

The Burning Bush, the Locked Room, and Other Mysteries

Sermon by Bob Kuntz

Exodus 3:1-6; John 20:19-31 4-11-99

Why are these impossible things in the Bible? The bush burns but it is not consumed. The doors are locked but Jesus appears in their midst. Why didn't God leave these parts out? Wouldn't that make it easier to believe the Scripture and the resurrection?

The Bible is full of these Mysteries. From the burning bush to the sun standing still to the Red Sea parting. From the manna and the quail in the wilderness, to the feeding of the 5000, to the raising of Lazarus and the resurrection of Christ. These mysteries are difficult for lots of people. Thomas Jefferson took the gospels and cut out all the miracles. He kept the teachings of Jesus: love God and love your neighbor, but he didn't know what to do with the mysteries. Aren't many of us like that?

We want to be precise, accurate, realistic, down-to-earth. We don't want exaggerations, distortions, false ideas.

But the closer we get to the heart of God, the less precise we can be. This doesn't mean being less intelligent ("Like, duh, man, it was far out."); it doesn't mean making less sense; it doesn't mean believing tabloid stories about aliens. But the closer we get to the heart of God, the closer we are to the Mystery that transcends our minds. God is greater than our minds can grasp.

Of course, we keep grasping. And this is as it should be. But as Christ leads us closer to the heart of God, we find that more often faith is not a matter of what we have grasped but who has grasped us; that faith is not so much about what we understand as about God who understands us; that faith is not so much a result of our work as it is the outcome of His work in us.

Thomas was absent from Upper Room and missed the Risen Christ. The Mystery of the resurrection bewildered him. He couldn't believe just because the others had seen the Lord. Thomas says, "**Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.**" (John 20:25)

The Scripture doesn't tell us why Thomas said this. Was he being stubborn? Was he refusing to give in to peer pressure? Was his faith weak or was the Mystery too great?

Few of Jesus' disciples believe the resurrection until the Risen Lord appears to them. His resurrection is a Mystery--in the Biblical sense of the word mystery: that which we cannot comprehend until God reveals it to us. Jesus told parables that were perplexing to everyone, including the disciples. Jesus explained the parables to his followers saying, "**To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven....**" (Matthew 13:11) A lot of things in faith are like the parables, they are perplexing to us until they are revealed.

For Thomas, the resurrection was this kind of Mystery. No matter what others told him, he couldn't "get" it until the Lord revealed it. But Jesus doesn't criticize Thomas for this. He isn't impatient with us for our honest doubts. Jesus knows that all of us struggle to believe. Like He came to Thomas, so He comes to us, so that we can say, "My Lord and my God!"

The burning bush was this kind of Mystery. Moses saw the bush burning and not being consumed. It was awesome, wonderful, but Moses did not see that it was the Lord. Then God spoke to him out of the fire and told him to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. The burning bush was a mystery to Moses until the Lord revealed Himself.

We still have questions about the bush not being burned up. Those questions aren't answered. But when the Lord reveals Himself, the tiny Mystery of the bush not being consumed is irrelevant in the face of the great Mystery: the Lord God, who made Heaven and earth, is giving Himself to us now.

Many people are uncomfortable with these mysteries in the Bible. They try all sorts of explanations: the fire was a mirage or dream or the bush really was being consumed but Moses missed it--anything to get us out from under the unsettling nature of the mystery: something is happening here that we have never seen or known.

I believe that these Mysteries in the Bible are unexplainable because they represent a moment when God reaches down from Heaven and makes contact with this world. God often comes as fire, an eternal fire that will never burn out. If you think the first at the burning bush was something, wait until Pentecost. Faith involves mystery--not as a cop-out from science, reason, thoughtfulness--but because God transcends all these things. Faith involves a kind of seeing that we can never do on our own, that only happens by revelation.

Moses confronted this kind of Mystery at the burning bush and Thomas confronts it in the Upper Room. The Presence of the Risen Lord is a moment when God reaches down from Heaven and makes contact with this world. God comes as to us as life, eternal life that will never burn out, a transcendent life, something wonderfully more than the life we know.

John's gospel points out the precise moment when the Mystery was revealed. ¹⁹ **When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said.** ²⁰ **After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw that it was the Lord, they were filled with joy.** (John 20)

They recognize Jesus by His wounds. Thomas missed the first party, and he, too, counts the wounds of Christ as crucial: **"Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."** When Christ appears to Thomas, Thomas recognizes the Risen Lord by those wounds.

We recognize Christ by his brokenness, by what He suffered for our forgiveness, by His wounds. The wounds reveal Christ and Christ reveals God. **"God is love. This is how God revealed His love among us: He sent His only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is**

love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be forgiveness for our sin. (1 John 4:8b-10)

This is a Mystery. It's not something that we can pin down and say precisely so that everyone gets it. When the Lord reveals this to us, we know that it is true. We know. Until then, we scratch our head, puzzled, and say, "I hope you know what you're talking about because I don't get it."

This revelation is has a personal character. The moments when Christ reveals the Mystery of His resurrection, of salvation, of the life He gives us, are not the same for everyone. Jesus doesn't come in the same way, at the same time, with the same words for everyone. He comes to some in company; He comes to some alone. He calls some by name. He comforts some and challenges others. When Christ appears to Thomas, He says, "Go ahead, put your finger in my wounds and your hand in my side." Why does He say that? He's telling Thomas, "I know what you said about Me. I wasn't there, but I heard you. Now, I am here. Once, in Galilee, I called you; now I claim you. I love you, Thomas; believe and be mine."

And Thomas says, "My Lord and my God!"

There is a Mystery about how He comes to us and when. It's not something that we can nail down, but watch out, because when it happens it can nail us down....

John tells us, at the end, why he's told us all these stories and sermons of Jesus'. Not to explain the Mystery. Not to get all the facts straight for the historical record. Not to apologize for the disciples or to defend them. **"These are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Son of God; and that believing, you might have life in His name.** (John 20:31)

There's a lot the gospels do not tell us. What did Jesus look like? What he tall or short? Did He and the disciples work? Where did they stay? Whose room is the Upper Room? What did the disciples think about each other?

We don't need to know these things to know what matters; we don't need to know them to come to salvation. These stories tell us what we need to know--that we recognize Christ by His wounds: He died for our sins. God, in Christ, forgives us all that is past. The gospel tells us that Christ triumphs over death--He lives and because He lives, His people will live too.

Will we open ourselves to the Mystery? I don't want to be gullible; people believe too many crazy things. But God help me notice the burning bush and hear His voice and take off my shoes; God help me see the wounds and receive Christ when He comes.