

Jesus – the One who ‘passed through’. Bethesda Meditation. 12 April 2009.

I want us to think this morning about our Lord Jesus as the One who ‘passed through’.

You may remember that we concluded the Bible teaching last Lord’s Day by referring to Peter’s words to Cornelius and his household concerning our Lord ... ‘how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power: who went about doing good’.¹ Literally translated, Luke reported the apostle as saying, ‘who passed through doing good’.

And, in his gospel, Luke used the same word on several occasions with reference to the Lord Jesus. He, Luke, tells us, for example, in chapter 17 that, when our Lord was on the way up to Jerusalem, ‘He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee’,² and in the opening of chapter 19 that ‘Jesus entered and passed through Jericho’.³

Indeed, Luke used the very same word to explain how the Lord escaped the murderous designs of the men of Nazareth, who, at the outset of His public ministry, ‘thrust Him out of the city and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong’. ‘Passing through the midst of them’, Luke adds, He went His way’.

Nor is Luke the only New Testament writer to use this particular word of our Lord. The writer to the Hebrews uses it to describe our Lord’s passage through the heavens following His ascension; ‘we have a great High Priest’, he says, ‘who has passed through’, not, as the High Priest of ancient Israel, the successive compartments of the tabernacle on the Day of Atonement, but who has ‘passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God’.⁴

In the days of His flesh then, our Lord passed through the various regions and cities of Palestine – doing good – and, consequent on His ascension, He passed through the heavens.

Although the apostle John does not actually use the word when speaking of the events surrounding our Lord’s resurrection in chapter 20 of his gospel – as he had when informing us in chapter 4 that it was necessary for our Lord to ‘pass through’ Samaria – it is clear that our Lord did, in fact, pass through several things at that time.

John was the very first of our Lord’s contemporaries – man or woman – to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead – and that several hours before he saw the Risen Lord for himself.⁵ And the position of our Lord’s grave-clothes in the otherwise empty tomb of Joseph of Arimathea was key to John’s faith.

Taking up the story after Mary Magdalene had reported her fear that the Lord – His body, that is – had been removed from the sepulchre, in John’s own words, the disciple whom Jesus loved (a clear reference to himself) ‘outran Peter and came to the tomb first ... Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin (the ‘face-cloth’) that had been around His (our Lord’s) head, not lying with the linen cloths, but wrapped (‘rolled’) up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed’.⁶

To John, there was no alternative explanation. If the enemies of our Lord, or the authorities, or some enterprising grave-robbers had taken the body, they would certainly not have left behind the expensive linen cloths and the even more expensive spices. Still less would they have taken the time to leave the tomb in such an orderly fashion, with the napkin so neatly rolled up.⁷ No, the fact that both the long linen cloths which had been tightly wound about the body and the face-cloth lay there undisturbed cried out to John that the Saviour had risen through and out of them.⁸

John had witnessed the raising of Lazarus, following which Lazarus had emerged from his tomb, as John later recorded it, ‘bound hand and foot with grave-cloths, and his face bound round with a napkin’.⁹

What John saw told him that, in the case of the Lord Jesus, the linen cloths and the napkin had been left behind by Someone who no longer had any use for them – that He had simply passed through His grave-clothes.

But not only that. He had, necessarily, also passed through the walls of His tomb – a tomb which we are clearly told had been ‘hewn (‘cut’) in the rock’.¹⁰ For when, according to Matthew 28, the ‘great stone’¹¹ was rolled aside from the door of the tomb by ‘an angel of the Lord’, this was not to release our Lord from the sepulchre. He had already vacated the premises. The tomb’s onetime tenant had already gone. The stone was removed, its seal broken and the military guard rendered helpless, not to let the Risen Lord out but to let the first witnesses in. The angel’s message to the womenfolk who ventured to the tomb was clear on the point; ‘He is not here; for He has risen ... Come, see the place where He lay’.¹²

The sealed tomb ensured that no human eye witnessed our Lord’s resurrection, just as the supernatural darkness on the previous Friday afternoon had ensured that no human eye witnessed the depth of His suffering for our sins.

And I note that, although in the case of Lazarus, human hands were required to lift and roll back the stone from the entrance to his sepulchre, in the case of our Lord, it was 'an angel from heaven' who rolled away the stone – the fact that he had come 'from heaven' being evidence of heaven's approval – evidence that the crucified 'Jesus' had been vindicated by God as both Messiah and Son of God.

But I said that, when speaking of the events surrounding our Lord's resurrection in chapter 20 of his gospel, John points us to several things which He – our Lord – 'passed through' at that time.

And moving us forward from when it was 'early, while it was still dark' on 'the first day of the week' in verse 2 to the 'early evening on that first day of the week' in verse 19, John tells us that 'Jesus came and stood among' His disciples, even though they were then assembled with 'the doors shut, for fear of the Jews'.¹³

But our Lord needed no angel of the Lord to open the door for Him – as did Peter almost fifteen years later¹⁴ when imprisoned by Herod Agrippa at Jerusalem – nor was there even any need for Him to knock loudly and repeatedly as had Peter to gain access to the place where the disciples then met for prayer.¹⁵

But between the time when our Lord had 'passed through' His grave-clothes and the walls of His tomb and the time when He had passed through the barred doors of His disciples' meeting place, our Lord was active.

And it is wonderful to note what it was that engaged His attention during that altogether unique day. Because that which occupied Him during those hours speaks volumes about the greatness of His love for His own.¹⁶

As Mark informs us in his gospel, 'when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons'.¹⁷ A woman overwhelmed by grief and her love for Him had first claim. And how she loved Him.¹⁸ *With Him* she had everything; but *without Him* she had nothing. And, as John's narrative makes clear, neither apostles nor angels could even begin to fill the void she felt.¹⁹ His one word 'Mary' was sufficient to transform her weeping into worshipping.

He turned His attention next to the other women who – hastened on by an angel's word – had hurried quickly from the tomb with mingled joy and fear.²⁰ And His message to these women overwhelmed, not by grief, but by fear? 'Do not be afraid'!

His third chosen encounter was with a man – a man overwhelmed by neither grief nor fear, but by remorse. I speak, of course, of Peter. For both our Lord's prayer *for* Peter and His look *on* Peter in the High Priest's house had availed. The prayer had kept his faith from failing, and the look had broken his heart.²¹

The two who returned from Emmaus early that Resurrection Evening were greeted by the words of the apostles and those with them, 'The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!'²² – which appearance had relieved Peter's deep distress.

And, indeed, these two disciples – in all probability two apostles in the wider sense of the word²³ – were the fourth – and last – case to benefit from our Lord's attention that day ... a couple overwhelmed, not by grief as Mary Magdalene, not by fear as the other women, not by remorse as Simon Peter, but by disappointment. 'Our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we were hoping that He was the one to redeem Israel', they had explained to the Stranger on the road, 'but ...this is the third day since these things happened'.

And the grace of the Risen Lord was such that He would bind up Mary's broken heart,²⁴ allay the women's fears, restore a contrite Peter and redirect two pairs of straying feet.²⁵

What a wonderful Saviour!

Come and see where Jesus lay,
Cold within the silent grave.
See, the stone is rolled away,
Void and tenantless the grave:
Clothes to shroud His form and head
Still their absent Lord display;
Christ is risen from the dead!
Come and see where Jesus lay.

Timothy Dudley-Smith

Footnotes

¹ Acts 10. 38.

² Luke 17. 11.

³ Luke 19. 1.

⁴ Heb. 4. 14.

⁵ In John 20. 19-20. Mary believed that Jesus had risen because she saw Him alive (as did the other early witnesses), but John believed before he saw Him. Compare our Lord's words later to Thomas, John 20. 29.

⁶ John 20. 4-8.

⁷ 'If anyone had removed the body, he would not have stripped it first, nor would he have taken the trouble to remove and roll-up the napkin and put it in a place by itself', John Chrysostom, Homily 85. 4.

⁸ John recognizes God's fingerprints at the scene!

⁹ John 11. 44.

¹⁰ Matt. 27. 60; Luke 23. 53.

¹¹ Matt. 27. 60.

¹² Matt. 28. 6.

¹³ Others if raised from the dead following crucifixion could have shown their hands and feet – but only He, as he did on the following Lord's day, could also show His side, John 20. 27!

¹⁴ The imprisonment of Herod is dated to the Spring of 44 AD by F. F Bruce, 'The Acts of the Apostles', page 55. Our Lord was crucified around 29-30 AD. (Herod the Great died in 4 BC, and our Lord began His public ministry when He was 'about 30 years of age' when He, Luke 3. 23.)

¹⁵ Acts 12. 7-10, 13-16.

¹⁶ In all, the New Testament records 14 specific occasions when the Risen Lord appeared – the first being to Mary Magdalene at the tomb and the last being to the apostle John on Patmos – but it informs us also that there were more appearances during the 40 days before His ascension, Acts 1. 3.

¹⁷ Mark 16. 9.

¹⁸ 'He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him', John 14. 21.

¹⁹ When the apostles left, she stayed, John 20. 10-11. When angels spoke to her, she turned her back on them, John 20. 12-14.

²⁰ Matt. 28. 5-8.

²¹ A thought borrowed from J. G. Bellett, 'A Short Meditation on the Moral Glory of the Lord Jesus Christ', page 53.

²² Luke 24. 34.

²³ The 'two of them', Luke 24. 13, seems to refer back to 'the apostles' of verse 10. But Luke clearly used this word with a meaning broader than as a synonym for the Eleven. See verse 33 and Acts 14. 4, 14 etc.

²⁴ See Isa. 61. 1.

²⁵ For our Lord's appearances to Mary ('A sorrowing heart'), Peter ('A soiled conscience'), and the two on the road to Emmaus ('Straying feet'), see the article 'The Active Grace of Christ Risen' by C. A. Coates in 'The Paths of Life', pages 66-78.