

**John 20: 17-22; “Say To Them, I Am Ascending”, An Easter
Sunday Afternoon Sermon, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on March 23rd, 2008.**

When we left Mary this morning, she had just been transformed from a woman in great agony and tears, to a woman of ecstatic joy. Her Savior and Lord, her Master and Friend was no longer dead, but alive! Did she throw herself at Jesus feet, like the other women did when they met Jesus coming back from the empty tomb, after seeing a vision of angels? Or did she embrace Him with a holy and sisterly fondness? We are not told, but it reminds me of the verses in Song of Solomon 3: 3, 4 which follow the verses that I gave you in this morning’s sermon that say, “The watchmen who go about the city found me; I said, ‘Have you seen the one I love?’” “Scarcely had I passed them, when I found the one I love. I held him and would not let him go...” This is how it was for Mary that morning when she found that Jesus was risen from the dead.

I am quite sure that if the disciples, such as Peter and John, did not know and understand that Jesus must rise again from the dead that it was also not known to any of them how greatly their relationship to Jesus would change over the next 40 days until His ascension. Because the Lord was not going to remain upon the earth for very long after His resurrection, and His revelation of Himself as alive would only be given to His disciples and not to the whole world. The disciples themselves would have a need to come to know what kind of a relationship that they would have with Him after He ascended. The new relationship that these disciples would experience with their risen and ascending Lord, would be based upon their coming to realize more and more, what the triumph of Christ’s life and death and resurrection would mean to them, both individually and as the church gathered. His resurrection was leading to His ascension. What could they expect in terms of their relationship to Jesus now? I think that our passage gives us 3 indications of what they could expect.

1st- They could not expect to cling to Jesus in an earthly physical way any longer, but they could and would cling to Him in a spiritual and heavenly way.

(Verses 17, 18)

We see this pictured for us so well by Mary. Immediately upon clinging to Him physically, Jesus says to her, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father.” You would have thought that Jesus would have given her a little time to rejoice over Him being raised from the dead, but these are His first words to her after He spoke her name. Right away, He

wants to let her know that things will be different; indeed, that things would never be the same as they were in that earthly sense that she and the other disciples had once known Him. She had seen and known Him before as a man of sorrows, a man of human weaknesses, as any other man, and yet far different because of His divine nature and His perfect humanity. There was a difference now in that His earthly work was finished. In a few weeks He would leave again for the heavenly realms of glory, to sit at His Father's right hand. The time of the children clinging to the earthly teacher and father was almost over. A new thing was about to happen. The New Testament church is about to be born. A whole new era was beginning. The Holy Spirit was about to be given in a way He had never been given before. "Stop clinging to Me Mary," Jesus says to her. "I am not yet ascended."

The little word "yet" is very important for us to notice. Since Jesus was not yet ascended, it was not a time to cling to Him. But after He was ascended, there would be a different kind of clinging. It says in 2 Corinthians 5: 15, 16- "Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer." This is what it meant for Mary, and this is what it means for all men, since Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus has taken the relationship with those who believe in Him, to a new level. And he expects all His disciples to interact with Him on this new spiritual level. The Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 1: 8, of the Lord Jesus, "Whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory. This would be a relationship of faith, not sight. This would be a relationship of trusting, not of touching Jesus physically. Each believer needs to understand this. Christianity is not a religion of old bones and relics. Christianity is not touching the shroud of Turin or walking on the Via Doloroso to get the impression of what it must have been in Jesus' day. Those who know Him, know Him and walk with Him by faith, not by sight, not by touch.

Jesus says to Mary, "Go to my brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God.'" He calls the disciples His brethren. This is the first time that Jesus has called the disciples His brethren. He called them servants before, and He called them friends before. Now He calls them brethren. We ought to see most clearly from this, that because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, now He has the power to bring us along and bring us, who are trusting in Him, up

to another level. God is His Father and our Father. He is going to put us up on His level, first by the gift of salvation and then bring us by the same path He came. He does this by making us all His brethren in placing us in His spiritual body, the church. He will be the head, we the members of His body, to represent Him here upon the earth. We then share the truth of His Word, together and with others around us. We grow this way to be more like Him. There is a real danger in believing that we need an earthly head of the church, when we have a risen living head at the Father's right hand. A body does not have two heads. The Pope of Rome cannot stand in the place of our Lord Jesus Christ as head of the church, and Peter never was appointed the head of the church. Jesus is the only rightful head of the church. If Jesus were not risen from the dead, if He were merely an earthly teacher, then others could take over that position, but this is not the case. Jesus is alive and ruling. He rules by means of His written Word, and by His Spirit working in His people. When Jesus ascended, He ascended in order to rule His church and the nations from that position. He is sitting there, ruling, until all His enemies are put under His feet. (Psalm 110: 1 and 2) He is ruling in the midst of His enemies. "Go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending."

2. Now 2ndly- The disciples could expect to have peace and joy in the midst of their fears and labors. (Verses 19-21)

It says, "Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'" "When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord." This new relationship with Jesus would be a relationship of Him coming to His church gathered, of coming to them when they were fearful, and bringing to them His peace. I am sure that the disciples were fearful of the persecutions that they were under because of their association with the Lord Jesus. They had been told to expect these things. What could sustain them in His physical absence? What would make them glad? What would hold them together? He was giving them a preview of it. It says that He came and stood in their midst. Whether He opened the doors and came in, or whether He came through the doors, I believe the truth can be seen either way. He can come to His church in the most troubling of times, and speak peace to them. It says that the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. But all this was to show them and to show us here today, that Jesus' power to convey peace and gladness of heart are not diminished since He left this earth and has ascended. He still gives these by His grace, to all His

people. And He brings peace and joy to the soul by His presence, sometimes suddenly and surprisingly. “Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings, It is the Lord who rises with healing in His wings: When comforts are declining, He grants the soul again, a season of clear shining, to cheer it after rain.” (William Cowper- Hymn 520) This is what was so powerfully strengthening to the disciples; to see their crucified, risen Lord. It made them glad to think that He had overcome death and was back with them again.

But once again we see Jesus give them no time to glory in His physically being with them. He is giving them a commission along with the peace and gladness. He wants them to be joyful in their labors for Him, sustained inwardly by His peace. So He says to them a second time, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” Let me ask you now, whether you know the reality of this peace, and this gladness in your service to Christ. Are you a sad Christian? In Mark’s gospel it says in chapter 16: 10, that Mary “went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept,” the good news of His being alive, but it says that they did not believe. Will you believe in Christ’s resurrection anew and afresh today? Are you a disquieted and discontented Christian? Are we, as a church gathered, experiencing the kind of peace and joy in our labors for the Lord Jesus that He died to bring to us? I trust that we will see that this is what He designed for us to have. No closed doors can keep our Jesus out.

3. Then 3rdly and finally- In this new relationship with Jesus, the disciples could expect that Jesus would still be with them in the person of His Holy Spirit, so that they would have good discernment on the greatest of issues. (Verses 22, 23)

Certainly the Apostles had already received the Holy Spirit in conversion. Certainly they and all the disciples there in that room knew the blessed influences of the Spirit’s grace and power in their lives during the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry. But now they received something further. Something that was very needful for them in their future service for Him. He personally breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” By this He is saying to them, in effect, “It is I who have given you life spiritually, just as surely as I breathed into the nostrils of Adam the breath of life in the Beginning. Now, as a pledge and seal of all I will give and do for you on the day of Pentecost, in public, before the whole watching world; I will breathe on you now here in private. I will convey to you the real spiritual life that you will need to preach and declare the gospel, and to rightly set forth and discern all doctrinal matters essential to salvation. This breathing was upon the church gathered, not the Apostles alone. This

was not an apostolic commission alone, but a commission given to the church gathered. The church does have real power. It is the power of the truth and life of Jesus Christ, as that power is lived out and demonstrated through the members of His body. The only power to forgive the sins of people belongs to God, and to Jesus Christ. But as the church gathered has received and does receive the Holy Spirit's wisdom and power to declare the gospel, she also has the authority and responsibility to tell people the outcome of their exercise of faith or the lack of their repentance. See how greatly each minister and each church needs the Spirit's wisdom and power to faithfully represent Christ. We have this new relationship with a risen and ascended Christ. May He come to each of us in this real and personal and spiritual way, when we are gathered together or when we are alone. He has come to give us His life.