

## Behold, I Make All Things New

We are in an Easter season series on the resurrection of Jesus-

### Resurrection Appearances of Jesus:

- He appeared to Mary on Easter Sunday: she thought he was a gardener till he called her by name
- He appeared to Peter that afternoon...
- He appeared to the two sad disciples on their walk to Emmaus Easter afternoon
- He appeared to most of the disciples that night inside locked doors
- He appeared to Thomas a week later, with open wounds on his hands and side
- He appeared on a beach in Galilee to Peter and his friends after a night of fishing- 'do you love me?'

**Why so many** appearances? Many of the appearances **set a pattern** that now frames a life of faith; these are **the ways he meets us** today...

- **Jesus meets with his own disciples.** Most were 'slow to believe', some were 'foolish', some 'doubted' – but they were all believers. The shepherd came to his sheep.
- **Jesus appears in bodily form...** he ate and drank with his disciples, he bid them touch the wounds in his hands and place their fingers in the wound in his side. There is no doubt he was **making sure they were sure** – he had risen from the dead in his flesh. And showing us **our own future**, too.
- **Jesus was not at first recognized...** we hear that he was mistaken at first for a gardener – or that they were kept from recognizing him, or that at first he sounded like an almost familiar voice on a distant shore. It seemed almost as though **he paused** before he made himself known. I'm interested in that!

- He appears to his disciples **in any place** – at a graveside, or in a locked room, or at their workplace, or walking on a road, he is suddenly there. There is no place in life where he will not go.
- He meets his disciples **in special places**. I call these places '**thin places**' between our natural world and the supernatural world of Jesus. They are like **intersections** between the world we know and the eternal world he is bringing.

When Bec and I went to Ireland some years ago, Bec took me on walk after walk looking for '**Holy Wells**' that were on the maps but had been long overgrown and forgotten in modern secular **Ireland**. They were ancient **natural springs** that at one time were places of prayer and pilgrimage. She wondered if they might still be places of God's special presence. What surprised us was that when we found them, often after long hikes through brush and bramble, often there would be a little tree nearby that had **rags tied** all over it – people had come to pray believing God would meet them there and left a prayer rag on the tree.

Well, I'm a bit of **an agnostic** on places of pilgrimage like that – but **not on the reality of 'thin places'**. I've learned there are **intersections** where the natural world and Christ's eternal, supernatural kingdom meet. Let me describe a few of them to you –

- **Fellowship** is a thin place – do you remember his promise that when 2 or 3 gathered in his name, he would join them? That's what happened on that road to Emmaus. It still happens today.
- **Bible study** is a thin place - when Jesus began to open the scriptures on that road to Emmaus, 'their hearts burned within them'
- **Prayer** is another thin place: he 'made as though he was going further', and they begged him (prayed him) to stay. He did.
- So is **Holy Communion**; 'they recognized him in the breaking of the bread'
- **Holy people** are thin places. You are with someone who is rooted in Jesus, filled with Jesus – and you know someone else is there with you, too.

- **Broken people** are thin places. God dwells in the high and holy places – and also with those who are crushed, broken in spirit. Leonard Cohen said that the cracks in life are there to let the light in. That is why God lets the world continue in its brokenness – to let the light in.

Since the resurrection of Jesus, the world is filled with 'thin places'. Some of them are well known. Some are surprising. He still meets us in these special places today.

For **40 days** he appeared again and again, some 10 of which are recorded in the NT. At the end of those 40 days, **Jesus ascended** to heaven, promising never to leave his disciples, promising to come again, and promising to send the Holy Spirit, which was poured out upon them 10 days later on the day of Pentecost. Now we **jump ahead some months**, maybe even a year, to the **last of the resurrection appearances**, to Paul.

When we meet Paul first, he is **no friend of Jesus**. Stephen, the first Christian martyr - and the namesake of this church - lies dying...

*Saul was there, giving approval to his death.*

Acts 8:1

Stephen's death was **a decisive moment** in the career of Saul...

*Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.*

Acts 8:3

Paul describes these months like this...

*"I went after anyone connected with this 'Way,' went at them hammer and tongs, ready to kill for God. I rounded up men and women right and left and had them thrown in prison*

Acts 22:4 (Msg)

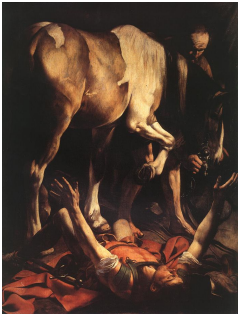
Hundreds of them fled to **Damascus**. So Saul got an extradition order to have them arrested and brought back for trial. Jerusalem is about 140

miles from Damascus. Saul walked much and rode some. It would take him about 7 days @ 20 miles per day. It is **a measure of his anger**.

*As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

Acts 9:3-4

Back in the year 1601 a famous artist named Caravaggio tried to capture the moment in a well known piece of art. I think he does pretty well with this...



Paul has been knocked to the ground by a brilliant light from above. His weapon lies useless at his side. His eyes have been blinded. His companion struggles to control the horse, but they are of no concern to Paul. He knows he is in a Presence that he has never known, of a power he has never sensed, and a glory, a light he has never seen. He is overwhelmed and he reaches up in confusion. He came as an armed **captor**. But just outside the city he is taken **captive**. The **first question of Jesus** must have startled Paul...

*"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

Acts 9:4,5

You can almost see the words on his lips, "Who are you, Lord?"

I want to **note two things** that impressed themselves upon Paul in this moment. The first is this:

## **The Greatness of Christ's Power**

*"Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus..."*

Acts 9.5

I noted before that in every previous resurrection appearance, Jesus appeared in **bodily form**. It was the **same** body, but **different**. The scars were there. He could eat and drink and talk and walk. But he could also appear and disappear. Come and go at will. He had been raised and was beyond the power of death.

But after 40 days and at least 10 resurrection appearances **he ascended**. And when he ascended, he was **further changed**, (caution here) further **transformed**. He was **glorified**. He **became light**. He had said, *'I am the light of the world'*. After his ascension, that was not just a **metaphorical truth** but also **spiritual reality**. In his resurrection we see metaphorical truth and spiritual reality and physical reality merge. That is our destiny, too, in Jesus

When he appeared to Paul on that road on that day, he **appeared as a great being of light**, light that was filled with power and life. For Paul in that moment, there was **no arguing**, no resisting, no fighting, no more pushing back. That is what happens when God comes to you in power like this. There is just, "Who are you, Lord?"

For the rest of his years, Paul would reach to find language that could convey that the reality of the risen Christ he met that day. He would call Jesus...

- *'the Lord of glory'*                      And he was. He would say that he was...
- *'raised in power'*                      And he had been. He would say that he had become...
- *'a life-giving spirit'*                      And he still is.

In his Revelation, John prophesied that in the end we would all live in a great city that...

has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

### **Revelation 21:23–24**

That is quite a phrase, *'its lamp is the Lamb'*... Paul said the light on that road that day was, *'brighter than the noonday sun'*.

**Jesus' own simple phrase** to introduce himself in that moment still haunts me... *'I am Jesus...'*

I think **we underestimate** the glory of the risen Christ. We underestimate his power and nature. We remember him best from the years of his humility, from the years of his hiddenness. We think of him as like ourselves only better, wiser and more like God. **Stand again with Paul on the road**, and see him unveiled, see him as he is, **meet again the 'Lord of glory'**.

Don't underestimate the greatness of Christ's power.

But don't miss either...

### **The Reach of His Mercy**

*Here is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners', and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that God could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners.*

1 Timothy 1.15-16

I noted that the previous appearances of Jesus were all **to his disciples**. These were Jesus' followers who had been with him through the years of his earthly ministry, who knew him, who loved him, who were loved by him. Those were the ones he appeared to. Every one of those 10 appearances.

But **not this one**. This man was **an enemy**. This man was hunting down Christians, cheering on when they were put to death, running them down to have them thrown in jail. He was on a tear.

Paul in later years would describe himself as the *'chief of sinners', 'the worst of them all'* and he was not exaggerating. There was nothing in his life that indicated any **openness** to Christ, any **appreciation** for Christ, any felt **need** for Christ, anything but **hatred** for Christ.

And Jesus came to him.

Looking back over it all, Paul would come to believe that God's choice of him was because he had a **special kind of badness**. It was a badness he couldn't see, wouldn't see, because it was **covered up by religious goodness**. **Blinded** by his religious goodness he **couldn't see his** pride and hatred and anger and rage – all done in the name of God. He spent his life telling people how to live their lives, and getting in their face if they didn't – or wouldn't.

But on that day God shattered his illusions of his goodness, and Paul could **see himself as he really was**. **'The worst of them all', Paul says.**

**And God chose him** and put him on display. Why?

*God had mercy on me so that God could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners*

God picked Paul for your sake, for my sake. **Here's why:** you might be someone or know someone who has failed, and failed badly in life. When that happens this happens: you think that God could forgive others, but not you. You understand his mercy for others – but not for you. Not after what you did. Not after what you have become. You think it is all over, you are beyond reach. **You are not.**

Not as long as the risen Lord is here, the Lord of glory, the Lord of mercy. **No one** is beyond his mercy, no one is beyond his reach.

**No sin** is beyond his forgiveness.

**No heart** is so hardened that he cannot make it new...

Not as long as the risen Lord is here, the Lord of glory, the Lord of mercy, the risen one who comes and says, *"I am Jesus"*