

BECAUSE HE LIVES!

2023

As I start writing this letter, I think about some childhood memories of Easter...

I remember our family going to church on Easter morning, and coming back home where a traditional leg of lamb was cooking in the oven. Of course, my two brothers and I were always in a hurry to finish eating what was on our plates, so we could get the chocolate bunnies we were promised for dessert! Chocolate wasn't an everyday treat, and it was certainly the highlight of our day. We didn't have an Easter egg hunt at our house, but I remember Dad surprising us with cute baby chickens one year, and a live rabbit another year. We couldn't contain our excitement! But at some point, we got tired of playing with them, and then he would bring them back to the farm. In a way, we were glad that he did because we always had the chore of feeding them, and cleaning up after them!

Those sweet memories are from a long time ago, and back then and for many years, that was all Easter meant to me. Actually, I was in my early thirties when, by the grace of God, I finally understood – among other spiritual truths - the real meaning of Easter: the resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God who came as a man on this earth, and willingly and selflessly gave His life on the cross not only for me, but for the whole world. In so doing, He paid the price for our sins and cleansed us from all unrighteousness, so that we might be reconciled with God. He is, therefore, the only mediator between God and us; the only way to eternal life for those who believe in Him.

Personally speaking, such spiritual truth totally transformed my life. The positive outcome was a true repentance for my sins; a surrendered heart with the growing desire to please and obey God, as well as the blessing not only of knowing Him, but also of having a personal relationship with Him. Since then, God has been at the center of my life, and this alone gives me so much peace and joy! I also have the assurance that one day I'll live in His presence eternally. If you ask me, that's what I call a miracle!

When we read about Jesus' three-year ministry on earth, we learn about His teachings and the many miracles He accomplished, which proved His deity. However, His own resurrection was definitely His greatest miracle. Jesus Himself said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life --- only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."¹ What a powerful declaration that no mere mortal and all the gods of this world can ever say! In fact, the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of the Christian faith. It means that Jesus triumphed over death; that eternal life is granted to all who believe in Him; and it's also the full confirmation of all that Jesus taught, and preached.

In the four Gospels of the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we read the details about Jesus' resurrection. I chose John's account, which is found in chapter twenty of his book, to write about what happened on that particular Sunday and the week that followed. And I have to say that after reading it, the stories about Mary Magdalene and Thomas particularly resonated with me.

Mary Magdalene had a very dark past when Jesus delivered her from seven demons and from sin. This very act and miracle totally transformed her heart, and her life. She then joined the close circle of Jesus' disciples, and a group of women who traveled with Him on His long journeys. She was also a bystander watching Jesus' crucifixion. She witnessed the terrible suffering and the death of her Savior and Lord... Mary Magdalene was also the first one, along with two other women, to go to the tomb early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, and saw that the large stone had been rolled away, and the tomb was empty.

Now, let's read John's words about what happened next...

“She came running to Simeon Peter and to the other disciple [John], the one Jesus esteemed, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put Him!’ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

“The disciples went back to their homes, but Mary Magdalene stood there, outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and one at the foot. They asked her, ‘Woman, why are you crying?’ ‘They have taken my Lord away,’ she said, and I don’t know where they have put Him.’ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.”

Then this brief and touching conversation takes place between them...

“‘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.’

“Mary Magdalene then went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that He had said these things to her.”

Her amazing story ends here, but as we keep reading John’s account we meet Thomas, one of Jesus’ twelve apostles.

“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ After He said this, He showed His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

“Now Thomas was not with the others when Jesus came. So they told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it.’

“A week later, His disciples were in the house, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then He said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’ Thomas said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have believed.’”

When we read Thomas’ story, it’s not surprising that he’s usually nicknamed ‘Doubting Thomas’. It’s true that he demanded evidence of the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection before he accepted the truth. But would I have done better in similar circumstances? I doubt! Seriously though, how often did I show doubt in my own spiritual walk with the Lord? As believers, how often have we done it? Doubt may have been Thomas’ spontaneous response to his friends’ news that they had seen Jesus, but that wasn’t the defining quality of his life. He was tenderhearted, loyal and unshakable in his love for Jesus. He never wanted to be separated from Him, and it broke his heart when Jesus said to His apostles that He was leaving them, because he couldn’t go where He was going... Thomas was human like all of us, and I believe that he should be better known for his love and faithfulness to Jesus; for his total trust in Him as he was determined to live, and even to die for Him.

This chapter about the resurrection of Jesus ends here with John's own purpose statement for writing his Gospel in the first place. He wrote, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name."²

Following His resurrection, Jesus stayed forty days appearing and ministering to many of His disciples before returning to His Father in heaven, where ever since He's been sitting at His right hand interceding for all believers in Him. How comforting it is to know that He loves us, cares for us, helps us in our times of needs, and that He always will. And what a message of hope we also get from these words that Jesus addressed to His apostles at their last supper together: "Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."³

Songwriters and singers, Bill and Gloria Gaither, wrote many beautiful and inspiring Christian songs in their long career, but this particular one became so popular that it was translated in many languages. They wrote it in the late 1960's shortly after the birth of their baby boy. I think that this song expresses so beautifully the assurance that we can all face uncertain days in our lives because Jesus lives.

BECAUSE HE LIVES

God sent His Son, they called Him Jesus,
He came to love, heal and forgive.
He lived and died, to buy my pardon;
An empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives.

How sweet to hold a newborn baby,
And feel the pride, and joy he gives;
But sweeter still the calm assurance,
This child can face uncertain days because He lives.

And then one day I'll cross the river,
I'll fight life's final war with pain.
And then as death gives way to victory,
I'll see the lights of glory and I'll know He lives.

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow;
Because He lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future;
And life is worth the living just because He lives.

**Praise be to God!
Happy and blessed Easter to you and to your loved ones!**

¹John 10:17-18 ²John 20:30-31 ³John 14:19