

2025 TALK, 4.5.25, (RISEN JESUS PLUS ONE SERIES) JOHN 20:1-18

NOT TOUCHING, BUT HUGGING

Today we begin a short series on the resurrection appearances of Jesus in the gospel of John. I have given this series a slightly tongue-in-cheek title: 'The Risen Jesus Plus One'. So, today and the next two Sundays we will look in turn at how the Risen Jesus met first with Mary, then Thomas & finally Peter.

Which presents us with a bit of an issue, right at the start of this series. We have to be honest about the different accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. This is not only in the four gospels, but also in Paul's writings. They are quite different. There are more discrepancies between the closing chapters of the four gospels than anywhere else. We could point to a number of - what some might call contradictions - in these various accounts. But today, I am simply going to try to address one major discrepancy between the gospels & what Paul wrote first about Jesus' resurrection appearances.

Paul wrote that the risen Jesus appeared first to Peter. However, none of the gospel accounts confirm this order of events. All four gospels agree that Jesus, risen from the tomb, appeared first to the women disciples: Mary Magdalen & several others. John's account only mentions Mary, of course. This minor discrepancy between John & the other three gospels can be explained by John's liking for describing one-to-one meetings between Jesus and A.N.Other. This is done, I think, for dramatic effect. To enable the reader to put themselves in the shoes of a specific character, to help people experience hearing the voice of Jesus to them personally. For example, at the outset of John's gospel there are three successive one-to-ones: chapter 2, between Jesus & his mother Mary; chapter 3 between Jesus & Nicodemus; & chapter 4, between Jesus & the woman at the well. I believe that John deliberately gives his gospel some symmetry by also concluding with three one-to-one meetings: between Jesus & Mary, Jesus & Thomas, & finally Jesus & Peter.

So how to explain this discrepancy, between Paul & the gospels...? Let's remember first that Paul's letters were likely written before all four gospels. Most scholars agree Mark was probably written first, about AD 60, probably after Paul had been martyred. And scholars generally agree that Matthew & Luke were written between AD 70/80, with John's gospel probably later still. So, when Paul was writing, the written gospels as we know them were not

available. No doubt Paul would have heard a number of verbal accounts. Peter would have been one of those he heard these eyewitness stories from. There is agreement that Paul, as a Jew steeped in the law of Moses, would have wanted to lend weight to the testimony that Jesus was alive, by mentioning a male disciple as the earliest witness. At the time of Jesus, women were not recognised as being able, by the law of Moses, to give testimony. Their word did not count for as much as the word of a man... (Aren't we glad things have moved on? Aren't you glad that the gospels of Jesus speak clearly against any kind of Andrew Tate philosophy?. Jesus obliterates misogyny in any form. His ministry clearly supports the equality of the sexes. Alleluia!).

On top of this legal point about Paul's account, there is the possibility that Paul was wanting to support the authority of the Apostle Peter in the early church. Paul & Peter had met in Jerusalem & came to an agreement about their different spheres of ministry & about support each other's ministry.

So, we can explain this one discrepancy between the gospels & Paul's writings, with an understanding of both the sequence of events, as well as the politics of the early church & Jewish society. But, before we get onto thinking about Jesus & Mary in John 20, there are two important things to add here:

Firstly, something of first importance - all four gospels & Paul agree on this essential truth: 3 days after his death on the cross, the disciples encountered the risen Jesus. Various people were involved, in various locations, over a period of several days, several weeks even. These written testimonies undoubtedly agree on this. Our faith in Jesus' victory over death is based on a whole number of eyewitness accounts of those memorable & confusing days.

Secondly, there's this. There are those who would point to the discrepancies between the gospels (& between the gospels & Paul) to argue that this undermines our belief in the resurrection of Jesus. I do understand this way of thinking. And it is important that Christians don't dismiss this issue too quickly. However, these differences are in details only. More than that, these differences actually lend weight to the authenticity of the gospels. A former pastor of mine, who previously worked as a police officer in the CID, commented that he would be suspicious of witness statements that agreed on all their details. The gospel writers clearly did not collude in writing their individual accounts. Nor did the church later try to erase the differences of

detail between the gospels. These are human documents, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, not infallible nor inerrant, but nonetheless used by God to speak to people across the centuries...

So, that was a long introduction to what I want to say, about Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalen. Let's begin by viewing a famous painting of this encounter. This is by Titian, entitled in Latin: 'Noli me tangere', which means: 'Desire not to touch me'. (SHOW PAINTING) This now hangs in the National Gallery. And there is an interesting war-time story about it. At the beginning of WW2, this painting & many other works were hidden away in a Welsh slate mine. By 1942, the director of the National Gallery decided it would be good to bring these works of art, gradually, back to London, to help the public's morale. So, he asked the people which art works should be returned first. This painting was in the top two requested by people, along with El Greco's painting of Christ's 'Agony in the Garden' (of Gethsemane)... (PAINTING – LEAVE ON SCREEN).

Well worth taking time to study this in greater detail. In one way, I love the way Mary is depicted. As she reaches out to Jesus, she is emerging, almost like a butterfly from its chrysalis. Her true self, in white, is coming out of a colourful, scarlet, sinful past... This movement is all about Mary's story, all about the story of how Jesus has healed & transformed her. Also a depiction of how God has & is changing each of us, into the image of God... But, as much as I like this painting, I find myself disagreeing with its central point. It looks here as if Jesus is in the middle of carrying out a 'body swerve', so that Mary doesn't touch him. But this is a mis-understanding, due to a Latin mis-translation.

Jesus didn't ever say to Mary 'Don't touch me'. And of course, not much later, Jesus makes a point of encouraging Thomas to do just this. What Jesus says to Mary is this: 'Don't hold onto me'... This immediately creates a very different picture in our minds. The moment that Mary, through her tears, recognises her teacher & LORD & Saviour, she instinctively reaches out to embrace the risen Jesus. An embrace, I believe, Jesus welcomes & joins in. Now that's not explicit in the text. The writer John avoids anything over-emotional or sentimental. But the fact that Jesus encourages Mary not to 'hold onto him', suggests that they have already shared a heart-felt embrace.

The only thing way that he is able to persuade Mary to let go of him, is with his first command since his resurrection. His command echoes what he has always said to all his disciples, since he first called them: 'Go & tell'... (x2)

What a moment – for Mary, for us all... As with Mary, so with us. Jesus welcomes us reaching out to him. Jesus even welcomes our embrace. Jesus welcomes our own voice – he encourages us to speak up & share our story of how we have encountered the risen Jesus.

There are three things which Jesus says to Mary in this story. Words which resonate with each of us.

Firstly, he says to Mary & to us: 'Why are you crying?'. This is not a rebuke, rather it is a gentle enquiry. He wants to hear us, to both affirm & understand our feelings & where we are coming from. I can remember so many times this happening to me. Before we recognise Jesus is with us, we are often in a place of feeling bereft, broken & bewildered. No doubt we have all been here. And Jesus invites us to tell him exactly what we are feeling & why.

Secondly, Jesus calls Mary by name. Both Mary, and us too, are reminded exactly who it is we are talking to. Someone who knows us by name. The best friend anyone could ever have. Someone who knows us intimately & still loves us deeply, passionately. Jesus doesn't quote scripture, as he does with the two on the Road to Emmaus. He doesn't rebuke her for being 'foolish' & 'slow'. He simply calls her by name... Us too. Today & every day, Jesus will call us each by name. He calls us each to follow him daily, to trust our way, our whole lives to him. The way of the cross is the way of resurrection & the hope of new life.

Thirdly, Jesus tells Mary to 'go & tell'. He wants Mary, he wants us, to use our voice to share the good news that Christ is risen... Alleluia ! Instead of staying in the garden, instead of staying beside the tomb, clinging desperately to Jesus, we are to 'go' in his name. We carry his embrace to others. We are to share the loving embrace of Jesus with those around us. Praise the LORD! What better mission is there? What better use of our voices, our arms, our legs? What better use of our time, our gifts, our whole lives - than to pass on a Jesus hug, to some weary fellow-traveller... ?

Our mission is all about 'sharing the love'. We are called in our vision statement to: 'Be a Christ-centred people, at the heart of Hemel Hempstead, showing God's love to our community'. Alleluia ! But first, we need to know that the

risen Jesus is with us... We need to reach out to him. To speak with him. To hold onto him. To let go of him - so we can go tell others.

In these weeks after Easter, this is the story of Mary... This is our story. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. Thanks be to God. Jesus is alive & Jesus is with us!. The Kingdom of God is among us & within us ! Alleluia !