

“Keeping Up Appearances”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11



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Are you a Hyacinth fan? If you know this British TV comedy you need no further introduction. If you don't know this 'lady of the house' no description of mine will quite do her justice. Hyacinth is the outlandish heroine of this lighthearted comedy called *Keeping Up Appearances*.

I confess to plagiarizing this title in order to grab your attention. But I don't intend on pursuing her hilarious antics. Instead my interest this morning lies with the *appearances* our Lord made after his resurrection.

He kept appearing, we are told, during the forty days following Easter. We are presently in that period of the Christian year. So together let's reflect on some meanings found in these appearances.

Understand, the risen Christ did not simply pop up indiscriminately here and there. When he appeared it was for the purpose of bringing a gift, offering comfort, giving instruction or inspiring service. Of the dozen or so recorded resurrection appearances we are going to concentrate on just four.

These four appearances have one thing in common. All of them were private appearances of the risen Christ to specifically named individuals.

Mary Magdalene

The first person to see Christ alive after his resurrection was Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18). It's a tender account, you remember. Jesus approached Mary weeping outside the tomb, but she mistook him for the gardener.

“Tell me where you have laid him,” she insisted, “and I will take him away.” Brave words, but how was she going to handle a corpse? She'd not thought that out. She was leading with her heart, not her head.

Then Jesus spoke her name. In his post-resurrection appearances Christ often did or said familiar things that triggered memories and opened eyes. *“Mary,”* Jesus said in a tone she had heard many times before.

At this familiar sound, she whirled around and recognized him. Then Jesus announced enigmatically, *“Do not hold me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brethren...”* (John 20:17).

Scholars are not of one mind about what Jesus meant. According to one interpretation, this scene provides a clue to what Mary needed to learn and what many of us also could learn.

The Greek verb here translated *“hold”* is a present imperative, which means literally, ‘stop continuing to cling to me.’ Jesus may have been saying, ‘Mary, don’t keep clutching me to yourself as in the past.’

Mary had good reason to do this, of course, for the Lord we’re told had cast seven devils out of her. We don’t know exactly what her malady was, only that her gratitude to Jesus knew no bounds.

Some whose lives have been rescued and transformed by Christ develop exclusive attachments. Faith becomes a kind of ‘me and Jesus’ fetish with little connection to the larger body of believers or the broader needs of our society and world.

Such believers need to hear the Lord say, ‘Don’t keep clutching me privately to yourself. Instead, go and tell the news that He who brought you life can also bring life to others.’ Christ’s appearance to Mary may have been aimed at nudging private adoration toward a more public proclamation.

Peter

In Paul's list of appearances, Peter's name is at the top. But note that here he is identified by his Aramaic name "*Cephas*" which means 'rock.' The Greek word for 'rock' is *petra*, thus our name Peter.

Peter received this new name after his Great Confession – the time when he identified and claimed Jesus as the promised Messiah. In response Jesus gave him the nickname "*Rocky*." Upon this rock-solid confessional foundation, Jesus promised, "*I will build my church*" (Mt. 16:13-18).

Don't miss the point. It was not the fisherman 'Simon' who received Christ's appearance; it was "*Cephas*" – 'Rocky!' For 'the Rock' had crumbled. Peter had promised never to deny Christ, but when the chips were down he folded. In utter remorse, Peter went out and wept bitterly.

That's why the women, that first Easter morning, were told, "*Christ has risen...go and tell his disciples and Peter...*" (Mk. 16:6-7). Peter needed some special handling. Unlike Mary Magdalene, who wanted to hold onto Christ because He had been made her well, Peter wanted to run from Christ because he had failed Him.

Most of us know this feeling and its agony. If you've ever failed someone who trusted you, believed in you, was counting on you, you know the pain! Jesus appeared to Peter to forgive his weakness and heal the breach in their relationship.

Someone today may need to hear this. Like Peter you, too, may have let God down – or someone else or even yourself! – by something cheap you did or hurtful you said. That, or you may have rejected Christ for no clear reason, or taken Christ's name with no clear commitment.

You may have flung away from the church years ago, but wandered back this Sunday for no obvious reason. God knows. Perhaps, like Peter, you feel a kind of personal tug to reconnect with Christ. Our Lord holds no grudges and is eager to give purpose and strength to your life.

James

The third specifically named person to receive a resurrection appearance was James. But James who? Two disciples bore that name – James the son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus. If one of these had been intended our passage would surely have made it clear which one.

There is only one other possible biblical candidate for the name James – our Lord's own brother! The Gospel of Mark (6:3) tells us Jesus had four brothers – James, Joses, Judas and Simon – and at least two unnamed sisters.

No member of Jesus' family was a disciple during his ministry. On the contrary, they considered him crazy and wanted to get him well. But fast forward to the early church. There you find James, our Lord's brother, advanced to a position of authority in the Jerusalem Christian community.

Clearly, something dramatic intervened to change James' mind and claim his commitment. What happened, Paul reports, was a personal appearance of the risen Christ to his brother James.

James, as it turned out, had a special job to perform in connection with the church's missionary work. He did not want evangelism hamstrung with ecclesiastical red tape. He declared that the door of entrance into Christian life was faith in Christ – not rote obedience to religious laws.

But to accomplish his mission in life, James had to get beyond a huge obstacle – over-familiarity. James and Jesus grew up together as brothers. For James now to believe that his older brother, Jesus, was none other than the Messiah, the Son of God – well, that is the stuff of miracles!

Most of *us* can 'feel' with James. After all we, too, have grown up with Jesus – in Sunday school and Bible stories. Jesus is a household name. It's as tough for lots of us – as it must have been for James – to accept good-old-familiar Jesus as Messiah, Son of God, Savior and Lord.

Yet, Christ insists, 'Familiar though I am to you, *'Lord'* I intend to be for you.' Keep hanging around this living Lord and one day He will appear to you alive and will become the center of your life.

Paul

The apostle Paul is the fourth and final biblical account of a private appearance of the risen Christ to a specifically named person. We know his story well. Ambushed by Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul was called to be a follower of the very Christ he had so vigorously opposed.

Paul believed he had received a resurrection appearance of Christ no less than any of the others mentioned here...except in one sense. Christ appeared to him, he said, “*as to one untimely born.*” The Greek word for this phrase is *ektroma*, which literally means ‘miscarriage’ or ‘abortion.’

It is as though Paul wrote, ‘Finally to me, *as to a dead fetus*, Christ appeared.’ The others to whom Christ appeared had all previously believed in Jesus. Paul had not. Worse yet, Paul had proven himself to be Christ’s mortal enemy “*persecuting the church.*” Paul was dead to Christ!

On that Damascus Road, the resurrected Christ delivered ‘a live birth’ from ‘a spiritual miscarriage’ named Paul!

Only God could perform such a miracle. That’s why Christ appeared to Paul. The risen Lord transformed Paul’s abortive life and gave it back to him throbbing with Spirit and full of grace.

Often many of us begin our personal stories of faith with the words, “Well, I’ve never had a Damascus Road experience, but...” as though Paul told us of his experience as the quintessential conversion account. On the contrary! Paul believed his spiritual rebirth to be abnormal!

But one way or another Christ still changes lives, either dramatically as in Paul’s case, or gently as in the case of many of us. Either way it’s a miracle of huge proportions. Each of us has wondered at times how God could possibly weave his big purposes in and through the tangled mess we so often make of things.

The good news is this. If Christ could turn around a man like Paul, God will not be stymied by the likes of you and me. Christ still changes lives today.

You and Me

This week I found myself remembering a childhood puzzle I used to own. Perhaps you had one like it when you were a kid. It was a little tray of moveable numbers. All you had to do was slide the fifteen little numbered squares into the proper sequence. How hard should that be?

Then it occurred to me, I could work out this puzzle a lot quicker if I were allowed a third dimension. Then I could simply lift up each number and place it down in the right order.

How this Sunday's sermon triggered memories of a child's puzzle is part of the peculiarity of being a preacher. You see I began to think about those of us who want some spiritual order in our lives, a sequence that makes God's kind of sense. Problem is – we don't know how to make this happen.

But God does. That's the point! The resurrected Christ brings to the flat surface of our lives His eternal dimension. It's the very same dimension experienced by Mary and Peter, James and Paul. Each of them discovered, as can we, that "*in Christ*" – life's puzzle is solved.

Christ is still presenting himself alive to people like us, the insecure as well as the confident, the proud and broken alike. Christ is not dead. He is risen! Even today, this resurrected and living Christ is 'Keeping Up Appearances.'



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