, or to be an example before others. However we examine the command of Christ, from whichever angle we look at it, no matter how we analyze it—it still comes out the same: “Go tell!”

During a revival meeting at Trinity Southern Baptist Church in Fresno, California, the children’s choir provided music for one of the services. The evangelist complimented the singing of the children, and then remarked, “You know, there are hundreds and thousands of little boys and girls who have never heard of Jesus!” Lifting up his voice, a small four-year-old asked so everyone could hear, “Why?”
(Lola Finley, writing in the Baptist Bulletin Service, April 29, 1990).

That is a very good question, especially since Jesus Himself has told us “Go tell!” Is the testimony of your life that you have seen the Resurrected Christ? If you claim to belong to Jesus Christ, if you claim Him as the Lord of your life, then you have been given a new purpose as a reward: “Go tell!”

Will you step forward today and claim that purpose as your own?