



HOLY TRANSFORMATIONS

SEVEN SHORT
REFLECTIONS
FOR EASTER

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Introduction

Christianity, unlike any other faith or world-view, religious or otherwise, is predicated on the on-going, historical and universal effects of an outstanding, miraculous event that is utterly unique to it – an empty tomb. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!” (Luke 24:5b).

Every other historical figure of note is dead and buried.

That Jesus the Messiah was once dead but was raised resplendent to live forever is the epicenter and ground zero of our faith and hope. It underpins and augments every aspect of the Christian experience. It is the hook on which the veracity and authenticity of our Gospel hangs.

Without a resurrected Jesus, the Gospel narratives would be no more than an inspired collection of moralizing stories and true-to-life propositions from a remarkable but long gone figure. Thank God, there is so much more to it than that. The four Gospels make much of Jesus’ resurrection and the empty tomb. In fact, they present a resurrected Jesus that they saw, spoke with, touched and ate with.

The Apostle Paul is clearest on this when he writes, of first importance, what was passed onto him in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. That is, what the Hebrew Scriptures prophesied, then-contemporaneous people attested to: that Jesus of Nazareth, put to death by crucifixion and buried in an entombed cave, was seen alive three days later and over a period of another forty days, by at least 500 of his followers, including 12 disciples and a number of women followers that were closest to him, and finally by the Apostle Paul himself.

However, Jesus’ resurrection was not only historical, it was also transformational for all who believed (and believe) in His name and saving work. Indeed, it fills us with holy fear and unspeakable joy. It empowers us for on-going obedience, calls us to participation in God’s mission and seeks for kingdom outcomes. And it will bring fruit in our lives- the results of new and holy intentions affecting head, heart and hands.

In these series of short reflections, originally presented as blogs on the NAMS website, NAMS founder and Servant General Jon Shuler describes 7 effects that first Easter had on the first-hand witnesses of the day, based on Matthew’s description of the events as they transpired.

Our prayer is that, just as the first disciples – women and men –experienced a whole slew of emotions but ultimately were changed for good by their encounters with the Risen Christ, the same may happen to us. May we likewise be transformed by holy fear, joy and obedience such that we become missionary disciples and consummate worshipers of the crucified but risen Lamb of God. Holy outcomes and intentions will ensue.

May all this be ours this Easter and always.

1. Holy Fear

Echoing the Apostle Paul, the liturgical tradition of the Anglican family has for centuries used a form of corporate confession at the Lord's Supper which asks God to raise us to a life of service which pleases Him because we are walking in "newness of life."

This is the defining characteristic of a believer, who has come through spiritual death to the glory of the resurrection. This "newness of life" is the outcome of hearing the message of Easter, and believing it. This is the mark of one who has embraced the call of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These thoughts have been in my mind since deciding to imagine that all I knew about the Resurrection was what I could learn from the gospel of Matthew. Purely as a devotional exercise I laid aside the other three gospels to focus on what I would learn only from Matthew. And I was not concerned with the external manifestations he records, but with what this one gospel would say to me about the change that the Resurrection wrought in the souls of those who first experienced it.

I first noticed that fear was universal for those at the empty tomb - whether believers or unbelievers. The difference was what happened next. The unbelieving soldiers "became like dead men." But the two followers of Jesus, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary", while sharing in the soldiers fear were also filled with "great joy." Here, I think, is the difference between mortal fear and "holy fear." The latter comes accompanied by great joy.

There is almost no recorded episode in all Holy Scripture of a visitation from God or his holy angels that does not tell us the people who were visited were afraid. This is why the most common first words to them are: "Be not afraid". I have been told that there are 365 examples of this exact form of words in the whole bible. If this is true there is one for each day of the year! Clearly, when God draws near the frail human creature we all are, we quake in the presence of the One who made all things. And this is right. He is God and we are not. He is just and we are not. But the critical thing to note is that those visited by Almighty God are not to be afraid. In other words, their fear, though real is to be dispelled by the coming in mercy and love of the King of Glory. When this message of grace is heard, and believed, the soul is filled with joy.

I am persuaded that there is now a desperate need for the contemporary church to be reminded of the Holiness of God. Of His complete otherness and goodness. Of their need to bow in penitent awe before Him, in their sinfulness and disobedience. But when He comes to them in their penitence and sorrow, he comes to bring "Holy Fear", a fear that turns to unspeakable joy. "My Lord is risen from the dead. He is alive forever more. And he has come to me. Hallelujah." This is what Easter-tide is to bring.

2. Holy Joy

One of the central marks of those who have heard the message of Easter and received it, who have believed it, who have been changed by it, is "holy joy". What does that mean?

Joy is a remarkable human emotion. It is one that every human being knows and desires. And when it does come it almost always comes unbidden. It surprises.

For some, if not all, it leads to a pursuit of the emotion. To a constant, or near constant, quest for the return of its impact. Yet as so eloquently described by C. S. Lewis, the pursuit of joy, in and of itself, leads to grave disappointment. Nothing on earth that promises joy ultimately satisfies. Not wealth, not power, not human affection, not physical health, not sexual union, not accomplishments, not praise.

Christians do believe that joy is a gift from God. But in and of itself, like all our emotions on this side of the Fall, it is not always holy in its effects. It is holy only when it produces God's purpose for it. What does this mean?

I can be joyful when my favorite team wins a sporting event. I can be joyful when the sun rises over the horizon. I can be joyful when I hear a favorite piece of music. I can even be joyful, sinner that I am, when someone who has hurt me is hurt by others. But none of these are "holy joy". Holy joy leads me to God. Holy joy produces thanksgiving to the Source of all joy. Holy joy brings forth a desire to please God.

Many influences in this world are creating a false sense of security in the lives of those who are on the road to perdition. Many - if not all - of these influences are designed to move us emotionally, so we will buy the product they are selling, or do what they are desiring us to do. The modern economies of the West are now largely built on this deceit, as are many of our political patterns. When our emotions are moved we often respond without thinking, and joy is a powerful emotion manipulated by many whose purposes are far from God.

But God does give us joy. He allows us the wonderful privilege of sharing in the mystical reality that at the creation "the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy." (Job 38:7) And this joy is the birthright of every true believer in the Resurrected Lord. He is alive! He has poured out His Spirit on all who believe. He has adopted us into the family of His marvelous purpose.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary ran quickly to tell the others on that first day of Resurrection, and they did so in the grip of "holy fear", but they did so as well in the grip of "holy joy". Unspeakable joy.

3. Holy Obedience

While meditating on the resurrection account in the twenty-eighth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, I could not help but notice that the response to "holy fear," the fear engendered by the coming close of the messenger of the one and only Holy God, was "holy joy." And next I saw that the mark of holy joy was "holy obedience". Those spoken to by the divine messenger obeyed his command.

One of my mentors in the faith used to say regularly that the key to all the Christian life was obedience. Obedience to God Almighty. This teaching went into my conscious mind, but its' import escaped me for many years. It took years for me to realize that every time I disobeyed the clear instruction of God it became harder to obey. Conversely, when I obeyed it became easier to obey. But how do we know what God wants us to do?

In earlier times the answer was straightforward. When a person came to faith in the Risen Christ they were taught the Ten Commandments, the Lords' Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed. On the foundation of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" they were taught to build a life of obedience. Certain it was, to all who had followed in the Lords' way for many years, that there would be hard decisions and difficult choices in the days ahead, but the first steps were clear. The community of believers, the church, would assist him, but he must learn for himself to obey the Risen Lord of the Church.

We see this on the first day of resurrection. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary do what the angel of the Lord tells them to do. He is a direct messenger for the Living God, and they obey. They are given a message to convey and a people to speak it to. Why did Matthew tell us this? Surely because this is what happened. This is the truth. But also, I do believe, it was so that we might see what comes of meeting Gods' purpose for our lives. He speaks to us in our particularity and we must obey. Obeying proves we have heard, and that we realize we have heard from God.

As the Christian community continues to reflect on the first Easter and the astounding work of grace that followed it, we need to be clear that reading about other peoples' obedience is no substitute for our own. If we have encountered the Risen Christ Jesus, it will be seen in our obedience to Him. And our obedience will be to his specific word to us. It will be holy obedience.

4. Holy Mission

"Do not be afraid...Come, see...then go quickly and tell...So they departed quickly..."
(Matt 28:5-8)

What will be the outcome of our Easter celebration this year? Another year like last year? God forbid! May it be a year in which we come to a more faithful response to all He has asked of each of us. To all that He has commanded each of us.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary show us what the message of the Resurrection produces in the heart of the one who believes it. Jesus Christ is alive. He is risen from the dead. He is the risen Savior. He is the risen Lord. And because of this most fundamental miracle the word of the Lord becomes - for the one who believes it - the word of God. He is to be obeyed. There is no more important evidence of true belief. None.

The angel of the Lord gives these two godly women a direct order from the Lord. They are to go quickly to tell the other disciples that the tomb is empty. The Jesus who was crucified, who died and was buried, is "risen from the dead". They are to convey this message and specific instructions for the disciples to leave Jerusalem and go to Galilee where the risen Lord will meet them. This is their assignment, and they obey it. What a glorious example they are. If only all of us who say we love the Lord were as obedient as these two dear women. They did not wait, they "ran to tell his disciples." This is a picture of obedience to the mission of Jesus. This is an example of Holy Mission obeyed.

How then, in our own day, are we to tell the difference between a mission devised by men, and one that is "holy", that is asked for by God? The answer a believer gives to this question will reveal immediately the place they are on in their journey to follow and serve the Lord.

The single question must first be answered in return: Is the mission I am asked to complete consistent with the clearly revealed will of God in Holy Scripture? Is it in line with what is there set forth as true for all who are the Lord's own? Mary Magdalene and Martha knew the scriptures of the Hebrews. They knew that an angel from the Lord was to be obeyed. This angel (which means "messenger" in Greek) asked them to do a good thing and so they obeyed. Nothing they were asked to do was a wrong thing. Unlike the dark angel who tempted Jesus in the wilderness (see Luke 4), the angel from the Lord asked what was consistent with the whole of scripture. The devil asked for it to be broken. He even used scripture to try to get Jesus to break scripture! But Jesus would not. A mission from the Lord will not involve breaking God's Word written.

Nor will a holy mission ever be contrary to the Lord's specific teaching. This angel explained to the women that what Jesus had clearly taught, while he was alive, had actually happened after he died. We must ask of every mission put before us: "Does this lead me to obedience to the clear teaching of Jesus Christ?" A mission which does is a "holy mission".

5. Holy Worship

In the last four short chapters, we have been looking only at Matthew's Gospel to see what it reveals to a believer in the light of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. We have seen that when someone experiences the truth of the resurrection it first produces holy fear, then holy joy, then a desire to live holy obedience, and that issues in a holy mission. From there, we must now come to holy worship.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are running back to Jerusalem to find the disciples and tell them the news of the empty tomb. But before they get there they themselves are met by Jesus. He initiates the meeting, he speaks directly to them, and they fall at his feet. The otherness of a Holy God revealed in His Son overwhelms them. They cannot stand. They can only bow down. They are prostrate before their Lord. They "worshiped him."

I remember some years ago walking in to a small local church in Spain with Cynthia my wife. She was immediately overcome with a desire to fall on the floor to worship the Lord. The presence of the Spirit of God was tangible to her in that place, and as she yielded in her secret heart and began to worship the Lord spoke into her soul.

To worship the Lord Jesus is not an afterthought for a Christian, it is a first response. A man who does not feel drawn to worship the Lord Jesus has not believed, truly believed, the gospel of the Risen Lord. The spirit within him, if that spirit is the Holy Spirit, will bring him of necessity to worship Jesus. He may not know how to explain it, but he will know that it is so. And he will always find that when he moves toward the Lord in worship there will be others coming at the same time. Jesus taught us that the Father seeks true worshipers, and true worshipers recognize God's Son and fall at his feet. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, at Jesus' feet, present us with a picture of the true church.

We have talked before about the difference between emotion and action, and true worship is always more than emotion. It must issue in obedient action to be verified as true. But true worship is never without emotion. These two women were face to face with the One who loved them enough to die for them to be free. The Resurrection of the Lord had inaugurated the Age to Come, so long prayed for by the faithful Jewish people. Overwhelmed with love and joy they worship their Lord.

As we continue to reflect on the power and glory of the Day of Resurrection, may it lead us to holy worship.

6. Holy Outcomes

When I was a young clergyman I served in a diocese (a geographical area overseen by a bishop) that had a great missionary past. For many decades the church in that region had expanded and grown, but by 1975 its growth had nearly stopped. Surprisingly to me, even then, the decision was made to stop distinguishing between small dependent congregations (called "Missions") and larger self-supporting congregations (called "Parishes"). The leadership thought that all of the congregations in the diocese should be "on mission" and therefore the distinction should be dropped. From then on all were called "congregations". An unfortunate by-product of that decision was that the diocese ceased to grow ever after. Soon it will be forty years since that decision, and the diocese is half the size it was in those days.

There are certainly many contributing factors to that decline, but one of them is the refusal to expect holy outcomes as a consequence of holy obedience. In the earlier years of diocesan growth, every small church wanted to grow to be self-sufficient. They wanted to share the gospel in their town with others and grow up into parish status. There was an external incentive to be obedient to the Lord's clear instruction to his church. "Be my witnesses. Make disciples."

When the truth of the Resurrection of Jesus is grasped, that he is alive and moving among his people in this world, and when it is surrendered to in believing faith, the power of the Resurrection falls upon the believer. He or she is then raised to "newness of life." The Spirit of God fills them. They are empowered for service to the Risen Lord. They are given work to do. They are expected to see results. Jesus promised that his disciples would "bear much fruit", and that is something that can be seen. God expects holy outcomes when he gives holy assignments.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary return to Jerusalem. Gloriously, they encounter a community filled with the dawning realization that the promises of the Lord Jesus have not been thwarted by the Cross, but have been released by it! (This fact is assumed by Matthew, though not described here, but it is in the other Gospels.)

Through his Cross and Resurrection new life has come into the world. It has come to them. And when then convey to the disciples the word given them by the Lord, the disciples obey it and leave Jerusalem for Galilee. They go "to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them." But note this fact carefully: the apostles obey the word the Lord has given these two women to tell them. They recognize it is the Lord, and they obey.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary see the outcome of their obedience. Others obey the Lord Jesus. This is what all of us must pray for and long for — holy outcomes.

7. Holy Intentions

It is an ancient practice in the historic liturgical churches of the world, to make specific prayer requests to the Lord in the midst of common worship. To come to the House of the Lord and to present to him the burden of your heart for someone else in need. It is an extension of the general Christian pattern of intercession, heightened by the connection with the sacred acts recounted in every celebration of the Lord's Supper. The worshiper brings, in their heart, another person, or a sacred cause.

One is said to "make an intention". Thus someone might pray: "Lord I come to you today to worship and praise you, with the intention of asking for the healing of my grandmother." Another might pray: "Lord as I come to your Holy Table, to receive from you, I beseech you to save my friend Jack." Still another might pray: "Lord I make it my intention today to beg you to raise up laborers for the harvest." There can be no doubt that when these intentions conform to the clear teaching of God, they are prayers heard in heaven. They are "holy intentions."

The Gospel of Matthew ends with the outcome of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary's obedience seen in the eleven remaining apostolic disciples doing exactly what the Risen Lord Jesus told them to do. But the story does not end there. Having obeyed Jesus in coming to meet him in Galilee, and worshiping him there, they are now told that their mission will be to see that the truth of the gospel goes to all nations. Not just those they know. Not just their families, or to just their people, but to all nations.

Their Lord intends that they should cooperate with God's declared purpose. He wills that all nations come to worship him, all peoples adore him, in the community of his glorious Son.

In this Easter season (or indeed, whenever you are reading this), may the example of the first community of faith fill you with a desire to take your part in that ongoing apostolic mission. Pentecost comes to empower the church to do the work the Lord has given it to do. The intention of God is that his faithful church should take part in that apostolic mission until the coming of the Lord. It was not given to eleven men alone. It was given to the universal church of the Risen Lord. The church that submits to Christ aligns itself with the mission given by Christ. It makes it a constant "holy intention".



NAMS NETWORK

If you have found this booklet helpful, or have more questions or would like more help to become a disciple-making disciple of Jesus Christ, write to us at the following address: info@namsnetwork.com or directly to the author and Servant General of NAMS Canon Jon Shuler at jonshulersg@namsnetwork.com

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What is NAMS?

NAMS stands for New Anglican Missionary Society. We are a community of pioneering, global church planters engaged in calling the faithful Church of Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to be obedient to the final command of Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20) by making disciple that make disciples, raising leaders that make disciples and planting churches that make disciples.

We are headquartered in Pawleys Island, South Carolina, USA. NAMS colleagues and associates are making new disciples and planting new communities of faith on 5 continents and are working in or developing work in 41 nations.

You can get more information about us at our website: www.namsnetwork.com, or by writing to us at: info@namsnetwork.com

Check out our **YouTube** channel (search '**NAMS Network**') for more disciple-making resources that we have produced to help Christians obey Jesus' final command.

Thank you.

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