

He Is Risen Indeed

During the Easter season, it's important to remember how many people actually saw the resurrected Christ.

Every Easter most Christians attend a sunrise or other church service and then conclude their spiritual celebration is over. But Easter is a 40-day season, not just one day. It commemorates the 40 days the resurrected Jesus walked the earth before His ascension into heaven. Luke wrote, "He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3, NKJV).

Many churches burn a "paschal," or Easter, candle during this 40-day period. Just as a Christmas tree with its lights reminds us of the birth of Christ, the Light of the World, so this candle reminds worshipers of Christ's 40 days on earth after His resurrection.

You may be wondering why Jesus stayed on earth for 40 days before ascending into heaven. Here are some of the reasons:

To demonstrate He was truly raised. Jesus' resurrection was a physical fact; His body was literally brought back to life after He died on the cross. But without the "many infallible proofs" Luke refers to in the Scripture quoted previously, people might not have believed the Resurrection actually occurred. People had to see the risen Christ and witness Him in action.

The apostle Paul writes: "He rose again the third day ... was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once. ... After that He was seen

by James, then by all the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:4-7).

Jesus also appeared to the believing women on Easter morning (see Luke 24:1-12), to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13-31), to 10 apostles on Easter evening (see John 20:19-23), to "Doubting Thomas" (see John 20:24-29) and to seven by the Sea of Galilee (see John 21:1-14).

Some skeptics allege that the Resurrection was a lie held together by a conspiracy, but there were too many witnesses for a conspiracy to hold. Far from recanting their testimonies as a lie, many eyewitnesses suffered martyrdom for what they knew to be the truth: Christ rose from the dead.

To remind the disciples of what He had already taught and point them to their mission. Jesus had been a teacher without parallel during the three years of His earthly ministry. But now He needed to repeat some of what He had already taught His disciples and explain His resurrection to them in the light of Old Testament prophecies (see Luke 24:27).

But there was also a future component. They were to carry out His work—and in order to do so, they first had to wait and then they had to go.

Perhaps in their excitement they wanted to rush around telling everyone: "Jesus is alive, death is conquered; His teaching is vindicated; He is truly the Messiah we've been waiting for!" But then they would have been trying to evangelize in their own power, and the results would not have been good.

So Jesus told them first to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to be bestowed upon them (see Acts 1:4). While they

waited, they engaged in continual prayer (see Acts 1:14).

After they received the gift of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were prepared to fulfill their divine commission, which was to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything Jesus had taught them (see Matt. 28:19-20).

To emphasize three essential aspects of discipleship. Jesus knew that after His ascension, He would no longer be with the disciples in person to direct them, and He wanted them to continue to grow. So He encouraged them to participate in three important things:

Community. Although individual believers have a personal relationship with Jesus, He made it clear to His disciples that community is important—a place He is especially present: “‘Where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there in the midst of them’” (Matt. 18:20). The church is the body of Christ on earth (see 1 Cor. 12:27), and all members are to make a habit of gathering together for prayer and worship with other believers.

Reading of Scripture. Before He died, Jesus made provision for a New Testament to be added to the Old. He said the Holy Spirit would ensure that the writers of the Gospels accurately recalled Jesus’ words, would teach them everything Jesus did not have time to teach and would reveal what would happen at the end of the age (see John 14:26; 16:12-13).

Communion. On the first Easter Jesus accompanied two disciples on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:1-35). They did not recognize Him until He celebrated communion in their midst.

From its earliest days the church has seen the service of communion or “the breaking of the bread” as the chief act of worship, a way in which Jesus can “be known” to believers (see Luke 24:35).

To reassure His followers that, despite their failing Him, He still loved them. Some of Jesus’ female followers stayed by Jesus at the cross. But except for John, the men all ran away (see Matt. 27:55-56; 26:56; John 19:25-27). Peter had even denied knowing Jesus (see Luke 22:54-62).

What must the men have felt when they heard that Jesus was risen? On the one hand they were overjoyed. Their beloved Lord was alive, His predictions about His resurrection had proved true, and He had conquered death.

On the other hand they must have felt shame and fear. Shame, because they knew they had abandoned the Lord when He needed them most. Fear, because He might now reject them for their cowardice. Had He not said, “‘Whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven'” (Matt. 10:33)?

They needed the encouragement, as do we, that “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

One of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances specifically concerns the restoration of Peter (see John 21:1-19). It was not a coincidence that Jesus asked Peter three times if Peter loved Him. Peter had earlier denied Jesus three times. Jesus was making sure that Peter understood he was truly forgiven.

But it's one thing to be forgiven. Can a person, having badly blown it, ever be restored? Jesus' answer to Peter is a resounding "Yes." Three times He tells Peter, "'Feed My sheep.'" Peter had sinned grievously but was restored.

Considering some of the reasons Jesus remained on earth for 40 days after His resurrection, let's not stop celebrating at noon on Easter day but enjoy the entire 40-day Easter season, reflecting on all we can learn from what Jesus taught His disciples during that first post-resurrection time.

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