

Perfume, Cross, and a Seed

John 12:23-26

A Sermon by Dr. Neil Chadwick

A climactic point in John's Gospel was the raising of Lazarus. Water had been turned into wine; 5,000 had been fed with five loaves and two fishes; the lame had walked and the blind could see; Jesus had walked on water. Then came the greatest of all miracles, the raising of a man who had been dead for four days.

John tells us that due to this dramatic miracle, many believed in Jesus - not that this is the first time miracles were followed by belief. In fact, according to a statement which comes near the end, it seems the entire book of John was written with this in mind: "Jesus did many other miraculous 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 Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (20:30,31)

Before we talk about this matter of "belief", let's note that there are several "death benefits" identified in the 12th chapter of John. This of course is an insurance term - when you die, someone else gets the benefit. Here, the "death benefits" are represented by Perfume, a Cross, and a Seed.

When Mary welcomed Jesus into her home, she not only washed His feet as would be the custom of that day, she did it with expensive perfume! Jesus took the opportunity to point out that this was prophetic - she was preparing His body for burial. What is of interest to us is that when she did this, "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." (12:3) In other words, the death and resurrection of Jesus would entail a releasing of something wonderful which would benefit all who would come into contact with it. In effect, His life would be poured out, and everyone who would believe would be benefited.

Later (v.32), Jesus talked about "being lifted up", a prophecy concerning the method of His death - He would die by crucifixion. Those who heard this obviously understood it as a reference to His death because they said, "We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'?" (v.34) Jesus became believable because of this and other accurate predictions. Notice again the idea that Jesus' death brings benefit - "... the prince of this world will be driven out . . . [I] will draw all men to myself." (12:31,32)

However, we've left for last, the "death benefit" represented by a seed: "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (12:24)

I'm no biologist. In fact, I masterfully steered a course through both high school and college which successfully avoided any possible learning in this subject. But I do

understand this - the seed cannot remain in its former existence if it is to fulfill its mission of bringing life to a new stalk which in turn will produce many more seeds of the same kind.

I would like to know if there's a farm show anywhere which offers blue ribbons for the best looking seed. Let's say there is, and the prize winning seed, after being acclaimed for full color, rich texture, perfectly symmetrical form and unusual size were to be taken on a tour throughout the entire land so that all farmers everywhere may see what a near perfect seed looks like. Crowds of amazed onlookers would "ooh" and "aah" over its incomparable beauty; parades would be organized; TV talk shows would feature displays of this wonderful seed. But we would laugh and say, "What good is that?" There comes a point when the real vitality of the seed, the real power encased in its small shell can only be realized when the seed is planted in the ground to die. Soon its beauty will be marred, its shape destroyed - what was once a beautiful seed will soon become unrecognizable. Only when its life as a seed ceases will it fulfill its destiny and produce an abundant supply of its own kind.

What a great picture of Jesus, His crucifixion and burial! Isaiah had foretold that the Messiah would be disfigured almost beyond recognition (Isaiah 53:2). Upon His death, His body was buried in the ground like a seed planted in the field. It had to be.

When Jesus talked about the seed and new birth, He was only using this for instruction purposes - His death and resurrection would be like the seed which dies and gives life to many seeds. Death and resurrection is like the ongoing, seemingly miraculous cycle of death and rebirth seen throughout the natural world.

However, let's be careful not to slip into a worship of fertility rather than the Creator of fertility. Perhaps you're aware that the name for our holiday "Easter" was used in connection with the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, to be worshipped at the time of the vernal, or spring, equinox. It's easy to see that this goddess, and the symbolism around her, closely corresponds to the springtime themes of rebirth, new life, new hope, and light.

But who is this goddess Eostre? According to the legend, she found a bird whose wings were frozen from the harsh winter and saved it by turning the bird into a rabbit. However, it was a magical rabbit which could actually lay eggs. That's why today we have Easter Bunnies, Easter Eggs and a celebration of Spring, none of which is directly related to the true meaning of this greatest of all Christian holidays - the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That "Easter" comes during our springtime is coincidental - Good Friday and Easter Sunday are on this page of our calendar not because of spring, but because of the Passover.

Ancient Israel was much more agricultural than our society today, and much attention was given to planting, raising, and harvesting crops. In fact, religious observations were connected to both barley and wheat harvests. On the second day of the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread (which immediately followed Passover), there was a firstfruits celebration, and seven weeks later, on the day we know as

Pentecost there was another celebration for the wheat harvest, again with the offering of the firstfruits sacrifice.

Paul was referring to the first of these in I Corinthians 15:20 when he wrote: "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." (Perhaps that is why the Resurrection was to be celebrated two days after Passover, to correspond to the firstfruits celebration.)

Gordon Fee tells us that "The first of the harvest serves as a kind of guarantee for the full harvest . . . God's own pledge that there will be a full harvest of those who will be raised from the dead." (Commentary on I Corinthians)

Also, even as Jesus submitted to, and survived death, so will we, both spiritually and physically.

What is important for us today is that while the resurrection story conveys messages having to do with God's power and the validation of Jesus as the Messiah, according to John it also has to do with his main theme, "belief."

"After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken." (2:22)

Now let's do a quick review from the beginning to see this theme of belief - it is such an important theme, and appears in almost every chapter.

Chapter 1. Of John the Baptist it was said, "He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe." (1:7)

Chapter 2. After Jesus turned water into wine, John commented, "This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him." (2:11)

Chapter 3. When Jesus instructed Nicodemus, He spoke those memorable words, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (3:16)

Chapter 4. After Jesus revealed to the woman at the well both who He was and the sin that was in her life, it was said, "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I ever did.'" (4:39)

Later in that same chapter we learn that a government official's entire household believed on Jesus because his son was healed of a life threatening fever. (4:53)

Chapter 5. After healing the man at the Bethesda pool, and coming under criticism because this was done on the Sabbath day, Jesus said, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." (5:24)

Chapter 6. In this chapter we have the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. . . everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (6:35,40)

And when He asked if His Disciples would abandon Him, Peter responded with, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (6:68,69)

Chapter 7. At the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus cried out, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." (7:37,38)

Chapter 8. We learn that some Jews did believe in Jesus (8:31) - others did not and Jesus chided them by saying, "If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?" (8:46)

Chapter 9. A blind man was healed, and when testifying that it was Jesus who healed him, was expelled from the synagogue. Jesus found him later and asked, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (9:35) to which the man replied, "Lord, I believe," and he worshipped him. (9:38)

Chapter 10. After the discourse about the Good Shepherd, Jesus was accosted by Jews who demanded, "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly," to which Jesus said, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep." (10:24-26)

Chapter 11. Then we come back to the Chapter which relates the story of Lazarus' resurrection. We're told that Jesus delayed His responding to the call of Mary and Martha so that His Disciples would believe (v.14), and also that "many of the Jews who . . . had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him." (11:45; 12:11) The Pharisees reported to the Sanhedrin, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him." (11:48)

Chapter 12. After the Triumphal Entry, we learn that "many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God." (12:42,43)

Chapter 13. When Jesus predicted His own death, He said, "I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He." (13:19)

Chapter 14. Along with a promise of heaven, Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me." (14:1)

At the end of that same chapter Jesus said, "You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I

am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe." (14:28,29)

Chapter 16. At the close of Jesus' teaching concerning the Holy Spirit, the disciples finally confessed their faith when they said, "Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God." (16:30)

Chapter 17. In the great "High Priestly Prayer" Jesus included this: "For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours." (17:8,9)

And He prayed for us as well when He said, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message. . .that all of them may be one." (17:20,21)

Chapter 19. John addressed his readers, saying that he, the writer "testifies so that you also may believe." (19:35)

Chapter 20. After the resurrection, John was again speaking of himself when he wrote, "He saw and believed" (20:8) after he had seen that the tomb was empty. That same day, when Jesus met with the Disciples, He said to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (20:29)

So the whole point of this Gospel account by John is to bring about belief, to facilitate faith in Jesus - and that's part of the effect of the resurrection - to get us to believe.

In closing, let's go back to a conversation Jesus had with Disciple Phillip where Jesus asks a very important question, "Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" (14:10)

This is the critical question, and is put to us today. "To believe or not to believe, that is the question." What is your answer? The message of Easter is not about fertility and the cycle of death and rebirth. It is about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son of God. To "believe" is not merely to assent to the historical accuracy of the reports. It is to stake our eternal destiny on the truth that He is who He claimed to be - the One who can provide forgiveness leading to eternal life.

That is the greatest "death benefit" of all. It is perfume which pervades the entire house; it is a cross which defeats the power of "the prince of the world"; and it is a seed buried in a tomb to come forth and usher all who believe into the Kingdom of God.