# **Title: Courageous Love: An Invitation**

*‘If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.’* Romans 8:11 (*ESV*)

**Scripture Reading:** John 20:1-30

## **Introduction:**

We pick up from the material for Good Friday identifying the raising of Lazarus as the last of seven signs in John’s Gospel and endorsing the claim that Jesus is ‘the Messiah, the Son of God’ (John 20:31). By doing what only God can do, he demonstrates he is **the source of life**, both present and eternal (John 1:4).

This causes faith to arise amongst the crowd (John 11:45) with corresponding antagonism from the religious leaders, leading to his death (v53).

While Martha anticipated a future resurrection for Lazarus, Jesus declares:

‘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.’ (John 11:25,26)

Crucially he adds, ‘Do you believe this?’ (v26)

**The invitation to believe is key to receiving what God is offering through Christ**, that:

‘by believing [we] have life in his name.’ (John 20:31)

‘just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.’ (Romans 6:4)

A life which is energised by the **same** ‘mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead’ (Ephesians 1:19) and which will allow the Spirit of Christ within us ‘to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us’ (Ephesians 3:20).

Easter Day is not a celebration of an event only - **it is an invitation to** **participate in the resurrection life, both present and eternal**.

‘Lo, a new creation dawning!

Lo, I rise to life divine!

In my soul an Easter morning;

I am Christ’s and Christ is mine’

(Francis Bottome *SASB* 734 v5)

## **Context:**

* After Good Friday the crowd is subdued and the disciple group fearful. Judas took his own life and the Sanhedrin was satisfied it had accomplished its objective. Pilate probably felt manipulated. Easter morning dawned to a *new reality*.
* In 50 days, 3,000 people will openly accept that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 2:41) based on the witness of Peter to the resurrected Christ – a witness already expressed by the disciple group in unlearned languages to the pilgrims in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5-12).
* Their response did not happen in a vacuum. Those who had shouted ‘Hosannah!’ (John 12:13) on Palm Sunday claimed the salvation they asked for. Those bereft as Jesus was paraded through Jerusalem to Golgotha were vindicated.
* The impact of Jesus was already embedded in the lives of many who witnessed his journey to the cross and before, and would facilitate the phenomenal growth in the numbers of disciples following his resurrection (Acts 2:47; 5:14; 6:7 etc); but it needed to be ignited.
* It would be the resurrection and the events that followed that achieved this and gave courage to the people, empowering them to speak and witness for Christ. ***Courageous Discipleship* would result from his *Courageous Love.***

Steer:

* The crowd has been silenced – except for the women who supported Jesus, and they were not believed (Luke 24:11). The Pharisees have nothing to say beyond ensuring the tomb is secure (Matthew 27:62-66). Of our protagonists, Judas, never lived to see the possibility of forgiveness in this life; and Pilate’s story moves outside the biblical narrative. Peter remained, tormented by his denial – his betrayal. John records his reconciliation with Jesus (John 21:15-17) but that would happen later and away from the Easter events. On Easter morning he is left ‘wondering’ (Luke 24:12) and not expecting that the empty tomb meant Jesus had returned to life, according to John (20:9).
* Aside from Jesus meeting the Eleven on the evening of his resurrection, it will be others who will become the catalyst of faith to the waiting followers of Jesus. We will focus on three of these.

The Protagonists:

* Mary Magdalene

John records that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb on Easter morning and discovered the stone had been removed from the entrance. She ran and reported it to Peter and John, who both come to investigate. Already, her posture and response is to *go and tell*, foreshadowing what is to come.

She turns away from the angels and sees Jesus – though she supposes him to be the gardener, who asks, ‘Who is it you are looking for?’ Mary responds on the assumption the ‘gardener’ may have taken the body away and offers to ‘get him’ (John 20:15).

Jesus simply **speaks her name**: ‘Mary’ (v16).

Hearing the familiar voice of her Saviour, her eyes were opened to Jesus: ‘She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”)’ (John 20:16).

We can only imagine the emotions bursting through any lingering tears at this realisation. But the next instruction from Jesus is what we are to lean into:

‘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’.”’ (John 20:17)

Jesus’ instruction is to go and tell – and in obedience,

‘Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.’ (John 20:18)

Mary becomes the first of the apostles, the first witness to the resurrection, and the first evangelist, as the good news flows through her.

* Cleopas and the other disciple on the Road to Emmaus

The travellers on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:13-33; Dorothy Sayers is among those who suggest the second disciple may have been Cleopas’s wife) present a domestic scene, and we can suppose typical of many at this time talking about Jesus and their hope ‘that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel’ (Luke 24:21). As Cleopas and the other disciple are joined by an unrecognised Jesus, they together discuss the events of the last days. The informed responses and measured understanding offered cause Jesus to be invited to remain with them overnight, an invitation accepted. At the evening meal Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them, when ‘their eyes were opened and they recognised him’ (Luke 24:31). They too became witnesses.

* Thomas

Thomas was not there when Jesus met the disciple group in the evening of Easter Day and he refused to believe them when they told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ (John 20:25). A week later Jesus returned. After greeting the disciples, he told Thomas:

‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’ (John 20:27)

Thomas’s response is to acknowledge, ‘My Lord and my God!’ (v28)

* The Eleven

According to Luke and John, Jesus met with the disciples on the evening of Easter Day. In Luke’s account the appearance confirms his actual resurrection – he is not a ghost. And as on the Emmaus Road, this reinforces that all had happened according to God’s intention (Luke 24:45). Pentecost and the disciples’ spiritual empowerment is anticipated along with the Great Commission (vv47-49). John suggests, ‘The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord’ (John 20:20), and that Jesus gifted the Holy Spirit to them (v22).

## **Application:**

We see in each of these three accounts, that **with revelation comes a response**.

Mary Magdalene, Cleopas (and another) and Thomas, were all:

* Comforted by Christ
* Companioned by Christ
* Confronted by Christ

For Mary Magdalene, Jesus comes in her distress and answers her emotional need.

For the travellers, his appeal is to their intellect and understanding.

For Thomas, it is to challenge his innate character. There is an insistency: ‘Stop doubting and believe’ (John 20:27).

* It is in the intimacy of hearing her name that Mary believes.
* It is in the action of breaking the bread that Jesus is recognised.
* It is in the force of his presence that worship of Jesus is engendered.

**Jesus appeals to all aspects of the human person to indicate his presence and elicit a response to worship and share this worship with others:**

* We can only imagine the joy of Mary as she reports, ‘I have seen the Lord!’ (John 20:18).
* The energy and excitement of the travellers who, weary and seeking rest on the road, are energised to return to Jerusalem late in the night to report that Jesus lives.
* The response of Thomas as he recognised Jesus for who he is: ‘My Lord and my God!’ (John 20:28).

The impact of the witness of these three actors on those associated with them will be considerable:

* On the crowd
* On the Pharisees
* On Peter

It will gather a momentum which will finally burst forth at Pentecost.

**There is a present application as belief in the resurrection is invited and celebrated.**

**The key message of John is that we are called to believe in order to find the life that is described. By faith, new life is experienced, and we are to pass on this invitation to all.**

The joy in the resurrection will facilitate the coming of the Spirit of Jesus at Pentecost when we become partakers of all that has been promised and equipped to continue to witness to a living Christ.

The individual stories also have merit as material for preachment.

Mary

* Wondering
* Weeping
* Witnessing

Travellers

* Engaged
* Enlightened
* Energised

Thomas

* Contrary
* Confronted
* Convinced

Now, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we too can respond to the resurrection of Jesus: to accept the invitation of new life and take courage as we then offer this invitation to others. Filled with joy this Easter, let us continue this theme of courageous love in all that we do; let it spread across our communities.

The resurrection story continues in and through us.

Apply these thoughts to your local corps and context bringing practical steps of what this can look like.