

VCEFC Daily Devotion, April 24-30

April 24: John 20:11-18 A Personal Encounter with the Risen Lord

In confusion and grief, Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside Jesus' tomb. This Rabbi who had loved her as no one else had loved her was gone. Not only was He dead, His body was missing- apparently stolen away. Jesus had so touched her heart when He was alive that she wanted to honor Him in His death by giving Him a proper burial, and now even that was taken away from her. Would there be no end to this tragic series of events?

But Mary's sadness was to be short-lived. First there were angels; then a mysterious gardener; then, finally, the one thing she had so longed for and thought she would never hear again: His voice speaking her name. In an instant, everything changed. Jesus was alive! He was going not only to His Father, but to her Father. He had fulfilled his promise: God's love was poured out. Everyone could know God as a loving, merciful Father. Mary received all this as she heard Jesus speak her name and reveal Himself to her.

The encounter was deeply personal. By speaking her name, Jesus touched her at the center of her heart, the place where all her fears lurked, and the place where the struggle between the darkness of sin and the light of God's love was the fiercest. There, in the depth of her heart, Mary received the love of God, and her sadness was turned into a joy that moved her to tell the other disciples, "I have seen the Lord". Only after Jesus spoke her name was she able to truly "see" Him.

Mary's encounter with the risen Lord shows us what can happen in our own prayer as we quiet our hearts and listen for His voice. Every day, Jesus asks us to let Him enter even the fears and darkness in our hearts- those places that we hide from the rest of the world- and heal them with His love. As He speaks our name, we too can say with Mary, "I have seen the Lord."

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I believe that you want to make yourself known to me just as intimately as you revealed yourself to Mary. By your Spirit, help me to listen so that when you speak my name I will be able to receive your love and proclaim your resurrection.

April 25: John 20: 19-23 Receive the Holy Spirit

Blessed Holy Spirit, you are God's presence within us, the faithful witness to God's mighty works and the enduring promise of things yet to come. Come, Breath of God, and dwell in us. By His death and resurrection, Jesus planted the seeds of eternal life. Now, through your presence, we know the first fruits of the harvest to come. In your love, strengthen us and prepare us for the coming wedding feast of Christ and His church.

Through you, O Spirit, God's word takes up residence in our hearts. You come to teach us God's law and to transform us day by day. Through you, we who once were condemned to death for our trespasses are redeemed and forgiven. We who were burdened by sin can now walk in freedom. We who deserved no mercy can now extend mercy freely to others. Come, Comforter, and sustain us and encourage us in our daily walk. Help us understand the signs of the times. Be our teacher. Write the word of God on our hearts.

Come, faithful Counselor, and lead all nations to God. Fill the house of God with believers from every nation, race, and tongue. Make us into one body, united in our worship of the Lord. Prepare us, the bride, to take our place beside Jesus, our bridegroom. Overcome our natural differences as you did with the disciples and all those to whom they preached the gospel. Let everyone hear the good news in his or her native tongue and receive new life through you. Break down barriers that keep us apart. Give us compassion.

O great Advocate, teach us to pray in every circumstance and for every need. Move us to intercede for one another—even for our enemies. Form the prayers within us and give us the words to say. Give us the courage to speak the gospel in all situations and to all nations. Enable us to testify to the truth of Christ in our thoughts, words, and actions. Make us instruments of your grace, vessels of clay filled with your living water.

Come, Holy Spirit, reign within our hearts! Purify us and refine us! Empower us and use us! Live within us as you prepare us for our Heavenly Groom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

April 26: John 20: 24-31 My Lord and my God!

Filled with awe, Thomas uttered these words when he saw the risen Lord. Now he too could join his voice in the apostolic proclamation, "We have seen the Lord!" (John 20:18, 25). Thomas came to the same faith that transformed Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, and the others, and so was moved to make such a bold statement of faith and commitment to Jesus.

Thomas is a very important figure for us as we seek to deepen our faith. He stands as a hinge between the first Christians, who physically saw Jesus, and all the generations to come whose faith would rely on the apostles' witness and on their own vision of Christ with the "eyes of faith." Because Thomas first heard about the resurrection through his fellow apostles, and yet also had his own personal encounter with Christ, we can take his experience as a model for ourselves.

How can we deepen our faith? Like Thomas, we have the witness of the believing community, a two-thousand-year-old testimony of the people of God who continue to proclaim, "We have seen the Lord." This is no small matter, for while the gospel has penetrated every culture and age since the day of Pentecost, it retains its essential unity. The truth has not changed, and the promise of a personal encounter with Jesus remains as real as it did on the first Easter Sunday.

At the same time, like Thomas, we too are invited to experience something more than an agreement with the apostles' testimony: We can all experience the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit, whose role is to guide us into "all the truth" (John 16:13), was poured out so that we could know and experience the love of Christ in our hearts and freely embrace the salvation He offers.

The first community of believers lived a common life in which they knew the presence of their Savior and were drawn ever closer together in love and service. In their worship at the Eucharist, their attention to the apostles' teaching, their communal prayer, and their fellowship with one another, their faith deepened and the witness of their transformed lives touched others. In our prayer today, as we reflect on all that is available to us through the resurrection of Jesus and the power of the Spirit to reveal him

to our hearts, let us sing with the psalmist: "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His steadfast love endures forever!"(Psalm 118:1)

April 27: John 21: 1-14 Be a good fisherman of men.

The story of the miraculous catch of fish can teach us a good deal about fishing for people. The story that John recounts is similar to the great catch in Luke 5:1-11, yet it includes three specific emphases that only John gives us. He shows us that Jesus' call is universal; that He calls us to live in unity; and that we who have been called must share that call with others.

Some people are curious about why John specified the number of fish in the catch. Why 153? Many symbolic interpretations have been put forward, all pointing to the variety, size, and comprehensive nature of Jesus' call. Early church father Jerome said that since the zoology of his day specified 153 different kinds of fish, this number would symbolize a gathering in of people of all nations.

A more significant emphasis is placed on the fact that the disciples' nets did not break, despite the size of the catch. By including this detail, John was illustrating the fact that despite the diversity and the number of followers, the Christian community need not be torn by divisions. This is a significant promise to hold on to, especially in the face of the church's turbulent history.

This miraculous story also has something to say about the commission of Jesus' followers to preach the gospel. Peter and the other disciples must have been flabbergasted by Jesus' charge to build the church. We can imagine them going out to fish in their restlessness- falling back on something they knew well how to do. But consider what the historical and spiritual implications would have been had they spent the rest of their lives trying to catch perch instead of people.

Something about this appearance of Jesus, however, launched them on their apostolic mission. Over the next thirty years, we never again hear of the apostles going out to fish. They were too busy bringing the gospel to the world. The life of Jesus in us does not remain just a personal and interior thing; it wells up within us and must be expressed to others.

Prayer: Jesus, continue to bring all people into the kingdom, that your will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. Strengthen your church today and help believers to love each other and live together in harmony. Lord, help us to be missionaries in whatever situations we find ourselves.

April 28: John 21: 15-19 Feed my sheep (I)

Once again Peter stood warming himself by a charcoal fire. The last time we saw him in this position, he three times denied knowing Jesus. In this scene, Jesus confronted him three times, "Do you love me?"(v. 15, 16, 17) Still remembering the pain of his earlier denial (21:17), Peter answered "yes" each time. But Jesus did more than just reinstate this humbled apostle; He charged him to "feed my sheep". What did Jesus see in Peter that He entrusted the future life and ministry of His church to him?

It was not Peter's wisdom that enabled him to care for Christ's followers as Jesus Himself might. The issue was not pastoral gifts(though these gifts can be important) or Peter's leadership qualities that prompted Jesus to say, "feed my sheep." No, the single quality that enabled Peter to care for Christ's followers was his love for Jesus, "Lord, you

know that I love you.”(21:16) Based on this foundation, how is someone who loves Jesus to respond to the Lord’s charge to “Feed my sheep”?

April 29: John 21: 15-19 Feed my sheep (II)

Andrew Murray, a pastor and prolific writer on South Africa during the nineteenth century, pondered the meaning of the three words, “Feed my sheep”. Below is a summary of his insights:

To feed is to give to others what will help them grow. Every Christian must consider how to help others to grow: How can we explain Jesus’ words so they might understand? How can we nurture a desire in them to turn to God?

The word “my” means that these sheep belong to Jesus. The work we do in caring for the Master’s sheep involves hard work and initiative. But we must always remember that we nurture them for the Lord, not for the fulfillment of our own wishes or desires. They belong to Him.

And what are sheep? Sheep depend upon their shepherds to create an environment that is safe, healthy, and good for their growth. A precious lot are weak and in constant need of care. In a similar way, all Christians are in one way or another sheep in need of care. We have a responsibility to care for them and feed them with the food Jesus gives.

Prayer: “Lord Jesus, change my life and melt my heart with love for you. You have many sheep who need to be fed, and I want to take part in that work. May your love be the stimulus for what I do.”

April 30: John 21: 20-25 Even the whole world would not have room for the books about Jesus.

How many books indeed! Jesus’ actions- His miracles, healings, words, and deeds- are not limited to the few years during which He walked the earth. From the very beginning of creation, the Son of God was at work- intervening in history and preparing the world for His coming. Now, enthroned as Lord, His work extends through the church as His people, filled with the Holy Spirit, bring the light and life of the gospel to people everywhere.

We are all familiar with the biographies of the great Christians of history. Yet how many “silent” Christians have there been- men and women whose stories have never been recorded, yet whose lives are testimonies to the unending love and grace of our Redeemer. Every citizen of the kingdom of heaven, both past and present, is a book in himself or herself. In each one, God has worked wonders. In ways great and small, Jesus never ceases His work, so great is His love.

In the annals of history and in the homes of families throughout the ages, God has always been at work. His desire is that everyone come to know the life that is available through His Son, Christ Jesus. When we sinned and turned away from God, He sent His Son, the very one through whom and for whom we were made, to redeem us. Offering Himself on the cross to ransom us from darkness, Jesus performed His greatest work of all. Now, through faith and baptism into His death and resurrection, all people can receive His life

within them and become yet another “book”, another testimony to the love and power of God.

Let us open our hearts to Jesus, the author of our lives and perfecter of our faith. Let us give Him reign over our thoughts and actions so that He can write yet another book of testimony within us. Let us proclaim the gospel to others, that the witness of our lives would be like an open book before them, inviting them to receive the same grace that we- and all the saints- have received.