

“MORE THAN AN APPEARANCE”  
John 21:15-19, Acts 9:1-9, I Peter 1:3-9  
April 20 & 21, 2024

Bible Teacher and Christian counselor, “Dr. Larry Crabb, recalls an incident in the church he attended as a young man. It was customary in this church that young men were encouraged to participate in the Communion services by praying out loud. Feeling the pressure of expectation, the young Crabb (who had a problem with stuttering) stood to pray. In a terribly confused prayer, he recalls ‘thanking the Father for hanging on the cross and praising Christ for triumphantly bringing the Spirit from the grave.’ When he was finished, he vowed he would never again speak or pray out loud in front of a group.

“At the end of the service, not wanting to meet any of the church elders who might feel constrained to correct his theology, Crabb made for the door. Before he could get out, an older man named Jim Dunbar caught him. Having prepared himself for the anticipated correction, Crabb instead found himself listening to these words: ‘Larry, there’s one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I’m behind you one thousand percent.’

“Crabb reflects in his book, *Encouragement: The Key To Caring*: ‘Even as I write these words, my eyes fill with tears. I have yet to tell that story to an audience without at least mildly choking. Those words were life words. They had power. They reached deep into my being.’”<sup>1</sup>

There is such power in words of encouragement given to one another. That encouragement changes the lives of those who are questioning their importance or their abilities to the point that they are lifted up beyond their failures and moved on into confident success in the work they dedicate themselves to doing. When we encourage each other, there is no telling what can be accomplished.

We heard that today in the gospel account of John 21:15-19. As you recall, in the upper room celebration of Passover, Jesus had addressed His disciples, saying that they would all fall away from Him. Peter had vowed profusely to stay with Jesus, even if it meant death (John 13:37). He had spoken

---

<sup>1</sup> (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 82-83)

bravely, but when the time came for him to stand up for Jesus, Peter denied even knowing Jesus 3 times. Having seen Jesus arrested and beaten by the guards, Peter had lost his courage and had let fear guide his life. But realizing his actions, Peter cried bitterly about his failure (Luke 22:54-62).

Imagine Peter's discouragement at failing his Master, Jesus. Imagine the doubt that raged within his spirit. It affected Peter to the point that he thought there was no more hope of him being a disciple of Jesus, and he gave up any aspiration of serving Jesus any more. So he had returned to Galilee to take up his fishing career once again, having lost all hope of following Jesus. Even though he had seen Jesus on the day of His resurrection, even though there was hope of Jesus providing the salvation of the world, Peter was convinced that his time as a disciple was over.

Imagine Peter's further discouragement, then, when after spending a full night working hard at the only other thing he knew - fishing - he was not able to produce any results (John 21:1-3). He must have thought himself to be a complete failure, a real reject, now being cursed because of his having denied even knowing Jesus. As the dawn appeared in the skies of that disappointing morning, Peter's self-esteem was probably ten stories deep in the basement of despair. I can only imagine the thoughts of Peter: "What a complete disaster I am! I disappoint Jesus, I deny knowing Jesus, and now I can't even catch fish. What a waste of humanity I am! I can't do anything right!"

But then something marvelous happened. A "man" on the shore called out to them as they were fishing, asking if they had caught anything. In complete exasperation, Peter may have been the one to reply, "No." (John 21:5)

But the "man" didn't let it go. "*Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some*" (John 21:6). Well, nothing had worked throughout the night, so they might as well try the wrong side of the boat to put their nets out. And to their great surprise, voila, they can't even haul the nets back into the boat for the large number of fish in them.

However, it is John's words to Peter that threw him for a loop, "*It is the Lord!*" (John 21:7). John quickly remembered the very first time that this same thing had happened. Jesus had told them to

fish in the deep water, and having done so, they caught so many fish that both boats were in danger of sinking.

What excitement floods Peter as he hears John's words! He gets his robe on, and then jumps into the water so that he could go to be with Jesus. There was hope yet, if only Jesus would stick around all the time. Maybe he could be a successful fisherman with the help of the Lord. Maybe, just maybe, things could change and his failures could be rewritten into something close to resembling a success.

Upon reaching the shore, Peter sees that Jesus already has a fire going with fish already cooking. With great excitement, Peter shows Jesus all the fish they had just caught - 153 large fish - and no damage to the nets. AMAZING! Maybe there was hope for the Rock's Trawling Company after all.

Jesus, however, was not interested in Peter going back to fishing for fish. Jesus had already called him to be a fisher for people (Luke 5:1-11), so it was time to pour encouragement into him so that he could not only receive that title, but live into it. So Jesus asked Peter 3 times if he loved Him. And each time, Peter responded, "*Yes, Lord... You know that I love you*" (John 21:15-17).

With each affirmation of his love for Jesus, one denial of knowing Jesus was wiped away. Even though it hurt for Peter to have Jesus ask him three times if he loved Him, Jesus' question stated three times cancelled Peter's failure and reaffirmed him as one to "*feed My lambs,*" "*take care of My sheep*" and "*feed My sheep*" (John 21:15-17).

Peter had done all the chastising that needed to be done on himself. Jesus was there to reaffirm him as not only a fisher of people, but as a disciple who would live the rest of his life serving and glorifying the Lord. What power Jesus poured into Peter with those simple words of encouragement. Jesus assured him that he would indeed be the Rock upon which the church would stand.

As we look at all the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples and the other followers of Jesus, we need to remember the words of James Denny, who says that "there is no such thing in the New Testament as an appearance of the Risen Savior in which He merely appears. He is always represented as entering into relation to those who see Him in other ways than by a flash upon the

inner or outer eye: He establishes other communications between Himself and His own than that which can be characterized in this way. It may be that a tendency to materialize the supernatural has affected the evangelical narrative here or there - that Luke, for instance, who makes the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus in bodily form as a dove went involuntarily beyond the apostolic tradition in making the Risen One speak of His flesh and bones, and eat a bit of roasted fish before the disciples, to convince them that He was no mere ghost; it may be so, though the mode of Christ's being, in the days before His final withdrawal, is so entirely beyond our comprehension, that it is rash to be too preemptory about it; but even if it were so, it would not affect the representation as a whole which the gospels give of the Resurrection, and of the relation of the Risen One to His disciples. It would not affect the fact that He not only appeared to them, but spoke to them. It would not affect the fact, that He not only appeared to them, but taught them, and in particular gave them a commission in which the meaning of His own life and work, and their calling as connected with it, are finally declared."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus wanted His disciples to be men and women of faith, to let go of their failures in the past, and to be strong in serving Him. Jesus' appearances to the followers were to encourage them to continue to follow Him and trust in Him as the Risen Savior of the world, so that they might take the great news of Salvation to the whole world. This was not to be a short-lived, temporary movement to bring relief of people's burdens only for a few years after Jesus' ascension. It was to be an everlasting association with the Lord Jesus, allowing Him to guide them so that all the peoples of the world could hear the Good News of God's love for them, giving them a chance to repent of their sins and return to a relationship with the Lord their God through Jesus Christ our Savior.

And God has that plan for each one of us. He calls us to let go of the past failures that hold us captive, preventing us from boldly stepping forward to do the work Jesus has called us to do. Even if we have done horrendous things against the Lord, or against others, there is hope for us to serve the Lord. If we allow Jesus to pour encouragement into our hearts, transformation occurs to make us into people

---

<sup>2</sup> (Charles L. Wallis, editor, *Lenten-Easter Sourcebook*, [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1961] pg. 168-9, #353)

of faith who can then boldly love others and witness to our faith in Jesus. God knows His plans for us, plans for welfare and not calamity, to give us a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11). Though we be enemies of Christ, Jesus can change us from enemies to friends and servants.

And that's the power of Saul's conversion. In Acts 9 we see that God chose to use the most radical enemy of Christianity to become the greatest evangelist the world has known. Jesus appeared to Saul to change his direction in life, and then to empower him to become His servant and witness. Of course, Jesus had to knock Saul off his high horse to get his attention, but when Saul heard and saw that it was Jesus, the Risen Christ, who was speaking to him, he repented of his wickedness against the church and became an advocate for the Gospel.

With the encouragement of Ananias and Barnabas, Saul, who became Paul, let go of his failure of the past and grew into a powerful witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His past could have prevented him from doing anything for the Lord, but his transformation brought encouragement and hope into the lives of millions of people. Jesus' appearance to Paul was not to destroy him, but rather to call him out of his wicked ways and to use him for the sake of catching people for the glory of the Lord. Through the grace of Jesus Christ in his life, Paul opens up the eyes and hearts and souls to the grace of God for all of us through His Son, Jesus. And it is only by the grace of Jesus Christ that we can be saved from our sins and given eternal life.

So we see that "though individuals had their own experiences of the risen Christ, it was in fellowship with one another that they knew Him most fully. Not only faith and hope and courage, but the love that He lived and taught, surged up in their lives and transformed them into 'His body.' The Church which thus came to birth, exists because of the Resurrection. As through the centuries it has grown from a handful of men and women to uncounted millions, its Scriptures, its sacred day, its Church Year, its sacraments, its creeds, its fellowship, and its outreaching service, all continue to witness to 'His mighty resurrection.' Wherever the Church has fully appropriated the resurrection faith, it has experienced '*the immeasurable greatness of His power in us who believe, according to the working of*

*His great might which He accomplished in Christ when He raised Him from the dead'* (Ephesians 1:19f.)” (Wallace Eugene Rollins & Marion Benedict Rollins)<sup>3</sup>.

And we are beneficiaries of all the faithful who have gone before us. Because of the encouragement of Jesus’ appearances to them, and because of His great words of hope and life and love, we can have the same confidence in Jesus as the Risen Savior of the world.

But it’s so easy for us to see our failures of the past, the hardships and difficulties we have faced that have prevented us from being faithful witnesses of Jesus, that we focus on them, and fail to see the empowerment that Jesus gives to us when we trust in Him and follow Him as His disciples. It can be easy for us to look so hard at what has prevented us from serving Him, that we miss all of His blessings and all of His encouragement.

Take for example “a party of pioneers on the Oregon Trail who suffered for weeks from a scarcity of water and grass for their animals. Most of the wagons had broken down, causing endless delays in the stifling heat. A feeling of fretfulness and futility prevailed. Optimism and cheer were gone. Courage was in limited supply.

“One night the leaders called a meeting to air complaints. When they gathered around the campfire, one man stood up and said, ‘Before we commence our grief session, don't you think we should at least first thank God that he has brought us this far with no loss of life, with no serious trouble from the Indians, and that we have enough strength left to finish our journey?’

“The other settlers agreed. After the brief prayer, all that could be heard were the cries of a distant pack of wolves. There was otherwise stone silence around the campfire, because no one had any grievances they felt were important enough to voice. They suddenly realized if they couldn't be satisfied with what they'd received, they could at least be thankful for what they'd escaped. Thankfulness enabled them to see the mercies of God they had been overlooking.”<sup>4</sup>

And that is what the Apostle Peter wishes for us. Though we have to face struggles, hardships,

---

<sup>3</sup> (Charles L. Wallis, editor, *Lenten-Easter Sourcebook*, pg. 169-170)

<sup>4</sup> (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 286)

disappointments and failures, Peter, having been encouraged by the Lord Jesus, encourages us to keep our faith and trust in Jesus Christ so that we might find life and hope and love in Him. Listen to his encouraging words in I Peter 1:3-9. (READ I Peter 1:3-9)

Peter reminds us of the greatness of God given to us through Jesus Christ. New life is given to us through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and we have an everlasting inheritance waiting for us in the Father's house when our time here on earth is completed. That's exciting news, at least for me! This world is not all there is - we have more waiting for us. But it is imperative for us to remain faithful throughout our lives and keep our eyes on the hope we have in Jesus. It is by our faith that God shields us and protects us from devastation so that we might continue to live as His witnesses of His salvation through Jesus Christ. Nothing else is important for the Lord as is our faith and trust in Him so that we might live in a relationship with Him, empowered by His word and guided by His Holy Spirit. It's not the jobs we have that the Lord rejoices in, but rather the living of our lives as His servants, reaching out to those around us so that they might also see the need for the salvation of Jesus in their own lives.

You see, Jesus is there for us so that we don't focus on the past failures in our lives. We've all done and said things that have brought pain to the Lord and others. We're all guilty of not doing what we could have to encourage another. We're all guilty of hindering the work of the Kingdom at some point of our lives. But Jesus says to us, "*Do you love Me more than these?*" "Will you let Me be first in your life so that all you do and all you say might encourage and support and build up a brother or sister so that they might grow in their faith in Me?" "Will you let Me use you in whatever you do to bring forth the glory of God?"

We will all have to "*suffer grief in all kinds of trials*" (I Pet. 1:6) because we live in this world. So many people do not know the Lord Jesus, so He has invited us to live for Him in such a way that despite our troubles and trials and hardships and difficulties, people will see Jesus in us and through us. God is faithful to use every circumstance and every condition for His glory if we stay faithful to Him. Then we can demonstrate the genuineness of our faith so that praise and glory and honor might be

shown to Jesus, especially in these dark times. We are invited to love Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, believing that He is faithful to encourage us and empower us as we live for Him. That in itself will bring us indescribable joy.

Your past failures and faults do not dictate your future when you put your hope in Jesus Christ. He showed Himself to the disciples and all His followers in order to give them such resolve that He was alive, arisen from the grave, having beaten death in order to give us life. As we put our trust in Him, as we follow His teachings and as we live as His witnesses, we will be able to say with Peter, “*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (I Pet. 1:3). And as we experience Jesus walking alongside of us, and encouraging us and empowering us, we will be able to see “*the end result of our faith, the salvation of our souls*” (I Pet. 1:9).

So let today be the day that you devote your life to Jesus, maybe for another time, so that He might work through you to encourage another beside you. Let Him renew you and restore you into the presence of the Lord God Almighty, and you will find great blessing in all you do. Be a living hope to all who see you, and speak with you, and work alongside you and worship with you. Find the encouragement of Jesus’ words in your life so that you might also encourage another for the sake of Jesus Christ. Let’s pray.

Father, all praise, honor, glory and majesty belongs to You, for You are the One True Holy God! Thank You for giving Jesus to us so that we might have life through Him. He died for every one of us, so that as we put our trust and faith in Him, all our sins are wiped away and we become renewed and redeemed people. Give us the courage to live our faith each day, encouraging one another as we gather together to worship You so that we might help each other toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24-25). As these day grow dark, and as troubles and hardships surround us, let us find our hope and life and love in Jesus so that we might rejoice in Him each day. No matter where we are, no matter what we have done, no matter how badly we might have failed, lift us up out of our despair so that we might live boldly for You, as we live for Jesus, our Risen Lord and Savior. This we pray in Jesus’ Name. AMEN.