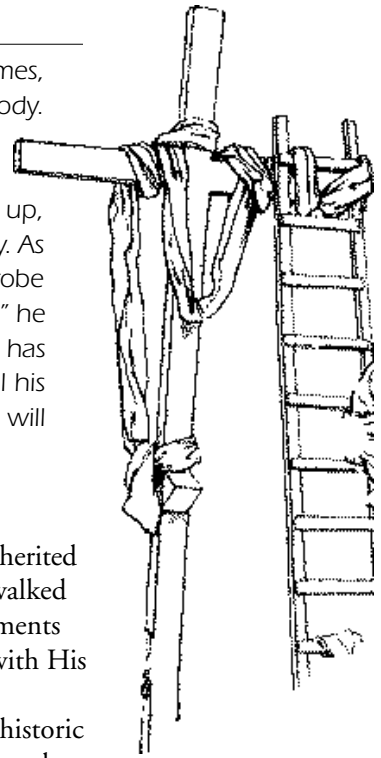


“Were not our hearts Burning within us...?”

Mark 16:1-7

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' "



If we inherited our bent toward sinning from Adam, then we also inherited our unique relationship with Jesus from those who saw Him and walked with Him during those waning days of His time on earth. Few moments from His life are more intimate, more personal, than those Jesus spent with His friends during His last forty days upon this earth.

We look upon the death and resurrection of Christ as an epochal, historic moment—a turning point in God's relationship with man. We see it from the hazy distance of two millennia: a moment of great import, yet one that often takes second place to the tyranny of the immediate. We gather together and proclaim the truth of Christ's atoning death on the cross; we gladly declare it to be both historical and doctrinal truth. We rightly worship a Savior who would sacrifice Himself for common man. Our hearts fill with gratitude and praise for one so unselfish and kind—then, come Monday morning, we get back to our *real* lives: back to the factory, the office, the housecleaning and laundry.

But at Calvary there were those who had lost a close friend. *Their* real lives had been taken up into the life of the one who had dripped His blood onto that Jerusalem hillside, and it was a family member, a brother, that was then sealed away inside a cold rocky grave. They had all invested their lives in this Man: who He was and what He represented. Then suddenly, He was gone.

Jesus said He would be raised, but, based on their behavior, most of His followers probably assigned that notion to one of His mysterious stories or obscure prophecies. He was gone; with their own eyes they had seen Him put away. Jesus said He would walk with them again, but surely no one could walk away from that kind of horrible death. And certainly no one could walk through stone.



Left Behind

There have been mornings I awake in a clammy sweat, pushed from my slumber by a dark nightmare in which I am left to live out my days without the companionship of my wife. On those mornings sleep vanishes, and the wrenching emotions leave me feeling sick and disoriented. It takes the entire next day for me to shake the sense of loss, to wash the nauseating aftereffects of the nightmare from my system.

For the friends and family of Jesus, that nightmare was real.

Mary from Magdala was still living her nightmare when she came to the tomb that Sunday morning so long ago. Jesus had been much more to her than a respected teacher, and His loss had brought upon her life a heartsick void that she carried along with her that sad morning. Then, heaped upon that sorrow was the strange disappearance of even the body of her Lord.

Life without Him. How would it be to have Jesus suddenly removed from our lives? We have walked alongside Him, heard the tender strength in His voice, accepted the wisdom from His heart. We have felt His strong arms holding us up when others have turned aside, we have felt the rush of His love passing between us. We've known His forgiveness, a mercy only He could possess. What would it be like, were all that taken away?

Those who have never married have grown accustomed to living alone. Even if they would rather be wed, their present lives move to the rhythm of being alone. They have learned, even unconsciously, to rely upon themselves for many things some of their friends receive from their mates. In contrast, those who are married—especially those venerable marrieds—have grown accustomed to the rhythm of depending on someone outside themselves.

Isaiah 62:5

As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

Having never known union with Christ, unbelievers never mourn His loss, for they literally don't know what they're missing. The church, however, is the Bride of Christ. Every believer has been joined in an intimate, mystical way with the Bridegroom: the Son of God. Were He, somehow, to be taken from our lives, as He was to those who watched Him die at Calvary, it would be to experience one of life's most agonizing pains.

Imagine, then, the unbounded bliss Mary felt that morning when she heard, once again, that tender voice of her Lord. This one to whom she had given herself totally, the one in whom she had come to rely for everything, this one who had then been brutally wrenched from her life—this one, her Lord, had returned!

John 20:14-17

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. "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." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 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.' "

“It is the Lord!”

Luke 24:13-32

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?” “What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”

Day after day we plod along, trying to work things out for ourselves, befuddled by events and frustrated by our inability to understand the mysteries of life. We’re sometimes blind to the presence of Jesus, thinking we’re doing things on our own when, really, He’s been a part of it all along.

When we finally see that someone, or something, is there helping, we imagine that it’s only our own wisdom masquerading as a stranger. Something deep inside us whispers that it is really the Lord, but we push aside the idea. It can’t be Him; surely we can work small things out for ourselves.

But the Lord says “What things?” So we do our best to explain, stumbling and tripping over our tongue, our reason swathed in thick cotton, like trying to explain the clarity of nocturnal imaginings with clouded memory, a sleep-masked brain, and a tongue formed from the bottom of an old shoe.

But He listens, kindly, until even *He* loses patience with our slow-headed obstinacy. And, good friend that He is, Jesus takes us to task: “You’re being foolish! You should know this by now! How long will it take? Listen to me, let me explain again how it all works together...”

So we listen, but the dim bulb only begins to glow a little brighter, not yet to full wattage. Recognition comes, but slowly. The many layers of human reason cling stubbornly to us, loathe to give way to the light of the eternal.

After awhile, though complete realization is still outside our grasp, we invite Him to stay. He’s a pleasant enough chap, good company and, anyway, who knows—He just might have something to contribute.

So dinner is served, the table spread. We take our places about the table and, because we’re polite, we invite the wise stranger to say grace. As He lifts His gaze heavenward and gives thanks for the bread, the bulb finally comes to full glow. *It is the Lord!*

It was Him all along! It was Jesus listening to our frustration, our confusion and misgivings; it was Jesus patiently explaining what we now see was the truth; it was Jesus who walked beside us, shared our weepings and our joy, who took hold of our hand, who picked us up when we fell. It was Him all along!

The Personal Touch

Modern technology is a wonderful thing. A satellite can be launched and positioned in a geosynchronous orbit (always over the same global location) 23,000 miles above the earth. This satellite receives digital data from a location in the United States, then sends back that digital data over the entire country. I can mount an eighteen-inch metal dish on the roof of my house that will receive that data, and in my living room I can then view a television picture that has traveled more than 46,000 miles, yet is sharper than the signal I receive by antenna from a city only 30 miles away.

They say we have satellites up there that use optics so sophisticated that they can photograph any spot on earth, revealing objects as small as a person. Intelligence groups can conduct covert operations in the dead of night, from the opposite side of the world, and watch the whole thing take place in real time from the image sent to them by a satellite orbiting thousands of miles in space. Modern technology is certainly a wonderful thing.

It's also quite ancient.

God has been using it since the beginning of time.

From the infinity of heaven, the Son of God painted all of creation into existence. Galaxies and nebulas, stars and planets, orbiting moons and rocky satellites—all were breathed into place by the all-powerful, utterly holy God. By simple will, this great God created man and woman, then caused them to multiply. As mankind spread across the globe, the Godhead manipulated whole nations of people, as if they were figures on a chessboard.

Yet this same God—too utterly pure for humans to bear His presence—has many times stooped to deal with individuals in their moment of need.

- ◆ When the long-patient Abraham needed encouragement regarding God's promise of a son, the pre-incarnate Son visited him in person at the oaks of Mamre.
- ◆ When Sarah's Egyptian servant, Hagar, was driven into the wilderness by her mistress, the angel of the Lord came to her in her distress.
- ◆ When Lot and his family needed rescue from Sodom, the Lord sent two angels to physically lead them out by the hand.
- ◆ And when every individual in the world needed salvation, the Lord God sent His Son in the person of Jesus, to be sacrificed upon a cross.

Man cannot create a lens that will read the condition of a human heart from the infinite height of heaven. But God performs this feat countless times every day. He is a God of the heart, a personal God. He cares about every individual under His care—just as Jesus cared about the bruised hearts of His friend Peter and His brother, James.

William Temple

Faith is not the holding of correct doctrines, but personal fellowship with the Living God...
What is offered to man's apprehension in any specific revelation is not truth concerning God, but the Living God Himself.

Apostle Paul: 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

The Sixth Sense

Luke 24:36-45

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

The human spirit is tuned to the same senses used by its physical container: touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Try as we might to will it into a higher level of super-sensory, our spirit clings tenaciously to its physical, earth-bound roots. Loftier philosophies may entice, but every component of the human form still responds best to those five elemental senses with which we were born.

God's Spirit, on the other hand, is held down by no such restrictions, for He is, in His *entirety*, spirit; He has no physical form to weigh Him down. He is free to soar wherever God's will designs. The Spirit may employ the same senses as humans: He certainly can hear our groanings, and can touch our hearts with soothing balm; He peers deeply into our intentions, and might even sniff

out our base fears and imaginings. Though He may employ these earthy senses from time to time, surely the Spirit—being God—more often relies upon the one sense that does not come naturally to humans: faith.

“. . . why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

When our eyes see a bird with orange breast pecking about in the soil for worms, we *know* we have seen a robin, and that spring is just around the bend. When a master cabinetmaker runs his callused hand over a board, he *knows* whether or not it is ready for the stain. When a mother hears the cry of a child, she *knows* it is hers. These senses are built into us; we need not strive to acquire them. Short of disability, they are there without our trying.

Our sense of faith, however, is not nearly so sure. Because it is not natural to us, and because it is the least used, this sense often languishes in disrepair, so that on those rare occasions when we do pull it out for use, we must first blow off the dust and cobwebs, and oil its rusty joints.

Job 42:1-6

Then Job replied to the LORD:
"I know that you can do all things;
no plan of yours can be thwarted.
You asked, 'Who is this that obscures
my counsel without knowledge?'
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.
"You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.'
My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes."

How splendid it would be if our faith were in the same limber shape as our sight or smell or touch. How convenient it would be to rely upon it with the same certainty as our corporeal senses, so that when we are called upon to *know* the ways of the Lord—to understand with certainty His words, His works, His methods—then our faith will be prepared, ready, and true.

And this is what the Lord means when He longs for us to grow up. Spiritual maturity in the human believer means a closer, more steady communion between our earthly spirit and His. It means that we have trained our other-worldly sense of faith to be as reliable as those with which we were born.

In God we Trust

The apostle Peter and his chums would fit right into small town America. Take your average Joe on the street—middle aged, hard-working family man, decent guy, a little rough around the edges—and place him into a troubling situation. Maybe there are problems at home, maybe his boss has been giving him a hard time. Worse than that, maybe he's been presented with an unwieldy intellectual problem, something that troubles his gray cells and he can't quite get his mitts around the predicament. What is his response?

"Let's go fishing."

The favorite way for the American male to deal with a troublesome situation is to ignore it while doing something productive with his hands. Everything will work out fine so long as he just keeps *busy*.

The second verse of a Christian song popular in the Eighties begins: *When my plans have fallen through / And when my strength is nearly gone / When there's nothing left to do / But just depend on you / And the power of your name.*

Good rhyme; bad theology.

No matter the condition of any individual's faith, the human spirit is designed for self-sufficiency. No matter that our relationship with Christ is as solid and deep as can be, we will always try to work things out for ourselves before we call for help. Peter and the boys worked all night on the energy of their own cunning and strength, but for naught. No fish. One word from Jesus, however, and their nets strained under the immensity of the catch.

Jesus doesn't want us to expend all our energy trying every imaginable human solution before we come to Him. He wants us to come to Him *first*. He is the one with all the answers; He is the one who always knows where the fish are hiding. Jesus is not to be reserved as the solution of Last Resort, but used quickly, instinctively, as the first solution to every troublesome situation.

When his disciples asked John the Baptist to draw a comparison between himself and Jesus of Nazareth, John replied

He must increase, but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. (John 3:30-31)

Christ's perspective is more sweeping than ours. As we decrease our own importance, as we develop the habit of relying on Him, it will become more instinctive for us to turn *first* to the Lord in all things.

John 21:1-13

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

Thine is the Kingdom

Acts 1:8-11

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Forty days after the resurrection the eleven remaining disciples joined the ranks of the rest of us. They no longer would have the person of Christ by their side.

They no longer would hear His voice, feel the touch of His comforting hand upon their shoulder, gaze into His expressive eyes. They no longer would laugh with Him over something clever said around the fire, no longer smell His sweat at the end of a hard, dusty journey. Jesus was gone, lifted up into the clouds, and no one among them knew when He would return.

Now things would be easier for them.

For roughly three years they had been torn between the earthy humanity of Jesus of Nazareth and the supernatural power of the Son of God. This one who grew weary by the end of the day, and who would flare with anger over something stupidly said, would also miraculously heal the congenitally lame, converse with demons, and walk atop the surface of the Sea of Galilee. Just as they would become accustomed to the Man, Jesus would display His deity; just as they would get used to walking with God, Jesus would ask for something to eat!

Now, before their eyes, the Man Jesus had ascended into the bosom of His heavenly Father, leaving as a final image in their memories the sight of one last miracle. Then He was gone. There would be no more fish dinners around a crackling fire, no more intimacies shared beneath the branches of a palm, no more sitting at His feet as He shared His wisdom.

Now it would be easier. For if men's feeble minds could hold only one image of Christ at a time, then surely it must be of His deity. In God's wisdom Jesus came in flesh, so that men and women could know that He understood and cared; in God's wisdom Jesus came as a man, for only as a man could He suffer and be killed, then miraculously be raised on the third day.

But only God could save their souls. Only the blood of spotless, sinless God could atone for their sins. And only if He left their side could they share in His supernatural power through the work of the Holy Spirit. They now had a clearer picture of their relationship to Christ: servants to the King.

*Fairest Lord Jesus! Ruler of all nature,
O Thou of God and man the Son!
Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor,
Thou, my soul's glory, joy, and crown!*

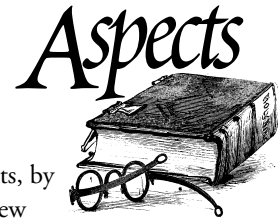
*Fair is the sunshine, fairer still the moonlight,
And all the twinkling starry host:
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer,
Than all the angels heaven can boast.*

*Fair are the meadows, fairer still the woodlands,
Robed in the blooming garb of spring:
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer,
Who makes the woeful heart to sing.*

*Beautiful Saviour! Lord of the nations!
Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor, praise, adoration,
Now and forevermore be Thine! Amen.*

TO THESE HE ALSO PRESENTED HIMSELF ALIVE, AFTER HIS SUFFERING, BY MANY CONVINCING PROOFS, APPEARING TO THEM OVER A PERIOD OF FORTY DAYS, AND SPEAKING OF THE THINGS CONCERNING THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

"Were not our hearts burning within us...?"



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To say "Thank You"...

We have compiled a selection of narratives from past issues, entitled *The Living Word: Favorite Narratives from the monthly devotional journal Aspects*. We also still have a few copies remaining of our previous booklet, *Summer Reflections*, a collection of columns from our weekly column, *Reflections by the Pond*.

One of these two booklets will be sent—along with our deep appreciation—to those who include a request along with their gift to this work. If you would like to receive one of these booklets, fill out the accompanying form and include it with your gift—and be sure to check the box stating which booklet you would like to receive!

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