RESURRECTION IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Caravaggio’s painting, The Entombment of Christ, consists of a tightly compact figurative group consisting of six people, including the dead Christ. The upper half of Christ's body (that of a muscular laborer) is being supported by John the Evangelist (in the red cloak) (or possibly Joseph of Arimathea), his right hand inadvertently fingering Christ's stab wound; the lower half is carried or supported by Saint Nicodemus, who traditionally removed the nails from Christ's feet on the cross. Nicodemus is the dominant character in the picture and his body is its compositional and spiritual anchor. Historically a man of wealth, he is portrayed here as a working man, whose deliberately designed troll-like form suggests devoted service to his deceased Lord. He stares unflinchingly at us out of the picture-plane, almost challenging us to interfere with the ritual, and in the process drawing us into the picture.

Behind the two men, the three women are grouped in a fan-like shape. They include (left to right): the partly obscured Virgin Mary, depicted here as an elderly nun, who extends her arms horizontally in a picture-wide blessing and acceptance of what has happened; in the center, face shadowed, is Mary Magdalene, the female follower of Jesus, who dries her tears with a white handkerchief; on the right is the wailing Mary of Clopas, sister of the Virgin Mary, who raises her arms to heaven.

The five mourners are standing on a flat stone slab (previously thought to be a lid to a tomb), which probably represents the Stone of Unction, where Christ's body was anointed with oil and wrapped in a linen shroud, as described in the Gospel of John.

As usual, Caravaggio tries to capture a precise moment during the action. In this case, he depicts the moment just before the two men lower him into the tomb. In a few seconds he will be gone and the mourners will be on their own.

Compositionally, the painting is based around a diagonal pattern of form and movement, from the hysterical hands of Mary Clopas (top right), down through Mary Magdalene's sagging shoulder, Nicodemus's elbow and Christ's torso, to the end of the white shroud (bottom left).

The fan-shaped pattern - upright Mary Clopas, forward-leaning Mary Magdalene, arched Nicodemus and horizontal Christ - presents us with a cascade of limbs and heads that adds tension and movement to an essentially 'frozen' snapshot in time. Interestingly, the picture becomes quieter as our eye moves from top to bottom.

It is possible to read the picture as an allegory of life and death. At the top we have living people. At the bottom, the tomb and death. In the middle, acting as a barrier between the two, is Jesus Christ. It illustrates the Catholic dogma that, only by having faith in Christ can we avoid death and ascend into heaven.

The Gospel of John is a gospel of encounters. In our Lenten Retreat we focused on three of those encounters: the woman at the well, the man born blind, and Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. There are others encounters in John’s Gospel: Nicodemus, the cripple at Bethesda, the disciples, even Pilate. John takes us deeper into the story to examine the relationship that Jesus has with these people. These relationships are then models for us in our relationship with Jesus. As we saw in the Lenten Retreat they are really a personal call to discipleship that Jesus gives to each one of us and how we respond to that call.

John’s Gospel will also revolve around the theme of light and darkness. These personal encounters with Jesus will lead us further into the light, or if we turn away, further into the darkness. Even Caravaggio’s painting has the figures moving out of the darkness and into the light that seems to be brightest on the person of Jesus.
This week I will look at four resurrection appearances in Chapter 20 of John’s Gospel. Next week I will look at the appearances in Chapter 21. These four resurrection appearances will focus on the faith reaction of those to whom Jesus appears. These reactions remind us that people are at different places in their relationship with God and thus will respond differently to the appearances of the risen Jesus.

**John 20:1-10 - The reactions of Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple**

In all four Gospels women come to the empty tomb on the first day of the week, but only in John does Mary Magdalene come to the tomb twice. The second visit in John’s Gospel is the one that parallels the other Gospel visits. But this first visit sets the stage for Peter and the Beloved Disciple to go to the tomb. Even though we are told Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb “early,” as in Mark and Luke, John adds that she comes to the tomb “while it is still dark.” Again, John’s theme of light and darkness. It is still dark until someone believes in the risen Jesus. And it is here that Mary Magdalene rushes from the tomb to tell the two disciples, “They took the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him.” It is interesting that Mary Magdalene here assumes that the enemies of Jesus have stolen the body, where in Matthew’s Gospel the story is told that disciples stole the body.

The two disciples who respond to Mary Magdalene’s report are Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple. The Beloved Disciple appears only in John’s Gospel and really only appears in the last half of the Gospel - he is present at the last supper, in the high priest’s courtyard with Simon Peter, and at the cross next to the Mother of Jesus. These same stories told in the other Gospels never mention him. The other Gospels tell us that “disciples” went to the tomb and found it just as the women said, but they only mention Peter. Notice here the two titles John uses for him: “the other disciple” and “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” The first title may have been how he was seen by the other Gospel writers and the second is how he is seen by John.

Much has been made about the fact that this disciple arrives first at the tomb but does not go in. He waits for Peter. Some think it is to show the importance of Peter among the disciples, others see John entering last as the culmination of the story because he sees and believes. Nothing is said about whether Peter believes and yet they both see the empty tomb and the burial garments in their places. The Beloved Disciple seems to be the first to believe in the resurrection even without an appearance of Jesus.

“...and he saw and believed.”

The evangelist goes into great detail about the burial wrappings and where they are positioned and how they are rolled up. Some use this to support the resurrection and refute the stolen body theory. If someone was going to steal the body they wouldn’t have unwrapped it and then taken the body. Nor would they have been so careful to put the wrappings in particular places or to roll them up. Others connect this event to the raising of Lazarus. Remember Lazarus comes out of the tomb bound with the burial clothes and needs to be unwrapped or untied as Jesus commands those who are present. Lazarus will need the burial clothes again because he has been resuscitated not resurrected. He will die again and need the burial clothes. Jesus leaves his burial clothes behind to show that he has risen from the dead, has conquered death, and will no longer need burial clothes because he now lives forever. The line that “as yet they did not understand the Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead,” explains why Simon Peter doesn’t understand or come to faith. Remember in Luke’s resurrection stories Jesus explains the Scriptures to them and then they understand. And yet the Beloved Disciple doesn’t seem to need that assistance because he comes to believe. It is thought that his relationship with Jesus was one that was so deep that he truly does understand the resurrection without having the need for explanation.
John 20:11-18 The reaction of Mary Magdalene

Next to Peter, James, John, and Judas, Mary Magdalene is the most frequently mentioned Gospel follower of Jesus (fourteen times). John positions the angels at the tomb at the head and the feet of where Jesus had lain. Similar to the positions of where the burial clothes lay in the previous scene. It is interesting to note that Mary Magdalene’s experience at the tomb is again a negative one despite the presence of the angels. It is only in her encounter with Jesus that she comes to faith.

The appearance to Mary Magdalene seems to be part of an old tradition but John seems to expand on it here in one of his encounter stories with Jesus. Just as in other places, Jesus is not recognizable at first to Mary Magdalene. Note the words that Jesus speaks to her, “Whom are you looking for?” It is the very same question Jesus asks two of John the Baptist’s disciples at the beginning of John’s Gospel, “What are you looking for?” It is also the question Jesus asks the soldiers who come to arrest him in the garden, “Whom are you looking for?” The disciples of John the Baptist stayed with Jesus and found the Messiah, the soldiers bowed down at Jesus’ response of “I AM he,” and now Mary Magdalene is looking for the dead Jesus and will find the risen Lord.

“Whom are you looking for?”

Mary Magdalene seems focused on finding Jesus’ body. She questions the angels and then Jesus, whom she assumes is the gardener, as to where they have put him. And yet the angels and Jesus question Mary Magdalene about “why she is weeping?” Her tears seem to have blurred her vision to the reality of the resurrection and focused her solely on finding the body. It is only when Jesus calls her by name that she is able to see clearly. This connects us to John 10:3 and the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd calls the sheep by name and they follow, the sheep will not follow the voice of a stranger.

As in other resurrection stories there is a “clinging” to Jesus that is referred to here. Jesus is telling Mary Magdalene that he does not belong to this world but to the world above. Jesus says he is ascending to “my father and your father,” which indicates that he belongs to the heavenly world and that she now also belongs to the what is above. It also connects to the very beginning of John’s Gospel where John states that “all those who did accept him he empowered to become children of God.” We see this also in the places where Jesus refers to his disciples as “brothers.” It seems that Mary Magdalene now shares in the status as a “daughter” of God.

The final point here is how the proclamation of Mary Magdalene changes after this visit to the tomb and her experience of Jesus. After her first visit to the tomb she proclaims to the disciples, “they took the Lord from the tomb.” Now she returns to the disciples and proclaims, “I have seen the Lord.” As the Beloved Disciple was the first to believe; Mary Magdalene is the first to proclaim the risen Lord.”

These first two resurrection stories show us the reactions of Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and Mary Magdalene. Peter has not yet come to faith, the Beloved Disciple sees the empty tomb and the burial clothes and believes, and Mary Magdalene sees the empty tomb and the angels and does not believe, but sees the risen Jesus and comes to not only believe but to proclaim that Jesus is risen. John seems to have a real sensitivity to how people come to faith and that process is not the same for everyone. John keeps giving us various examples of people coming to faith so that we might find one that resonates with our own experience. It might be important to reflect on how we actually did come to faith. What has that process been for you? What has it been for others whom you know? Sharing those stories of how we come to faith might strengthen others and even encourage others to come to faith.

The other point these stories make is that Jesus is trying to find ways to help people come to faith both through their experiences of this world and their experiences of God. I suspect that Jesus wants us to see all our experiences as moments of revelation from God.

JOHN 20:19-23 - The reaction of the Disciples

On this very same day, the first day of the week, Jesus appears now to his disciples. It is now evening but we are not told that it is dark, as when Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, because she and the Beloved Disciple have come to faith. But we are told that they are behind locked doors, in fear and hiding from the Jews.

Jesus appears to the disciples and immediately greets them with “peace be with you.” We might remember at the Last Supper that Jesus speaks about peace to them as his farewell gift to them and that he
does not give it to them as the world gives it. Jesus connects his words to his human life with them. And Jesus continues this attempt to connect his risen appearance with his human life by showing them his wounds in his hands, his feet, and his side. He fulfills another promise from the Last Supper in telling them then that they will be sad but when they see him again, they will rejoice. And here we are told that they “rejoices when the saw the Lord.”

As we have seen in the other Gospels, there is a commissioning of the disciples by Jesus after the resurrection. This seems to be very similar to the commissioning in Mark, Luke, and Matthew. But here John states that “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” There is a purpose to this sending: to bring life, light and truth to people. Just as the Father was present in Jesus’ mission, so now the disciples must make Jesus present to others in their mission. Which is an enormous challenge and yet fulfills another Last Supper promise, “whoever welcomes anyone I shall send welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes him who sent me.”

This enormous challenge of Jesus is supported and encouraged now with the Gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was designated by John the Baptist as the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, and at the Last Supper promised to send the Holy Spirit. And that Spirit is received by the disciples in this moment through a particular gesture of Jesus, he breathes on them. And this gesture takes us back to the story of creation in the book of Genesis, “the Lord God formed the human being out of the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” Just as God’s breath fashioned us into the image and likeness of God, so now Jesus was starting a new creation forming disciples in the likeness of the Son. As God’s breath in Genesis gave us life; the breath of Jesus now gives us eternal life.

Another element of this gift of the Holy Spirit is the power to forgive sins. Jesus was sent as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world; and now he shares that power with his disciples. This is an important point because the disciples will now begin to preach the gospel to people who will have to make a choice between following the light of the gospel or remaining in the darkness of sin. There will be a moment where they will have to make this judgment of whether or not to follow the light of Christ and when they do make that choice for Christ the forgiveness of Jesus is what seals their decision to keep moving toward the light and away from the darkness. The disciples will thus be empowered to invite people to make this decision in their lives, and what a tremendous power that is.

I suspect we can reflect on our own decisions to follow Jesus and the empowerment that has come to us in making that decision. We also know those times in our weakness, and in the weakness of others, that we cling to the darkness of sin and the confusion, fear, and chaos it leads us into. Following the light of Christ gives us a clear direction in our lives. That clear direction gives us a sense of peace and leads us to find greater joy in life.

It is also important to be reminded how God keeps entering into history when we are lost, afraid, or confused, and brings us His life-giving Spirit. Here he brings that Spirit to the disciples in their fear and confusion. And that Spirit empowers them to do things they didn’t seem capable of in the ministry of Jesus. In our fear we need to trust that God’s Spirit comes to us and empowers us, just as it did for the disciples.

**JOHN 20:24-29 - The Reaction of Thomas**

We meet Thomas three times in John’s Gospel. When Jesus finally decides to go back to see Lazarus after he has been dead three days, Thomas says, “let us also go to die with him.” Just before this story they have tried to stone Jesus and he has fled to Judea to escape their wrath. Thomas bravely challenges the others to go with Jesus to protect him and if necessary to die with him. This journey to Bethany is very
which is lose to Jerusalem stirs up in Thomas a fear for Jesus’ life. The other reference to Thomas comes in 14:5 where Thomas asks Jesus, “Master, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas seems to be very conscious of where they are heading and what dangers or benefits lie ahead. Thomas seems to have invested himself rather heavily in the person and ministry of Jesus. This helps us to understand his distress in this story now that Jesus has died and all that he had invested seems lost. There are some who believe this kind of doubt, distress, disbelief, is something that Jesus speaks out quite strongly against in his ministry: “Unless you people see signs and wonders you never believe.” But Jesus having faced this in his ministry must have had some insight into the fact that he would see it again, even in his own disciples and would need to counter it.

It is interesting that when Jesus appears he already knows about Thomas and his doubt, no one tells him. Jesus showed this ability in his ministry and shows it again here to maybe alleviate our doubt. Jesus immediately turns the tables on Thomas and “probes” him. Jesus in effect says, “If you want to probe my wounds, go ahead, but do not persist in your unbelief.” Scholars have debated on whether or not Thomas actually does probe the wounds of Jesus. The wounds are quite visible again in this appearance, but we are never told that Thomas touches them. Thomas takes Jesus at his word and becomes a believer.

Thomas, the disciple who doubted the most, now gives the highest evaluation of Jesus in the Gospels, “My Lord and My God.” If we remember the beginning of John’s Gospel we are told that the Word was God. At the end of the Gospel we see how difficult it was for the disciples to come to believe that insight. Thomas has been remembered as the one with the greatest doubt about Jesus and yet the last words of Jesus to him in response to his confession of faith are “you have believed.”

There is tremendous hope for all of us here. No matter what level of doubt, questioning, confusion or misunderstanding we may have about God, God finds a way to help us believe. There is no situation that is hopeless. And it seems Jesus addresses this in his words to Thomas, “have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.” And those words are addressed to us. John seems to know that at some point these resurrection appearances stop and people have to come to believe based on the disciples’ word. But their belief is so strong based on what they have seen, they are willing to preach that message to others even at the risk of their own lives.

In these times when our confusion, our doubts, our fears and our questions are sometimes overwhelming, even distressing at times, we have those who are risking their lives every day to proclaim that love and healing are more powerful than death. And there is nothing worth living for without that love and healing.

“My Lord and my God.”