

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 4 April 2021. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced, and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Rise with Your Risen Lord!

During the dark days of the old Soviet Union, there was a young man (who, for safety reasons, called himself “Dmitri”) who had grown up in a Christian family. At an early age, he placed his faith in Christ. However, as he grew up, the communist authorities methodically destroyed more and more churches in Russia. By the time he was married, the nearest church to Dmitri was a three hour’s walk away. Thus, he and his family were able to go to church only a few times per year. As the years rolled by, Dmitri failed to give his boys any instruction from the Bible, because he was afraid of being caught by the authorities. However, the Lord began to convict him sorely about it; and one day, he said to his wife, “Since we can’t get to church, why don’t I read the Bible to the boys just one night per week?” His wife was overjoyed! She told him that she had been secretly praying for years that God would put it on his heart to do this!

Well, before long, they were reading the Bible daily. His family couldn’t get enough of it. In fact, his boys asked their papa if they could *sing hymns*, as well, just as they did when they went to the “real church.” Well, it didn’t take long before the whole village knew that something was going on in that house. The houses were very small, and very close together; and windows were often open. People could hear the singing and Bible reading; and many of the villagers, starved for the Word of God, came to Dmitri and asked if he would teach them God’s Word. He protested that he was not a trained minister. However, that didn’t stop them from coming to join Dmitri’s worship time with his family. Soon, Dmitri’s little house was packed with 25 people, singing, praying, and studying the Bible together.

Of course, their group was now too big to avoid notice. The authorities came to Dmitri, and threatened physical violence. They accused him of conducting a *church*; and Dmitri denied this. (He thought that because he wasn’t a trained pastor, it couldn’t be a church. Little did he understand the significance of what he was doing!) Yet, despite this intimidation, the people wouldn’t stop coming. Soon there were 50 people attending the meeting. Because of this, Dmitri was fired from his job, and his wife lost her teaching position. Yet, they continued to obey God. Finally, there were 75 people attending house church; and there was standing room only. In fact, some people had to stand outside, and listen through the windows. At this point, the authorities had had enough. During a service, the police smashed down the door, grabbed Dmitri by the shirt, and began to beat him. However, a fearless little old lady pointed her finger in the face of the man who was beating Dmitri, and said, “You have laid hands on a man of God, and you will NOT survive!” Two days later, that officer suddenly dropped dead of a heart attack!

Needless to say, the fear of God fell on the village. At the next house church meeting, 150 villagers showed up at Dmitri’s house! This time, the authorities weren’t putting up with it anymore. They arrested Dmitri, and put him in a prison 1,000 km away from his family. There were 1,500 prisoners in this prison; and all the rest of them were hardened criminals. For seventeen long years Dmitri endured tremendous suffering for Jesus, while his wife and boys struggled to survive. His jail cell was so small, that it was only one step from his bed to the sink, or to the cell bars, or to the stinking toilet. Countless times he was beaten within an inch of his life for daring to pray, or to sing. Yet, he would not deny Christ. Every morning, he got up, faced the east, lifted up his hands in praise, and sang a hymn to Jesus. The prisoners would mock, laugh, scream at him, beat pots against their cell bars in protest, or throw human waste at him. Yet, Dmitri would not be silent. Anytime he happened to find a scrap of paper lying around, he would take a piece of charcoal or lead, and would write down as much Scripture as he could fit onto the paper. He would then stick it to the damp wall of his cell, as the best offering to God that he could give. Every time he did this, he was beaten severely; but he would not waver.

However, as the years wore on, the persecution began to wear on him. The guards tauntingly told him that his wife had been executed, and that the state had taken his kids; and finally, they conducted an elaborate and cruel hoax to convince him that his wife was, indeed, dead. This broke him. He finally told the guards that he would sign any confession that they wanted him to sign. The next morning, they would have a paper for him to sign, on which he would renounce his faith in Jesus, and would state that he was a paid agent of Western governments to destroy the USSR. Upon signing it, he would be free to go. That night, Dmitri, broken in mind, heart, and spirit, lay sobbing on his bed.¹

Before this message is over, I will tell you what became of Dmitri. For now, though, I would like to take you back 2,000 years, to the year A.D. 33; and I would like to examine the testimonies of three believers who, just like Dmitri, had reached a place where they were broken in mind, heart, and spirit. Like Dmitri, these people had reached a place where their faith was nearly dead; yet, in an instant, their faith was resurrected. The title of this message is *Rise with Your Risen Lord!*

Read John 20:1-18.

I. The “resurrection” of Mary Magdalene

In this passage, we find Mary Magdalene standing alone at the tomb of Jesus. At one time, Mary had been possessed with seven devils; but Jesus had cast out the devils, and had saved her soul from sin and death. Since that day, Mary had walked in the sunshine of Jesus’ presence. Everywhere Jesus went, she went. It thrilled her soul to hear Jesus’ words of life. But then, the unthinkable happened: the authorities arrested Jesus, and beat Him, and crucified Him. For three days, His body had lain in the tomb. For Mary, it probably seemed as though she had gone from the sunlight of noonday into the darkest night. Her soul was crushed.

Now, as Mary stood there weeping, two angels were sitting at the bed where Jesus’ body had lain. When the angels asked Mary why she was crying, she said, *“Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.”* Mary was so distraught, that it didn’t occur to her that there was something “other-worldly” about these two men. But then, Jesus Himself appeared to her, and said, *“Woman, why weepest thou?”* However, Mary didn’t recognise Him. She said, *“Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.”* But then, Jesus said one simple word: *“Mary.”* Immediately, Mary knew Jesus’ voice; and in utter shock, she said, *“Rabboni”* (“Master”)!

Can you imagine what it would be like if you were at the grave of a loved one, and you suddenly heard that loved one’s voice, and then turned around, and saw him (or her) in the flesh? Can you imagine the joy and that would flood your soul? Imagine, then, what it would be like if you had personally known the *Son of God*—the One who had saved your soul. Imagine if you had seen *Jesus* come back to life! You’d be filled with joy beyond words.

Well, guess what? Even though we have never seen Jesus, we can have the same kind of joy that Mary Magdalene had! Years after Jesus’ resurrection, the Apostle Peter wrote to believers who had been saved through his testimony, but who had never seen Jesus; and this is what he said about Jesus: *“Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8).* We can love Jesus, and we can rejoice with *“joy unspeakable,”* just as Mary did at that moment when she saw her risen Lord! Not only that, but we can *hear His voice*, as well!

¹ Nik Ripken, *The Insanity of God* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), pp. 151-158.

Read John 10:1-5; 24-29.

Those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ can distinguish Jesus' voice from the voice of strangers (false teachers). Though we don't hear His *audible* voice, as the disciples did when He was on earth, we *do* hear His voice in the Scriptures. True believers recognise *all* Scripture as the words of the Lord Jesus Christ; and they cherish those words. Through the power of God, they are able to *understand* Christ's words, and to obey them. They know His voice, and they follow Him. Do you know His voice? Have you believed on Him, and received eternal life? If not, I urge you to do so! Jesus wants to be *your* Shepherd.

Now, let's look more closely at our Scripture. (**Read John 20:17-18 again.**) In a moment, we will examine this verse closely. However, before we do, let's look at *another* event that happened very shortly after Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene.

Read Matthew 28:1-10.

In this account, Matthew tells us about what happened to the other four ladies who had gone with Mary Magdalene to the tomb that morning. Mary Magdalene was with them, at first; but when she saw the empty tomb, she left the other ladies, and ran back to Peter's house to tell them that Jesus' body had been stolen. Meanwhile, the other ladies stayed at the tomb to investigate. However, as they were looking around the tomb, an angel appeared to them, and commanded them to go and tell the disciples that Jesus had risen! They ran back to Peter's house as fast as they could! However, when they arrived there, they found that Peter and John had just left to go to the tomb. The ladies told the other believers who *were* there at the house that Jesus was risen; but they didn't stay there long. All the other disciples were staying at another house; and so, they left Peter's house to find the other disciples. However, on their way there, Jesus Himself appeared to them; and they fell at His feet, and worshipped Him.

By the way, did you notice that when the four ladies met Jesus, they *touch*ed Him? Matthew tells us that they "***held him by the feet.***" Later that same day, in the Upper Room, Jesus invited *all* the disciples to touch Him, so that they could see that He was really flesh and bone. Yet, when Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, he commanded her *not* to touch Him.

Why did Jesus command Mary Magdalene not to touch Him, yet allowed everyone else to touch Him later that same day? It's simple. When Jesus said, "***I ascend to my Father,***" He was about to ascend to Heaven, to carry out a very important mission. Between the time when *Mary Magdalene* met Jesus, and the time when *the other four ladies* met Jesus, Jesus ascended up to Heaven to do some important business, and then came back down to earth. What was His business? As our High Priest, Jesus had to sprinkle some of His own blood on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant in the heavenly throne room! Just as the high priests of the Old Testament went *alone* into the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood of goats on the Day of Atonement, so Jesus went *alone* into the heavenly Holy of Holies to sprinkle His own blood, as the token of our redemption. **Hebrews 1:3** says that Jesus "***by himself purged our sins.***"

That is why Mary Magdalene wasn't permitted to touch Jesus yet! As our High Priest, Jesus couldn't yet have physical contact with sinners, because He was about to ascend up to Heaven to do His High-Priestly work. After this was done, He went back down to earth. However, of all Jesus' followers, *Mary* was the one who had the privilege of seeing Him first.

Mary Magdalene had been in the depths of despair. During those three days when Jesus' body was in the grave, her hope had died. It was as though she had died with Him. But then, she saw the risen Jesus; and it was as though she, too, were resurrected from death. The resurrection made all the difference!

II. The “resurrection” of Cleophas

Mary Magdalene wasn't the only one who was in the depths of despair on the morning of Jesus' resurrection. There was another follower of Jesus whose hope had almost died. His name was **Cleophas**. Cleophas (who was also called Alphaeus) had two sons named James and Joses; and James was one of Jesus' 12 disciples. Cleophas's brother was Joseph, the husband of Mary, and the foster-father of Jesus. In other words, **Cleophas was Jesus' uncle**.

Now, Cleophas had been in Peter and John's house that morning, and had heard some of the reports of Jesus' resurrection. At some point, though, Cleophas, and a friend of his, left John's house in Jerusalem, and walked to Cleophas' own house in Emmaus (which was 3 miles away). However, they hadn't stuck around long enough to hear *Mary Magdalene's* report that she had *personally* seen Jesus. They had heard the report from the *other* four ladies (one of whom was Cleophas' own wife) about the *angels* who had told them that Jesus was risen; but at this point, this was all that they knew. I can only imagine what was going on in their minds! However, while they were thinking about all this, they met a strange traveller on the road.

Read Luke 24:10-35.

Can you imagine what it would have been like to be in on *that* Bible study? Can you imagine what it would be like for Jesus Himself to appear to you, and to point out all the Old Testament prophecies concerning His birth, His ministry, His miracles, his death for our sins, and His resurrection from the dead? Cleophas and his friend had that privilege!

Now, Cleophas was already aware of at least one very important prophecy concerning Jesus—the prophecy of His virgin birth. Being the brother-in-law of Mary, Cleophas knew all about the virgin birth of Jesus; and, obviously, he believed Mary's story. Really, though, it wasn't *Mary's story* that he believed; it was *God's Word* that he believed. He had chosen to believe the prophecy of **Isaiah 7:14: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”** (“God with us”). Cleophas already believed that Jesus is God in human flesh, and that He had been miraculously conceived in a virgin's womb.

What Cleophas was *not* up to speed on, though, were the prophecies of Jesus' death and resurrection. Like nearly everyone else, Cleophas couldn't grasp that it was God's plan for His Son to suffer and die in order to pay for our sins. Even though Jesus had foretold His death again and again, it had all gone over his head. But now, his own nephew, Jesus Christ, was walking and talking with Him on the road to his house, and was showing him the meaning of all these prophecies. He didn't recognise Jesus at first, because God had put some kind of “blindness” on his eyes; but then, the blinders were removed, and he saw that it was Jesus!

However, the blinders of Cleophas's *physical* eyes were not the only blinders that were removed that day. The *spiritual* blinders that had prevented him from understanding a

significant portion of God's Word were removed that day, as well. Jesus Christ, the great Teacher, showed Cleophas and his friend the prophecies concerning Himself; and they received it. And how did the Scriptures affect them? Their hearts *"burned"* within them! Cleophas and his friend had been in the depths of despair. During those three days when Jesus' body was in the grave, their hope had nearly died. It was as though they had died with Him. But then, they saw the risen Jesus; and it was as though they, too, were resurrected from death. The resurrection made all the difference!

III. The "resurrection" of Thomas

After the Last Supper, as Jesus and His disciples were walking toward Gethsemane, Jesus stopped, looked up to heaven, and began to pray for His disciples. In His prayer, He said that He had *"kept"* the disciples, and that none of them was lost, except for Judas. Clearly, the other eleven disciples were *saved men*. Despite their failures, they belonged to God.

Yet, even though they were truly saved, they couldn't yet understand *how* Christ would purchase their forgiveness. Jesus had told them, many times, that He would be put to death, and rise again three days later; but they couldn't wrap their heads around this strange plan of salvation. They probably tried to interpret Jesus' words figuratively. One thing is for sure, though: they were *not* prepared for the severe trial of faith that they were about to undergo.

The next four days were a nightmare for them. They watched in horror as their Master was nailed to a cross; and they watched as He was buried in a tomb. Their faith that Jesus was the Messiah seemed to die with Him. Yet, their belief that Jesus was the Messiah was *not* fully dead. Instead of cursing Him as a false messiah because He had died in shame, they lovingly buried Him in a rich man's tomb, and honoured His body with spices. Instead of abandoning each other and going home, never to meet in Jesus' name again, they continued to assemble together in Jesus' name. Their faith, though battered, was *real*. It was not truly dead.

Nonetheless, their faith had taken a big blow; and the one disciple whose faith seems to have taken the biggest blow was Thomas. He was in the depths of despair. Yet, in an instant, his faith went from a barely perceptible flicker to a hot, bright flame!

Read John 20:19-31.

As we read this passage, there is a question that jumps out at us. The question is: "Why wasn't Thomas with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them?" Was Thomas simply out running an errand? We don't know. However, Thomas surely would have heard by now about Jesus' resurrection. At least eight people had personally seen Jesus so far; and the news was spreading fast. You'd think that Thomas would have wanted to be with all the other disciples, so that he could ask questions about what they had seen and heard that day. Yet, strangely, he wasn't there when Jesus appeared. Why? Perhaps his faith was so badly cast down, that he didn't even want to be around the other disciples. Perhaps it hurt too much.

Whatever the reason for his absence may have been, one thing is for sure: Thomas was *not* in the place where he should have been. The *assembly* was the place where Thomas should have been. This meeting of the disciples was a *church service*; and Thomas was absent from it.

You know, I think we just might be able to find an application in this! When you skip church, you miss out on blessings. Thomas missed out on a *huge* blessing by missing church that day. Because Thomas wasn't there, and didn't see Jesus, he had to go eight more days before seeing Jesus for himself, and hearing those comforting words, "***Peace be unto you.***" He missed out on the fabulous lesson that Christ taught them from the Scriptures, to show that His death, burial, and resurrection had been prophesied.

While we don't know why Thomas was absent, it does seem that *lack of faith* was the reason. Jesus knew this; and that is probably why He chose *not* to appear to Thomas yet. Jesus *could* have appeared to Thomas one-on-one, just as He had done with Mary Magdalene, and with Peter--or in a group, as He'd done with the four ladies, and with Cleophas and his friend. Yet, He didn't. Jesus was giving Thomas time **to respond to the Word of God.**

You see, Thomas *had* heard God's Word. First, he had heard it from Christ Himself. Like all the other disciples, Thomas had heard Jesus say that He would soon be crucified, and that He would rise again three days later. **That was God's Word.** Thomas had also heard God's Word from the eyewitnesses of Christ's resurrection. He didn't merely hear *their own* words, as they reported that they had seen the Lord: he heard Jesus' *actual* words, as *quoted by them*. Thomas had a responsibility to *believe* those words, even though he hadn't seen the Lord. It was time for Thomas, the doubter, to start believing without seeing!

There are two important truths that we should draw from this. First, if you have never placed your faith in Jesus Christ, you *must* believe that Christ's death, burial, and resurrection for your sins is all that you need to be saved. The Bible says in **1 Corinthians 15:1-4** that you cannot be saved without believing the Gospel (the message that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day). You may say, "Well, if I could *see* Jesus, I would believe." No you wouldn't! If you won't believe the Scriptures, you wouldn't believe even if you were to see Jesus with your own eyes. During Christ's earthly ministry, thousands of people watched Jesus do miracles; yet, most of them still rejected Jesus. The Bible says in **Luke 16:31** that if a person won't believe "***Moses and the prophets***" (in other words, the Scriptures), then that person would not be persuaded even if "***one rose from the dead.***"

The world's motto is: "Seeing is believing." Yet, even *this* isn't really true, because the soldiers who witnessed Jesus' resurrection *still* didn't believe! For the Christian, it is just the opposite. For us, *believing* is seeing. When you simply take God at His Word, your spiritual eyes are opened, and you are able to "see" the things of God. Jesus said to those who believed on Him, "***Blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear.***" The only reason that Thomas *believed his own eyes* when he saw Jesus was that he *finally believed God's Word!* His faith was small; and it had been crushed; but it was real. Christ was the one who enabled Thomas to believe on Him in the first place; and Christ now *strengthened* his faith.

Christian, is your faith weak? Are you having trouble walking by faith in your daily Christian life? Then ask the Lord to strengthen your faith, so that you can believe His promises without seeing—just as you did on the day when you asked Him to save you.

Now, before we close this morning, let's take a look at **verse 28** again. **(Read John 20:28.)** The meaning of this verse is clear: Jesus is God! Thomas called Jesus "***My Lord and my God.***" If Thomas had been using God's name in vain, or as an exclamation of surprise, Jesus

would have sharply rebuked him. Yet, that is not the case. Thomas was acknowledging that Jesus is God Almighty. Jesus *accepted* what Thomas had said about Him, because it is true!

By the way, the thought that Jesus is God didn't pop into Thomas's head for the first time when He saw the risen Jesus. He had *already* been convinced that Jesus is God. Like all the other disciples, Thomas had confessed that Jesus knows "*all things*." He had believed that Jesus forgives sins, and raises the dead, and that He will judge the world. By believing these things, he owned Jesus as God--because only God can do all these things! Thomas had believed Jesus when He said, "*Before Abraham was, I am*." Thomas knew, and confessed, that Jesus is the God who existed from eternity, before Abraham was born.

Thomas had been in the depths of despair. During those three days when Jesus' body was in the grave, his hope had nearly died. He and the other disciples were so crushed, that they had huddled together in terror in the Upper Room. It was as though they, too, had died. But then, Thomas saw the risen Jesus; and it was as though he, too, were resurrected from death. The resurrection made all the difference for Thomas; and it makes all the difference for us today!

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-23.

Read Colossians 3:1-4.

Conclusion: The resurrection of Jesus truly makes all the difference. It made all the difference for Mary Magdalene, and for Cleophas, and for Thomas, and for Peter, and for all the other disciples; and it made all the difference for a man named Dmitri. Before we close, I would like to tell you the rest of his story.

The next morning, the guards were in Dmitri's cell, with the document of recantation for him to sign. However, when they arrived there, they found him sitting up straight, with his shoulders squared, and with fire in his eyes. He told them, "I am not signing anything!" Dumbfounded, they asked him "Why?" He told them that during the night the Lord had allowed him to hear the voices of his wife and sons as they were praying for him! By this, he knew that they were still alive! (Dmitri later discovered that his wife and sons had, indeed, felt strongly compelled by the Holy Spirit to pray for him at that very hour!)

Well, time dragged on, and Dmitri's persecutors continued to torment and beat him. But then, the "evil day" came. Once again, Dmitri had just "happened" to find a piece of paper and a pencil on the ground, and had written Scripture on it, and had stuck it on his cell wall. When the guards saw it, they dragged him out of his cell to execute him. However, while they were dragging him down the corridor, a bizarre thing happened. *All the prisoners--1,500 hardened criminals--stood by their beds and sang the hymn that they had heard Dmitri sing for 17 years!* The guards were not only stunned; they were terrified! In fear, they looked at him and asked, "Who are you?" His answer was, "I am a son of the living God; and Jesus is His name!" Not long afterward, Dmitri was released from prison, and returned to his family.²

Dmitri's faith was crushed to the ground. It was almost dead. But then, it came alive! Why? Because he was reminded that *Jesus is God, and that He is alive!* Dmitri was reminded that when Jesus died, he died with Him--and that when Jesus arose, he arose with Him. If Jesus were not risen, we would be "*of all men most miserable*"; but because He lives, we have sure hope! As we close this morning, I would ask, "Do you know the risen Lord? Have you died to sin, and risen to a new life in Christ?" If not, you can

² *Ibid.*

rise to a new life today, by placing your complete trust in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. In simple faith, ask Him to be your Lord and Saviour. If you know Christ already, I would ask: "Are you daily reckoning yourself to be *'dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord'*?"