

ECF 19th July 2020 John 20:10-18 A Personal Relationship With Jesus

The problem of loneliness didn't start this year. But according to numerous pieces of evidence, living under lockdown has increased it.

The Samaritans in Ireland have recently reported an increased number of distressed calls on their support line. Google searches for words such as "loneliness", "worry" and "sadness" are increasing in many countries.

A survey by the Mental Health Foundation found that in the UK, loneliness has doubled during lockdown to almost a quarter of adults. And this loneliness was highest among younger people - 44% of 18-24 year olds, and 35% of 25-34 year olds.

Another study by the University of Essex found that although women are more likely to suffer from this social isolation, those reporting at least one severe mental health problem has more than doubled in both men and women.

And a professor at the University of Arizona claimed that many people are suffering from skin hunger or touch deprivation. They're desperately missing a handshake or hug or any other physical contact with another person. Maybe that is why in the States, animal shelters are running out of animals to put up for adoption as people get a pet to try to make up for the lack of human interaction.

And so although many of us have used Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom and a host of other platforms to connect with those that we love, we still suffer when we can't have those face to face meetings with family, friends or work colleagues. We were designed for close relationships and when these are missing, we suffer in many ways.

But this need for relationships points to a deeper need in our lives – our need for a personal relationship with God. As Augustine famously said, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

Mary Magdalene was suffering from a loss of connection. She had watched Jesus, the one who had set her free and transformed her life, die in agony and shame on the cross. She had seen where he'd been buried.

But when she returned to the tomb to mourn for him and anoint his body with spices, she found that the stone was rolled away, his body was nowhere to be seen with the grave clothes left behind. She was devastated. She felt lost and alone.

But this was going to change in the most remarkable way. Her loneliness, distress and grief was soon going to disappear, because she was going to meet the Risen Lord.

And Jesus wants to bring that same connection into our lives too. We were designed for relationships - not just with each other, but ultimately with God. Our hearts long for that connection. And Jesus died and rose again so that we could have that personal relationship with him!

John 20:10-18: "Then the disciples went back to their homes, ¹¹ but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

¹⁸ 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."

1. A New Reason For Joy

As we saw last week, Mary Magdalene had been confused when she discovered the empty tomb. She told Peter and John: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" John 20:2

She didn't know what had happened and so she mistakenly thought that the Jews or Romans had stolen Jesus' body. And

this intensified her grief. Now she couldn't even properly mourn for him. She couldn't express her love and devotion in caring for his body.

When John investigated the evidence, ["He saw and believed."](#) John 20:8. The stone rolled away, the empty tomb and the folded grave clothes was enough to convince him that Jesus had been raised to life.

But it wasn't enough for Mary. Even though she saw the same evidence, ["Mary stood outside the tomb crying."](#) John 20:11 She was still confused about what had happened, convinced her circumstances had gone from bad to worse that morning. Maybe this was just because her grief was so deep. Maybe nothing would lessen her sense of loss apart from experiencing closeness with Jesus again.

And so when Peter and John left, she stayed. It was like she had nowhere else to go. She had lost her last connection with the one she loved so much. Where would she go now? What could she do now?

Have you ever known that kind of desperation? Have you ever felt like you can't go on, that you've got nowhere to go?

But Jesus did not leave her there! Soon everything would change! Soon everything would make sense. Soon the light would shine and joy would come!

And this is the hope of the resurrection. It tells us that even in the darkest of moments, even in those times of despair – there is hope of joy to come! ["Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."](#) Psalm 30:5

This is what Jesus promised earlier: ["Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no-one will take away your joy."](#) John 16:22 Yes there are times of sadness and sorrow, but the resurrection brings us unshakeable joy!

2. A New Revelation

And for Mary, this came with a new revelation.

a) Two Angels

This didn't come from the angels. When Mary saw ["Two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been."](#) John 20:12, she remained upset and confused.

When they asked her why she was crying, she said, ["They have taken my Lord away... and I don't know where they have put him."](#) John 20:13. For Mary, even an angelic visitation was not enough to remove her distress. Even that supernatural experience would not distract her from her longing for the Lord.

Unfortunately, many people are intrigued and fascinated by angels. They want to know more about them. They want to communicate with them, receive messages from them. That's why people claiming to be able to give angel readings are making so much money these days.

And yes, as Hebrews 1:14 says, ["Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"](#) Angels are God's servants and work to serve his people. So God sent angels to declare the birth of this Son, his resurrection and his coming again in triumph.

But God doesn't want us to focus on angels. Paul warned the Colossians: ["Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head."](#) Colossians 2:18–19, that is with Jesus!

And when John was shown an amazing vision by an angel, he wrote: ["I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow-servant with you... Worship God!"](#)" Revelation 22:8–9

Today, we don't need to be connected with angels. We need to be connected with Christ and worship him!

b) One Lord

And this is what Mary experienced. ["She turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus."](#) John 20:14.

- Maybe that was because of the tears in her eyes.

- Or maybe it was the emotion of that moment.
- Or his identity was kept from her.
- Or maybe it was just that Jesus was the last person she expected to see.

But whatever the reason, she thought that he was a gardener and that he might know where Jesus' body was. ["Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."](#) John 20:15

There was no sense of bitterness or anger from her. Just the gentle request to be able to collect the body of her Lord and bury it with the dignity and love that he deserved.

But her life was changed by just one word! ["Jesus said to her, "Mary.""](#) John 20:16. When Jesus said her name, suddenly her eyes were opened. The person speaking to her was none other than her Lord.

The amazing truth was revealed that Jesus was alive. His tomb was empty, his grave clothes had been left behind, because he had risen from the dead.

3. A New Relationship

It was an amazing revelation – but it was such a personal revelation. Jesus' resurrection was not announced by an angelic declaration from the sky – but by a loving reunion in a garden. Jesus appeared to Mary, because he loved her.

It reminds us that this morning, we're personally loved. Jesus says that as the Good Shepherd, ["He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."](#) John 10:3 He doesn't send out a general invitation. He is calling us personally, by name.

He personally loves us, and he wants to personally meet us and bring us into a personal relationship with himself. He said here: ["I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."](#) John 20:17

As the eternal Son of God, Jesus has a unique relationship to the Father. That is why he did not say, "Our Father" or "Our God" here. But because of the resurrection we can be brought into a wonderful relationship with God as our Father.

a) Our Sins are Paid for

Without the empty tomb we would be cut off from God forever. Our sins would've separated us from God for eternity. But ["He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."](#) Romans 4:25

On the cross our sins were placed on Jesus. He died our death sentence. But Jesus rose again to declare that our sins were paid for in full. It is finished. No more sacrifice is required.

And so if we turn from our sin and put our faith in him as the forgiver of our sins and the leader of our lives – then we will be forgiven. We will be declared right with God and adopted into his family.

As John wrote at the start of his gospel: ["To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."](#) John 1:12

b) Our Saviour is Present

But that's not all. When Jesus called her Mary, ["She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!"](#) John 20:16. Rabboni is a personal title. It means 'my dear teacher.'

Just seconds earlier Mary had been in deep despair because she thought that someone had taken her Lord away. But now she was filled with joy because her Saviour was present.

This is the reality of the resurrection. It doesn't only declare that our sins are paid for. It declares that no matter what we face, where we go, what we go through, Jesus, our Saviour is Present – that he is here, with us.

It is because of the resurrection that Jesus can declare to us, ["Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."](#) Matthew 28:20

So even in the middle of a pandemic, with all the social distancing and isolation it can bring into our lives, if we've trusted in Jesus then we are never alone. He's always with us. He'll never leave us nor forsake us. Nothing and no-one can ever separate us from his love.

4. A New Responsibility

So the resurrection restored Mary's relationship with her Lord. But this relationship was going to be different from now on. Jesus said: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father." John 20:17

There's a lot of different ideas about what that meant. Some translations of the Bible say that Jesus said "Do not touch me." as if it would be wrong to touch him before his ascension. But that's not true, as Jesus often encouraged people to touch him to convince them that he had physically risen from the dead. We'll see that with Thomas later in this chapter.

So this is not, "Do not touch me," but "Do not hold on to me." In joy and wonder, Mary must have grabbed hold of Jesus and didn't want to let him go.

So maybe Jesus said this, to reassure her that she would see him again. He'd not yet ascended to his Father and for the next 40 days he would appear to them on numerous times to teach them. So Mary didn't need to panic. It was not her last and final meeting with the Lord.

Or maybe, Jesus was teaching her that her relationship with him would not be based on his physical presence. Yes, it was crucial in order to provide this convincing proof that he was alive. But his resurrection and ascension would lead to a new way of experiencing his presence – not through physical touch, but through the indwelling Holy Spirit. As Jesus said, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever — the Spirit of truth." John 14:16-17

That's why this new relationship with Jesus is not just for Mary and those who saw the Risen Lord. This new relationship is for all of us who've trusted in him.

Jesus has not left us on our own. He's not left us like orphans in this world. If we've trusted in him, then by his Spirit, he has come to live in us. "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." John 14:23

a) Share the Good News

But there was another reason why Jesus told Mary not to hold onto him. She had a job to do. "Go instead to my brothers and tell them." John 20:17

Jesus wanted Mary to go and share the good news! He commissioned her as the first to proclaim this wonderful truth that he was alive, that he had conquered the grave, that he had triumphed over sin and death.

This is further proof of the historical accuracy of the gospels. Nobody in that day would've invented this story because women were not thought of as being reliable witnesses. But Jesus chooses the most unlikely of people, the overlooked and marginalised to challenge the wrong thinking of this world.

And he still does this. "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no-one may boast before him." 1 Corinthians 1:26–29

We might not feel very important or influential in this world. We might not feel very clever or effective in sharing the gospel. But if we've met the Risen Lord for ourselves, if we've put our trust in him, then we're commissioned by him to take his good news to the world.

The resurrection is too wonderful, too important, too life-changing to keep it to ourselves. We need to share it with a world in desperate need! We need to go out into the world to shout this message from the rooftops, to share it over coffee, to chat about it to our friends and family, to take it to the world!

That's what Mary did. "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." John 20:18

She had come to that tomb in tears. She had been deeply distressed, lonely, confused and full of questions.

But meeting Jesus had changed everything. And so she left it with a deep and unshakeable joy and a clear and confident message that she had a personal relationship with the Risen Lord.

And I pray that we will do the same. If we put our faith in him, then we will have a personal relationship with him that will never end, no matter what we go through in our lives. And we can go into this world with this amazing news that Jesus is alive.

Andrew Burt
Enniscorthy Christian Fellowship
July 19th 2020