Believe and Have Life

John 20:1-31

Key Verse:20:31 “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

 Happy Easter! You should be surprised at my unseasonal greeting because it is November, not April! However, for Christians every day should be Easter Day in the view of Paul the Apostle. Paul said, “*I die every day*.” (1 Co 15:31) He meant that he faced death every day and experienced the power of resurrection every day. In other words, he lived by resurrection faith and every day was Easter Day for him. So from Paul’s viewpoint my greeting is not awkward or my resurrection message today is not out of date.

 In today’s passage the Risen Jesus visits Mary Magdalene and his disciples. Through his visit Jesus helps them to believe that he is alive so that they may be the witnesses of his resurrection. Today’s passage shows several evidences of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus also teaches us how to live a victorious life with resurrection faith.

First, Mary, why are you crying? (1-18) Look at verse 1. “***Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went up to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance***.” It was early Sunday morning. Jesus was crucified on Friday afternoon and was buried on that evening by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Because Saturday was the Sabbath day for the Jews, they waited until Sunday morning. Mary Magdalene had been possessed by seven demons (Lk 8:2). It would be terrible for us to be possessed by even one demon; but she was possessed by seven demons. She lived a miserable and painful life. But she met Jesus. Jesus drove out the demons and gave her new life. There was no more torture and suffering from the demons. After that she followed Jesus as a sheep follows her shepherd, even to the site of his crucifixion. Mary could not understand why such a good shepherd Jesus had to die on the cross. She cried beneath the cross because she was helpless before the power of death. After his burial all the people went back home in anguish and sorrow. But Mary waited until Sunday morning to anoint Jesus’ body with spices with the other women. In other synoptic gospels there were two other women who accompanied Mary.(Mt 28:1,Mk 16:1, Lk:24:1)

 When she arrived at the tomb, she was surprised by an unexpected scene. The tombstone which had blocked the entrance was rolled away and Jesus’ body was gone! She ran to his disciples and told them the news. “***They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him***.” (2) As soon as Peter and John heard Mary’s testimony, they ran to the tomb. As someone claimed, if Jesus’ body had been stolen by his disciples, Peter and John would not have reacted this way. Mary’s testimony would not have been surprising news to them if they had removed Jesus’ body. The young and speedy John outran the old and slow Peter. But John did not go into the tomb because he was cautious and careful. Peter, who reached the tomb later, went straight into the tomb. They saw the burial clothes lying there at the place where Jesus’ body was laid. (6-8) The strips of linen which had wrapped Jesus’ body and burial clothes were laid separately, as if Jesus’ body had evaporated. As someone claimed, if Jesus’ body had been stolen by robbers, they would not have left his burial clothes in the tomb, but they would have taken the whole body of Jesus as wrapped. Jesus’ body was gone as if he had vanished. In fact he rose again from the dead as he had said before.

 Still, his disciples did not understand what was going on. Look at verses 8b,9. “***He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead)***.” John saw and believed. He believed that Mary’s testimony was true; the tomb was empty, and Jesus’ body was gone. Still, he did not correlate Jesus’ resurrection to God’s prophecies and Jesus’ prediction about his resurrection. (Ge 3:15,Ps 16:8-11, 110:1, Is 53:11, Mt 17:9,23, 20:19, Jn 2:19, 11:25,14:3, 16:17) So Peter and John went back home with astonishment and bewilderment. Here we learn that if our faith is not rooted in God’s word and his promise, our understanding will be limited. No matter how many miracles and signs God may perform before our eyes, if we do not believe the promise of God, our understanding will be limited. Jesus performed many miracles and wonders before his people, but they still didn’t believe in him. But Jesus praised the faith of the gentile centurion who had trusted in his words and came to him for healing. (Lk 7:7) If you believe in even one promise of God from your heart, God is pleased with you and you will experience the unlimited power of your faith. So the Bible says, “*The righteous will live by faith, not by sight*.” (2 Co 5:7) (*So we live by faith, not by sight*)

 John and Peter went back home, but Mary stayed at the tomb crying. She could not leave the tomb until she knew where the body of Jesus was located. When she bent over to look into the tomb to see if the disappearance of Jesus’ body was real, she saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. (11,12) The angels asked her why she was crying. While she was answering them, Jesus stood beside her, but Mary did not recognize him. Jesus asked her, “***Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?***” (15) She thought it was a gardener. But Jesus called her name, “***Mary***”. When she heard Jesus calling her name, she realized that it was Jesus***. She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”)*** (16) The way Jesus called her name was familiar to her, so she could recognize him. This reminds us of Jesus’ words, “…*the sheep listens to his (shepherd) voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out* (John 10:3b)*…I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me* (Jn 10:14)…” Who on this earth could understand Mary’s sorrow but Jesus? Jesus was a good shepherd for her. He healed her from demon possession and gave her new life. Jesus was everything to Mary. But he was gone after the crucifixion. She came to the tomb to express her unchanging love for him by anointing his body, but now his body was gone. No one was around her but the shadow of death. At that moment Jesus visited her and called her name. Jesus showed her that he was alive. She had no reason to cry anymore. If we don’t have resurrection faith, we cannot but cry endlessly like Mary. Death seems to be the end of everything. But to Jesus it is the beginning of new life. Mary did not need to cry because Jesus provided her new life and eternal life through his resurrection. Jesus was alive! He conquered death! No more can death rule us. Jesus wiped tears from Mary’s eyes and opened her spiritual eyes to see the glorious resurrection of Christ.

Look at verse 17. “***Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God***.” Jesus did not allow Mary to hold on to him. Instead he told her to go to his disciples and tell them of his resurrection and ascension. Mary went to the disciples with the news: “***I have seen the Lord***!” (18) What is life with resurrection faith? Life with resurrection faith is to overcome our feelings and situations so that we can carry out God’s mission which was given to us. Crying in sorrow at the tomb never solves our problem. It makes us more troubled and sorrowful. Instead of crying we must go out and share the good news of eternal life as witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection. Amen!

Second, peace be with you! (19-22) While Mary was joyful with resurrection faith, the disciples were fearful with doubt and confusion. The night when the Risen Jesus met Mary, the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders. (19) Jesus visited them and greeted them, “***Peace be with you***!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side so that they could believe that he was alive. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw him. (20) Again Jesus said, “***Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you***.” (21) Jesus comforted them again with peace. This means that they had no peace in their hearts. People say that women’s weakness is sorrow while men’s weakness is fear. But some have both. The disciples thought that they failed as Jesus’ disciples because they all except for John ran away when Jesus was arrested and crucified. The sense of failure as disciples made them troubled and pained. They thought that they didn’t deserve Jesus’ visit when they were in fear because they had betrayed him. They did not follow him to the end. They just hid themselves to save their lives from the Jewish leaders. They had no peace in their hearts, even as Jesus visited them.

Jesus knew them very well. He forgave them and gave them the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 22. “***And with that he breathed on them and said,*** “***Receive the Holy Spirit***.” (22) The boss of this world might give punishment to his employees who betray him, saying, “Receive my punch.” But Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit so that they might overcome fear and deliver the message of forgiveness of sin to the world. Look at verse 23. “***If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven***.” Jesus told them that as Jesus had forgiven them, they ought also forgive their enemies. Jesus gave them authority to forgive others’ sin. Of course there is no one who forgives sins but God alone. But when they proclaim the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ, God will forgive their sins. Forgiving love is the most powerful message and virtue of Christianity. This world demands, “*Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth*.” (Ex 21:24, Lev 24:20, Deut 19:21) But Jesus taught us, “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*!” (Mt 5:44) He prayed on the cross even for his enemies who nailed him there, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*” (Lk 23:34) As Jesus forgave his disciples, they also must forgive their enemies. 1 John 4:18 says, “*Perfect love drives out fear*.” When we forgive others and love them, we have no fear. We have peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ who forgives us our sins. (Ro 5:1)

Third, stop doubting and believe! (24-31) In our common lives, whether at home, or school, or workplace, or church, there are always some who act erratically. They appear late at meetings or are missing from the crowd or disappear without leaving any trace. We dislike such people for no specific reason. Thomas was not there when Jesus had visited his disciples the first time. He refused to believe his colleague’s testimony about Jesus’ resurrection. He claimed, “***Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe***.” (25) He wanted personal and physical assurance of their testimony. His refusal sounds reasonable and scientific. ‘After I observe it and test it, then I believe it.’ Luke West and I made a survey on campus before the Bible Symposiums. We met several students who stopped going to church, who wanted a better experience before they would return. Indeed experience and reason have become two pillars supporting modern western philosophy. How did Jesus help the doubting Thomas? Look at verses 26,27. “***A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.***” Jesus did not give up on Thomas, but visited him while he was with the other disciples. He showed him his nail-marked hands and side and asked Thomas to touch them. Then he commanded him not to doubt but believe. Stop doubting about God’s power and believe in His promise! Thomas confessed, “***My Lord and my God***!” (28)

Then Jesus told him, “***Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed***.” (29) Jesus meant that having faith after seeing the result is blessed, but having faith without seeing it is more blessed. What is faith? Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. (Heb 11:1) To Thomas faith was to believe in the testimony of Jesus’ resurrection even though he did not see the Risen Jesus. To us faith is to believe in God’s promise even though we do not see the result. Jesus said in Mark 11:22-24. “*Have faith in God,” Jesus answered, “Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours*.” Philosophically speaking, faith is essence and its result is phenomenon (form). In other words, what is invisible is essence and what is visible and what is seen are phenomena. Jesus valued our faith, which is invisible, more than its result or experience, which is visible and tangible. If you believe God’s promise without seeing the result, you have a perfect score plus bonus points. If you believe after seeing the result, you have 70 points. But if you don’t believe after seeing it, they call in your parents!

Why is faith important? People say that it is our choice. What they say is true, but what we choose determines our eternal destiny. Look at verses 30-31. “***Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name***.” To have faith in Jesus is not a small matter like your choice between shopping at Wal-Mart or Target. It is a matter of eternal life and eternal death.

Today we learned that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a historical fact and a true story, not a fairy tale or a man-made story. There are several evidences of his resurrection such as the empty tomb, eyewitnesses, and the Scripture. The importance of our faith in the resurrection of Christ is our hope for our own resurrection. Jesus said in John 14:19, “*Because I live, you also will live*.” He also said, “*I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?*” (Jn 11:25,26) John was one of the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ resurrection. He wrote 21 chapters of his book so that we may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name. (31) He had no purpose for his writing other than for life in Jesus’ name. He said, “*In him was life, and that life was the light of men*.” (Jn 1:4) Today Jesus asks each of us this question, “*Do you believe that I died for your sins on the cross and rose again from the dead for your eternal life*? *Do you believe that your sins are forgiven and you have crossed over from death to life*? *Do you believe that the Bible is the true word of God and that God keeps his promises absolutely*?” How do you answer him?