

### **Gifts of Resurrection**

Jack and Mary's property in the Kangaroo Valley of the Blue Mountains northwest of Sydney, Australia, was a wilderness paradise set up as a camp for Christian youth. But the early summer of 2019 was the hottest and driest on record since 1900 with 40% lower than average rainfall. Drought had made the undergrowth and trees perfect for bushfires. In January, high winds pushed raging flames right onto their land. They escaped to the city, but feared that they would return to a scene of utter devastation. They did. Only tree stumps and ash remained, the charred skeletons of what had once been buildings. They broke down and wept as they mourned the death of their dream.

But life has a way of coming back, and so did Jack and Mary, moving their mobile trailer onto the property once the danger of further fire was passed. They brought with them a crew of workers from their church who soon had a large area cleared and the water well uncapped, enough to fill the reservoir again. Camp this year would be the work of resurrection: planting eucalyptus seedlings, singing songs after meals cooked in a portable kitchen, living in tents, learning how the land regenerates just as God renews hope when all seems lost. It was a meaningful experience for everyone, sharing past grief and future vision of new beginnings. They were even visited by birds who stopped for a drink of water and crumbs of food, entertained by their song of peace.

That's what Jesus' disciples needed – their distraught hearts put at peace after the harrowing events of the past few days. They needed to know that reports of his resurrection were true. And that's what they were given – proof by personal appearances of Jesus on two separate occasions in the upper room. The resurrection wasn't some imaginary story; it was real, tangible

and interactive with those present. Jesus encouraged them to accept the gifts he offered, gifts that would start them out on a life-long mission, gifts that he offers us as well.

1) Gift of peace. “That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! ‘Peace be with you,’ he said.” (John 20:19) It’s strange that the disciples were still afraid, given the testimony of women like Mary Magdalene who saw the risen Jesus, Peter and John who had examined the empty tomb, and the followers on the Emmaus road who had spent the afternoon with the Teacher. They were still traumatized by the crucifixion and concerned about what might happen next. Jesus, however, chose not to berate them or condemn their fear, but to give them peace, that sense of wholeness conveyed by the Hebrew word *shalom*, the calm reassurance that would be necessary for them to do the work of evangelists and missionaries of the Good News.

2) Gift of belief. “As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord!” (v.20) This fulfilled Jesus’ own promise to them at the Passover meal, “You will grieve, but your grief will suddenly turn to wonderful joy. You have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy.” (John 16:20b,22) Notice that Jesus’ resurrected body was, at once, similar to the one he had before his death, and in another way very different. The disciples needed to recognize him with his wounds, proving without doubt that it was really him. Luke’s gospel adds an interesting point, “Still they stood there in disbelief, filled with joy and wonder. Then he asked them, ‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he ate it as they watched.” (Luke 24:41-43) This was no ghost they were seeing, but a Jesus both old and new, able to appear and disappear suddenly, even through locked doors.

Unfortunately, Thomas wasn't there that first Easter evening, and didn't meet the risen Lord. His unbelief (Greek *apistos*) prevented him from experiencing the joy of having the Master back among them; rather, wavering doubts that questioned the reliability of the witnesses who claimed that Jesus had come back to life. "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side." (John 20:25)

Jesus met Thomas where his faith was at, and invited him to make it stronger. "Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!' 'My Lord and my God!' Thomas exclaimed." (v.27-28) There's no indication that Thomas actually touched Jesus in any way. He didn't have to. He could see for himself that Jesus was alive and well, raised from the dead. What followed was the strongest declaration of faith of any of the disciples. Jesus' reply was both a blessing to Thomas and a warning not to insist on physical evidence to secure belief. "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me." (v.29)

3) Gift of forgiveness. "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:23) Jesus' followers hadn't exactly been faithful to their promise of staying by his side. "Then all his disciples deserted him and ran away." (Mark 14:50) Peter's denials were embarrassing witness to his weakness of character in the face of danger. "Peter swore, 'A curse on me if I'm lying – I don't know this man you're talking about!'" (Mark 14:71) Jesus had every reason to want an accounting of their behavior, a dismal failure to keep their word of support. Instead, he offered forgiveness and a new start, saying again, "Peace be with you." (John 20:21a) to reinforce that he wasn't angry with them. He understood their fear and accepted the past. It was time to move on to the future.

4) Gift of mission. “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” (John 20:21b) Having given the disciples his peace, strengthening their belief in his resurrection and offering forgiveness, now was the time to focus on the task ahead. The Great Commission reflects the principle that the authority of the one who is sent is the same as the authority of the one who sent him—the king’s emissary speaks with the authority of the king. God was present in the work of Jesus; Jesus will be present in the work of the apostles. “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20) But to do that they would need power and wisdom not previously available.

5) Gift of the Holy Spirit. “Then he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:22) As far back as the first chapter of this gospel, John the Baptist witnessed, “The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. I saw this happen to Jesus, so I testify that he is the Chosen One of God.” (John 1:33-34) Without physical breath (Hebrew *ruah*), we have no life. Without spiritual breath (Greek *enephusen*) of the Spirit of life, sending the disciples out into the world would be futile. They had been afraid and confused, hidden in a locked room to escape danger. Now they could find strength to stand up, unlock the door, go outside, and begin their proclamation about the risen Christ.

Not much different from us. Receiving a mission from God without the ability to do the task would be unproductive. We must have the Spirit’s presence in our lives to not only give us the courage to begin the task, but the stamina to continue to completion, even if it involves hard work or inherent danger.

Corporal Mike Floyd and Constable Roger Morrow of the RCMP volunteered in 1993 to be part of a UN peacekeeping unit in war-torn Croatia. They were stationed in Korenica on the edge of forested hills. Nearby was a small hamlet where an elderly widower, a shepherd, lived. It was the job of peacekeepers like Mike and Floyd to make sure everyone who could escape did so as quickly as possible, especially those in danger like the widower.

But the elderly man wouldn't go. He had no money for the trip and no desire to uproot his life, leaving behind his flock. The two Mounties returned to Korenica and convinced their UN colleagues to donate money to help the aged farmer reach what was left of his family. They collected several hundred dollars. Once again, the old man declined their offer. Just when it appeared that their task was failing, Mike had a sudden inspiration. "What about this," he offered. "We'll buy the sheep from you and with the money you can go to your relatives." "But who will take care of them?" "We will," grinned Roger. The man accepted their offer and left.

Shepherding was hard, unfamiliar work to the Canadian peacekeepers, but they kept their word. Months later when news of the man's death reached them, they dispersed the flock to local area residents who needed them most. Thus, the widower's lifelong passion continued, reborn in others who appreciated the generous gift.

May we be people who believe in Jesus by seeing the result of the work done through his presence. May we "continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name." (John 20:31) Resurrection is the heart of the Christian message. Let's share it! Amen.