

THE RESURRECTION

John 20

The distinctive incidents in the Easter story in the Gospel of John are Mary's recognition of the risen Lord and Thomas' doubt and its resolution. But the teachers should be sure that all the classes have a knowledge of the general Easter story, as well as of its background in the states of the disciples.

Doctrinal Points

When we die we go on living in a spiritual body.

The Lord glorified His humanity, uniting it with the divinity which had begotten it.

Our idea of God is the most important idea we have.

Notes for Parents

On the first Easter Sunday the Lord rose from the sepulcher in which His body had been placed after the crucifixion and showed Himself to several of His followers, and during the next forty days, He appeared to the same people many times and to others also. We need have no doubt of the facts here—all history was changed by them. The Lord's resurrection not only restored the faith of His disciples but gave them courage to go out through the world and found Christian churches in many places.

For us as individuals the Easter lesson means the certainty that our life continues after the death of the body. But it means a great deal more than that. When Mary Magdalene recognized the Lord as He spoke her name, He said to her: "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." Mary was not to think of the Lord as merely the friend and master she had known and loved in the world. He had to rise in her thoughts and be recognized as the heavenly Father Himself. Jesus had once said to Philip, when Philip

had asked Him to show them the Father: “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” We must learn to think of Jesus not as a man who lived in this world many centuries ago, but as the one God of heaven and earth, who loved us so much that He was willing to take on a human nature like ours in order to show us how to meet and overcome our temptations, and who then put it off to show us that He really is our heavenly Father and that He is not far away but present with us in all our struggles and disappointments, even though we do not see Him with our physical eyes.

Mary and the disciples did not see the risen Lord with their physical eyes. He opened their spiritual sight, as He could open ours if He found it needful for us. The body in which He rose was His divine body, with which He had been gradually replacing the finite physical body He had put on through Mary. He appeared to the disciples without coming through doors. He appeared to each one as that one was prepared to recognize Him. This teaches us a very important lesson. We see the Lord only as we prepare our minds to see Him by learning all we can about Him and obeying His teaching. If we are faithful, He will rise in our minds and will become to us “the way, the truth, and the life.”

Primary

Get as much of the background from the children as possible. Use the attitude of the disciples to show how foolish it is to think that spiritual things are not real.

When the Lord rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He knew that the very people who were welcoming Him as their king would turn against Him in just a few days and shout, “Crucify him!” just as loudly as they had shouted “Hosanna!” The disciples did not know this. He had told them what was to happen, but they had not believed it or even remembered it.

When on the very next Thursday night the Lord was seized by His enemies, even His closest followers who loved Him “forsook

Him and fled.” They were not quite brave enough then to risk their own lives for Him. They still thought of life in this world as the most precious thing and of death as the end of everything. So when on Friday He was put to death, they thought all their hopes had come to nothing and that they would never see Him again.

But some of the women who had loved the Lord thought of one last thing they could do for Him.

It was their custom to use certain spices in preparing bodies for burial.

So on Sunday morning the women took these spices to the tomb where the Lord’s body had been laid.

The first one to reach the tomb was Mary Magdalene.

What did she find?

What did Peter and another disciple do when she told them?

After they had gone home, what did Mary see in the tomb?

Who then came and spoke to her?

How did the Lord appear to the disciples that same day?

Thomas was not with them, and he would not believe.

How did the Lord convince him?

The disciples knew then that death was not the end of life.

Do you wonder that after this none of the disciples was ever afraid of death again? And we need never be afraid of it either.

Junior

Do more in this class with the events of Holy Week before you go on to the lesson proper. At this age especially children need to be impressed with the facts of the Lord’s life and with the assurance of His continued presence in the world.

What kind of animal did the Lord ride to enter Jerusalem the last Sunday of His earthly life?

How did the people receive Him?

What did they carry in their hands?

What did they shout?

What did they think the Messiah would do?

What did the Lord know would happen?

What parable did He tell to explain why He had to die?

You would think, wouldn’t you, that the Lord’s disciples would have understood Him? But the ideas of life and death which were

in their minds were very much like those of the rest of the people. When we are born, we do not have any knowledge of the Lord or of heaven, and unless we are taught these things when we are children, we grow up thinking that this life is all there is and that death is the end of everything for us. And after we are grown up, it is very hard for us to change our habits of thought. Even if we come to see that there must be a God and a future life, it is hard for us to think of either as real, because the things of this earth seem to us the only real things. So, although the Lord had told His disciples that He would be put to death and would rise again on the third day, it seemed so impossible to them that they scarcely even remembered it.

You may remember that the Lord spent the first two days of His last week teaching in the temple, and at night went out to Bethany and lodged at the home of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. By Tuesday night the opposition to Him in Jerusalem had become so great that He remained at Bethany and did not enter Jerusalem again until He came for the Passover feast on Thursday evening. At that feast He instituted the Holy Supper, and after it He went outside the city to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. There Judas betrayed Him into the hands of the officers whom the chief priests had sent to arrest Him.

When He was arrested, all His disciples forsook Him and fled, and on Friday, after He was crucified, they were completely discouraged. Their hopes had centered in Him, and when He did not save Himself from death at the hands of His enemies, they felt that they must have been mistaken in their belief in Him. They were very unhappy about it, but they had no hope. As the two disciples on the way to Emmaus said (Luke 24:20), “We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel.” You see even the disciples had been thinking of the Lord as an earthly king.

But the women who had followed the Lord had loved Him for Himself. They had not been so concerned with earthly greatness. They, too, did not expect to see Him again, but they thought of

Him instead of themselves and wanted to do the last thing they could for Him, which was to prepare His body properly for burial according to their customs. That was why they came to the tomb with their spices early on Sunday morning. They could not come before, because it was not considered lawful to do such things on the sabbath.

The first one to reach the tomb on that first Easter morning was a woman out of whom the Lord had cast seven devils (Mark 16:9, Luke 8:2).

Who was this woman?

What did she find?

Whom did she tell?

What did Peter find in the tomb?

What did Mary afterward see in the tomb?

Who came and spoke to her?

Whom did she at first think He was?

When did she recognize Him?

What did He tell her?

When did he appear to all the disciples?

Which one was not present?

Why would he not believe the others?

How did the Lord convince him?

What did the Lord tell Thomas, which also applies to us?

We should notice that although there was nothing of the Lord's physical body left in the tomb, and although He appeared to Thomas with the nail holes in His hands and the wound in His side, still Mary at first did not recognize Him, and He appeared suddenly among the disciples in spite of the fact that the doors were closed. We know that death is no more the end of us than it was the end of the Lord. We go right on living in the spiritual world in our spiritual bodies—just as much ourselves as ever. But there is a difference between the Lord and us. We leave our physical bodies behind us when we die, and we no longer have any conscious contact with this world except when the Lord permits us to feel our nearness to the people we love here or to others whom we can help. The Lord also put off the physical body He had taken on

from Mary, but He replaced it with a divine body. So He is present in this world everywhere and sees and knows all that goes on here. We do not see Him unless He wishes us to, and when He does appear to anyone, He takes on the form in which the particular person can recognize Him.

These two special lessons we learn from Easter: death is only a step in life, and the Lord is always here with us.

Intermediate

There are a number of correspondences here around which to build the lesson for this class. The principal thought to stress is the necessity of rising above earthly ideas. Carry this out in its application to our thoughts of death, if the young people are at all uncertain about this.

At the end of the nineteenth chapter of John we are told that after the crucifixion two members of the high court of the Jews, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (see Luke 23:50 and John 3:1), with the consent of Pilate, the Roman governor, took the body of Jesus and wrapped it in linen cloths with spices [cf. Mark 16:1, Luke 24:1], according to their burial custom, and laid it in a new tomb. Matthew 27:60 tells us that the tomb belonged to Joseph of Arimathea and that after the burial he rolled a great stone in front of the door. We learn still more about this stone from Matthew 27:62-66.

In our Palm Sunday lesson we learned something of the reason why the Lord had to pass through death. In the Word, burial and a tomb, in the case of a good person, represent resurrection and regeneration. We can understand this most easily if we try to put ourselves in the place of the angels who welcome people into the spiritual world, who see the person awaking there just about the time when his grave in this world is being closed. The ideas which we in this world have about the person who has left us are pictured by the linen cloths in which Joseph and Nicodemus wrapped the body of Jesus before they laid it in the tomb. The spices represent truth also, but more interior truth which comes from goodness in

the heart. Both Joseph and Nicodemus believed in the Lord and were trying to do right, although their thought of Him was entirely of His earthly life, which now seemed at an end.

In all four Gospels we learn that it was the women who first discovered that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb and that the Lord's body was no longer there. Women represent affections. A stone, in a good sense, represents truth in its basic or lowest form. In this case it represents the truth which had been wrongly used by the Lord's enemies to make sure that He would "stay buried." They had falsified the letter of Scripture by making it mean what they wanted it to mean. In Matthew 28:2 we are told that there was a great earthquake and that the angel of the Lord rolled back the stone from the door. All the thinking of the world was upset eventually by the resurrection of the Lord. The women first discovered it because it is love in the heart which makes it possible for the Lord to show anyone the real truth. The women then told the men—just as our affections, if they are good, enable our minds to see.

When we die, we go on living in a spiritual body. The body we lived in here in the material world we leave behind us, but it lasts—at least in part—a good many years after we have left it, although it no longer has any life. We rise from death only in the spiritual world. But the Lord continued to be in contact with this world. He was seen and recognized by the women, by the disciples, and later by many others. And there was no material body left in the tomb. Yet Mary at first did not recognize Him; He appeared to the disciples suddenly although the doors were closed; and we remember from one of our lessons from Luke that the two disciples who walked with Him to Emmaus did not recognize Him until they began to eat with Him. All through His life in the world the Lord had been putting forth from the Divine within Himself a human nature to replace the finite nature which He took on from Mary. As He overcame each temptation, He put off that bit of the finite and replaced it with the Divine. Someone long ago compared this process with drawing out one thread at a time in a piece of cloth

and in its place weaving in a thread of gold, until finally the whole piece would be gold instead of cloth. So when the Lord rose, there was nothing left of the human He had assumed—even of the material body—but He had a divine humanity in its place in which He could always be present in the natural world. His last words in the Gospel of Matthew are: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” The Lord, unlike spirits and angels, sees and knows everything that goes on in this world because He is present in it in His divine humanity.

The only things that were left in the tomb were the linen cloths and the napkin, which had been about His head. The linen cloths represent the truths about the Lord which we find in the literal sense of the Word, and the napkin the memory of His external life on earth as it is recorded in the Gospels. These are what are left to us to pick up and examine as evidence of the truth. Read verse 31.

We should all study and remember the little incident about Thomas in verses 24 to 29 of our chapter. The kind of person today who likes to say, “Well, you’ll have to show me” is sometimes called a “doubting Thomas.” The Lord did “show” Thomas by appearing to him just as Thomas wanted to see Him, but He did not praise Thomas for his very earthly idea. The Lord “appears” to every good person just as the person has learned to think of Him, but He does not want us to confine our thoughts of Him to material ideas. This is what is meant by His words to Mary in verse 17 as well as by His final words to Thomas in verse 29. As we learn more and more of the Lord from the Word, our idea of Him should rise higher and higher, lifting us above the level of earthly thoughts and ambitions.

Basic Correspondences

- women = affections
- burial = resurrection and, in the case of a good person, regeneration
- linen = truth of the natural man
- spices = interior natural truth from good

a napkin = the memory of the natural man

Senior

The Senior notes have been devoted principally to the question of the importance of having a true idea of God. This lesson is the one to stress, but the teacher may feel that his particular class will be helped also by some of the other points which he will find in the notes for the other classes.

We usually think of the Easter lesson as given to teach us that our life goes on uninterrupted after death and that we should therefore think of death, whenever and however it occurs, not as a tragedy but as merely the beginning of a new and fuller life for the person who has died. This is true, and it is the most obvious lesson to be drawn from the story of the Lord's resurrection. But there are also deeper and more far-reaching lessons in this story.

When the Lord was on earth, even the good people had no thought about goodness except in terms of this world. Even the apostles, who had lived with the Lord for three years and listened to His teaching, still thought of His kingdom as an earthly kingdom and felt, when He was put to death, that all their hopes were over. We see this same belief in our lesson today in the experience of Mary Magdalene. She was a woman out of whom the Lord had cast seven devils. She believed in Him and loved Him. She was not, as the disciples were, concerned about her own future now that He was gone, but the only service she could think of which she could still render Him was the proper care of His body. She was a simple woman. But there was no higher idea than this in the minds of those of the Lord's followers who had education and worldly position, as we see from the deed of the two counselors, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, in verses 38 to 42 of the preceding chapter. The linen cloths in which they wrapped the Lord's body represent their natural ideas of Him, and the spices the quality added to these same ideas by the goodness in their hearts. Spices represent "interior natural truth from good." Truth which we love to learn affects us more deeply than truth we learn because we

have to. The people of those days knew the truths of the letter of the Word, but only a few of them loved them. The stone which sealed the tomb was the truth of the letter of the Word falsified by the interpretation of it by the religious leaders.

The Lord's resurrection was first discovered by the women, who represent affections, and they made it known to the men. Unless our hearts are loving, we can never be given any spiritual insight. Mary Magdalene was the first actually to see the Lord after His resurrection, although she did not immediately recognize Him. She knew Him when He pronounced her name. In the Word a name represents the whole quality of a person. Only the Lord knows the quality of each one of us. Then the Lord said to Mary: "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and to your Father; and to my God, and your God." Here again the Lord was pointing out to His followers by means of one who truly loved Him that their thoughts of Him must be lifted above the level of the worldly ideas they had had, until they could identify Him with God rather than with man.

All our thinking as we go through life really depends upon our idea of God. If, as many do, we think of God as merely the sum total of the forces of the natural world, then all our ideals and aspirations will be for worldly success, and even if we mean to be good and useful people, helping people physically will be the best we can do. If, as the people of the Gospel did and as some sects do today, we think of God as a stern ruler and judge who wants our worship and sacrifices and takes revenge upon us and punishes us if we do not give them, then in our dealings with fellow men we shall think these same things justifiable. If we think of God as merely the first cause, someone or something which created the first material cell and left it to develop according to certain laws, we shall think that every man must determine for himself what he should believe and do and that one man's idea is as valid as another's—that there is no such thing as fixed truth. We are in this same position if we think that there is a God active in the universe

but that we can know nothing about Him.

Then among Christians there is the problem of what to believe about Christ. Many Christians—people who accept Christ as their example—still think of Him only as the best man who ever lived. This leaves them free to take what they like of His teaching and say of what they don't like, "He was of course limited by His nation and His times; if He were living here and now, He would speak differently." But Christ was the Word made flesh, God Himself come into the world to live out the truth and to give us an ideal of which we might be sure, to show us that this life of ours in the world is only the beginning of our life and is important only as we use it to give our souls the truest form we can. So our thoughts of Christ must rise above the thought of Him as a man who lived a long time ago, and must be lifted up until we think of Him as God, our heavenly Father Himself. As He had told His disciples (John 16:28): "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father." He always adapts Himself to our ability to see Him, just as He did with Thomas in our chapter, but if we study the Word and try to increase our capacity to see and understand, he rises in our minds.

And in this new age in which we live He has come again in the opening of the inner meaning of the Word, giving us the means to a rational understanding of His teachings, so that our questions may be answered. If we make use of this means, our vision of the Lord will become clearer and more wonderful all the time, the things of self and of this world will fall into their proper places, and we shall come to live—even while we are still in this world—in the light of heaven.

Adult

The Adults will doubtless be familiar with the usual lessons drawn from the resurrection story. These should of course be touched upon, and the summary of the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord should be mentioned. A good discussion topic is found in the last two verses of the chapter. Even New Church people are sometimes fascinated and confused by stories and

moving pictures which add imagined detail to the Bible story. Another good discussion topic is the effect of false ideas of the Lord as compared with that of a true idea. Suggestions on this topic will be found in the Senior notes.

In our study of the Easter lesson from the Gospel of Luke, we considered especially the effect of the resurrection upon the apostles, and through them upon the world. This should be recalled, because we all need to feel the force of the external evidence of the access of divine power which came into the world with the resurrection. But the Gospel of John characteristically suggests rather the deep personal application of the story of the resurrection to the regenerating individual.

Many Christians cling to the finite humanity of the Lord, trying to picture Him as He was in the world, stimulating their imaginations with the study of the racial and historical and geographical background of His finite humanity, believing that in this way they are drawing closer to Him and understanding Him better. This effort is unconsciously epitomized in the phrase “Back to Jesus,” as if the real Jesus were somewhere in the past. They feel that the historic Christ is the whole Christ. The apostles were in this belief. In spite of all that the Lord had told them, they felt that they had lost Him when His material body was laid in the tomb. In the resurrection He taught them that they were wrong, and He wishes us to see that we are wrong when we confine Him in our thoughts to the humanity which He put off.

Early in the morning, while it was yet dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and discovered that the stone had been removed from the entrance. Morning always pictures the dawn of a new state, but the ignorance still in her mind is represented by the fact that it was yet dark. Mary, out of whom seven devils had been cast (Luke 8:2), represents the heart which has been deeply purified through temptations. It is a deep and loving desire for the Lord which first discovers that He cannot be confined to the sepulcher, the mere letter of the Word; but it is the faculties of the mind—pictured by Peter and John (who was almost certainly the other disciple in our chapter)—which explore the sepulcher. They saw

the linen cloths which were left in the sepulcher, the truths concerning the Lord in the letter, but it was Mary again, the loving heart, who perceived the angels, the living truths within the letter. Also it was Mary who first saw the Lord Himself after His resurrection. It is the loving heart which can first be given to feel the reality of the ever-present savior, even though it does not at first recognize Him. The Lord must rise in our hearts and minds. We begin our discipleship by studying His life in the world and trying to follow His example, but if we are faithful, the time will come when we shall no longer think of Him as someone who lived nearly twenty centuries ago, but as someone who is present in the world today, walking with us and speaking to us in the Word.

The Lord rose differently from any finite man. We leave something behind us when we die; we rise as spirits with full consciousness in the spiritual world, but we have left behind us the instruments by which we saw and heard in this world. The Lord glorified even His sensuous, replacing the material substance with divine substance,* so that He left nothing in the tomb, but rose a complete man even to ultimates. “For a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.” (Luke 24:39) (AC 10252⁷, 6135; HH 316) Through the divine humanity He sees and hears in this world, and could even eat with His disciples and be handled by them. His humanity, being divine, is infinite; so He is present with all men at all times instead of being confined in a finite body which is subject to the limitations of space and time. But His presence is not imaginary; it is the most real fact there is: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

The Gospels record several appearances of the Lord after the resurrection. The first was to Mary Magdalene, and Matthew records that He was also seen by the other women at the tomb. That same afternoon He appeared to the two on the way to Emmaus, as recorded in Luke and mentioned in Mark. An appearance to

*Cf., however, *Ath. Creed*, nn. 161-162 (London, 1954 ed.) or AE, Vol. 6, p. 519 (New York, Standard Edition, 1949). --Ed.

Peter is also mentioned in Luke (24:34). Mark, Luke, and John all record the appearance to the apostles as they sat at meat on the evening of the first day, and John tells us that although Thomas was not present on that occasion, the Lord appeared to them eight days later when Thomas was present. Matthew tells of an appearance in Galilee upon a mountain where the Lord had told them to meet Him, and John gives the story of the meeting by the sea of Tiberias (or Galilee) (John 21). In Acts 1:3 we learn that the Lord was seen over a period of forty days after the resurrection, and Paul says (I Corinthians 15:6-7) that He appeared to five hundred brethren, and also to James. Evidently the Lord provided that there should be ample evidence of His living presence in the world after the crucifixion, and that the testimony of many should be recorded. But He told Thomas, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." There is a higher sight than that of the eye, and a deeper hearing than that of the ear. If our minds accept the Lord's truth and our hearts receive His life, we have a far deeper conviction of His presence than if we were to see Him with the physical eye. Most of those who saw Him in the flesh rejected Him. Many things which we see and hear in the world make little impression on us because we are not interested in them. Those who do not wish to recognize and obey the Lord simply refuse to believe the testimony of those who saw Him after the resurrection. If they had a vision of Him themselves, they would soon explain it away. Belief is of the will. We are free to choose the Lord or self.

John tells us (20:30-31) that the testimony which he has just recorded is not the only evidence of the Lord's deity, but that He did many other signs, and in the last verse of his Gospel (21:25) he says that if all the acts of the Lord were written, the world itself would not contain the books.

The Lord's earthly life was one of constant active service. We are told that He went about all Galilee teaching and preaching in the synagogues and healing the sick. Only a very few of His words and deeds are recorded, but these few are so chosen through divine

providence that, in the letter, they illustrate all phases of His work, and in the spirit they contain the fullness of divine life. We should be willing to accept the wisdom of divine providence in this selection. In the early part of our lesson we spoke of the tendency to cling to the finite humanity of the Lord as the whole Christ. It is this tendency which causes many to waste time and effort—however sincere and reverent the intention—in trying to reconstruct by means of imagination plus historical studies, portions of the Lord's life which are not recorded in the letter; for example, to picture the Lord as a boy among other boys in Nazareth or as a young man working in Joseph's carpenter shop. Had there been any spiritual value in such thoughts of the Lord, the facts would have been recorded in the Word. Let us rather learn the facts which the Lord Himself considered it necessary for us to know about His earthly life, and not confuse His own picture of Himself with human imaginings, which tend to tie Him down in our minds to the plane of finite humanity. Then the Lord will gradually rise in our minds until we come to see Him as our living, present savior, God with us.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Explained, n. 687¹⁸: "Angels were seen in the tomb, sitting one at the head, and the other at the feet (John 20:12; Mark 16:5). These things seen were representative of the Lord's glorification, and of introduction into heaven by Him; for the 'stone' that was placed before the sepulchre, and that was rolled away by the angel, signifies Divine truth, thus the Word, which was closed up by the Jews, but opened by the Lord. . . . And as a 'sepulchre,' and pre-eminently the sepulchre where the Lord was, signifies in the spiritual sense resurrection and also regeneration, and 'angels' signify in the Word Divine truth, therefore angels were seen sitting one at the head and the other at the feet; 'the angel at the head' signifying Divine truth in things first, and 'the angel at the feet' Divine truth in ultimates, both proceeding from the Lord; and when Divine truth is received regeneration is effected, and there is resurrection."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. What kind of animal did the Lord ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday?
an ass
- P. What did the people shout? *Hosanna*
- J. What did they think the Lord had come to do? *overthrow Rome*
- J. What happened when they found that He had not come to be an earthly king? *rejected Him*
- P. On what day was He put to death? *Friday*
- J. What was done with His body when it was taken down from the cross?
put in new tomb
- J. What two men performed this service? *Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus*
- P. Who first came to the sepulcher on Sunday morning? *Mary Magdalene*
- P. Why did she come? *to anoint body*
- P. What did she find? *stone rolled away*
- J. What did Peter and the other disciple see in the tomb? *linen cloths*
- P. What did Mary see there? *two angels*
- P. When the Lord appeared to her, how did He make Himself known?
spoke her name
- J. Why did He tell her not to touch Him? *not yet ascended*
- J. How did He appear to the disciples? *through closed doors*
- J. Which disciple was not present? *Thomas*
- J. What did Thomas say would be necessary to convince him that the Lord was alive? *“Unless I see . . . and touch . . .”*
- J. How did the Lord convince him? *appeared again*
- J. What did the Lord afterward say to Thomas? *“Blessed . . . not seen and believed”*
- J. What does John say about things not recorded in the Gospel? *too much to record*
- I. What does burial represent? *resurrection*
- S. What is represented by the stone which closed the sepulcher? *false idea of God*
- S. What is represented by the linen cloths? *ideas of disciples as to who the Lord was*