

"AN IDENTITY CRISIS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

They say that the late Hubert Humphrey loved to meet people. And that, of course, made him a much-loved politician. One time on a fishing trip in northern Minnesota, Hubert Humphrey and Federal Judge, Miles Lord, were browsing around a sporting-goods store. The judge happened to notice that a California tour bus had broken down outside the store. The judge sneaked out to the bus and introduced himself as the Mayor of this little Minnesota town. He said to the people who were standing around the bus,

"Folks, I'm so sorry to see you're having trouble. If there's anything that we can do for you...just step by my office. And by the way...there's something you can do for us. We have a fellow here in our town who looks a lot like Hubert Humphrey. He sounds like Hubert Humphrey and he even thinks he is Hubert Humphrey. Now, if you should run into him while you're here...don't give him any money. But please be nice to him...'cause we kinda like him and he doesn't do us any harm...."

And with that the Judge went back into the store and said,

"Hubert...there's a bus load of California tourists out out front....and they're just dying to meet you!"

And with this, Hubert Humphrey roared out and proceeded to shake hands with all these people standing around the bus. He even got on the bus and shook hands with those who hadn't bothered to get off. Afterward he had a puzzled look on his face and said to his friend, the Judge:

"You know...I just don't understand those California people. Every time I shook hands with one of them, somebody started to giggle...they acted rather strange."

I'm sure that no one loved that gag more than the late Hubert Humphrey. Mistaken identities often bring a chuckle....a smile, a laugh and sometimes a bit of a red face. We've all that sort of thing happen to us.

IDENTITY OF THE RISEN CHRIST

Today we're dealing with an identity that was not mistaken...though some have claimed otherwise. It is the identity of the Risen Christ and it's recorded for us in the 20th chapter of John's Gospel. Let me work in to it by giving you a bit of background information.

As you may remember, after His resurrection, the disciples of Jesus devoted their lives to proclaiming to the world that Jesus was the "Living Lord" and when the religious and civil authorities tried to silence them, they found that they had their hands full. If they threw them into jail, these audacious people usually ended up converting their fellow prisoners and sometimes even the prison guards. And if they martyred them, they discovered that they died with such radiant confidence that the people who witnessed their ordeals were quite often won to their cause. His disciples and followers insisted that He is who He says He is and their witness rings loud and clear across twenty centuries.

HE IS WHO HE SAYS HE IS

not.

He is Who He says He is! Can we be sure? Is this a case of "mistaken identity"? I think

Yes, to begin with we have the testimony of those who were closest to Him and how difficult it must have been for those in that "select company" of the Twelve to deal with this claim. Such things just do not happen in this world.

Take the case of Thomas, often spoken of as a "Doubting Thomas". He's a part of this "post-Easter" season. Remember how he found all of this so hard to take. He wasn't there with the others when Jesus made His first "post-resurrection" appearance. And then when the other disciples told Thomas that "We have seen the Lord!"...why he was very skeptical and said to them something like this...

"Unless I see the NAIL MARKS in His hands, and put my finger where those nails were...and put my hand into HIS SIDE.....I will not believe it!"

And then a week later the disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them this time. And even though the doors were shut...locked...Jesus came and we're told that He stood among them and said, "Peace...peace be with you". Turning to Thomas, He then said,

"Put your finger here...and see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop your doubting, Thomas. Believe!" And Thomas said, "My Lord. My God...!!!"

Jesus did not reveal Himself to the world at large. It was only to those who believed. Yes, Lord....."I believe!" "Help my unbelief". But appear to them He did....in ways which left no doubt that He had risen...conquered the grave. And they went out to tell the story and it was against all kinds of opposition that they shared this incredible story. "He is risen" was the word that spread like wild-fire across the Mediterranean world....not, "love your enemies". And nothing could stop them. No power on earth could block them. Talk about faith and persistence...

Remember the story of the door-to-door salesman who was having a tough time of it...down on his luck, or so it seemed. Day after day he would walk up and down the streets of this town with his product. No one wanted to buy. Every day he knocked on the door of this same woman and every day she turned him away. But finally, after about his fifth time of knocking on her door, she gave in and made a purchase. But the very next day he was back there again...ringing her doorbell. She asked, "What are you doing here?" She was exasperated. The salesman replied, "Well, mam.....now that you're an established customer...is there anything else?"

Those followers of Jesus had persistence. Theirs was a witness that would not be defeated. We know what they went through - in arenas with lions, and burned as human torches, and suffering the vilest kinds of humiliation and bodily pain. But they remained faithful to what they knew in their hearts to be true. They had met the Risen Lord and they wanted the rest of the world to know of it.

LIVES WERE CHANGED

In the process, of course, their lives were changed by all of this. We know that. They knew beyond any doubt that He was Who He said He was, and people do not die defending a lie or some fictitious account. For them, it was no mistaken identity. And so they told their story of the risen Christ and how they had experienced His presence.

And I've often thought that if we followed their example, we could go out and just turn this world "upside down", or perhaps we should say, "right side up". But most Christians, as I see it, prefer to settle for what's been called, "DECAFFEINATED CHRISTIANITY"...the kind that promises not to keep us awake at night.

Wasn't it Saint Francis who said, "Preach the Gospel at all times....and when necessary use words". For some, the words of witness do not come easily. Actions, as they say, speak louder than words. Remember that. Witnessing to our faith does not have to be offensive.

A newly wed couple from North Carolina shared this one with me. While on their honeymoon down in the Savannah area they decided one evening to go to a small Chinese restaurant not far from where they were staying. It looked a bit tattered around the edges, but they went and enjoyed a fantastic meal. When it came time for them to leave, the lady behind the cash register...picking up on the fact that they were newly wed....asked if she could give them a present and reaching under the counter she pulled out a little porcelain Chinese house and handed it to them with these words,

"Always keep Christ in your home and marriage.
This house will remind you of keeping Him
in your lives....and this is my gift to you!"

This couple were deeply touched by this gracious gesture on the part of this woman and who among us would ever be offended by such a gentle and sincere token of love? In other words, our witnessing does not have to be offensive or "pressurized". Our witnessing can have a beautiful and a caring touch. A note. A call. An expression of concern. Such a warm witness travels, believe me. It doesn't have to be left to the "professionals". When I hear of some one praying with another member over the telephone, I think to myself....well-done. Beautiful. The call. The note. The visit. The affirming word.

We have two thousand years of observing the changes He has made in the lives of other people. Think of some of the people in the church in which you were reared...elsewhere...back there in Texas, or North Carolina...or wherever you first met the Lord. We all know of people in our personal histories who will tell you they couldn't have made it without Him. "It was as if He was there by my side...." Lives have been changed and continue to be changed. No case of a mistaken identity.

Millard Fuller that amazing man who did so much to get Habitat For Humanity started once told the story of a man who stopped his car in front of a house that had been built by Habitat For Humanity. The man told of chatting with a seven year old boy out front of one of the houses. He said, "Son...you've sure got a pretty house...tell me, which one of these houses do you live in?" And the lad pointed to one of the houses and said, "That one!"

He then asked the boy "And who built your house?" The man knew that Jimmy Carter had spent time there helping to build some houses and thinking that the boy who say, "Jimmy Carter", he was touched when the boy said, "Why...Jesus built my house!"

And when you stop to think about it, the boy was on target. Such good works get done in this world because somewhere and somehow Jesus Christ got into the act and touched a life. "Jesus built my house" said the seven year old. I like that.

TESTIMONY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Long ago a Gospel writer penned this line and offered a witness for many of us. Said he, "You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!" Granted that such a subjective experience can be misleading, but when you combine such an experience with the testimony of those who walked with Him and died for Him two thousand years ago.....combine it with the testimony of all others since that First Century who have felt His healing touch and His lifting life-giving and life-changing power, then we are led to cry out with Thomas, "Yes...MY LORD AND MY GOD."

Karl Malone, the great power forward of the Utah Jazz who is "up" for the MVP (along with Michael Jordan) in the NBA said something some time back about his least popular opponent in the NBA. He said,

"When I see Bill Laimbeer, my whole outlook on life changes!"

Now, in a positive way, I hope that you can say that when you see Jesus Christ coming to you in the pages of our New Testament, or in those high spiritual moments of prayer and of worship....yes, of good works, too....that "my whole outlook on life changes!" And if you have not had that kind of experience of the Christ spirit in your life, I invite you to "open" yourself to that possibility here today. A simple prayer of faith...of surrender....is a good place to begin. Then, support it with some steps, some action. And see where it goes.

An elderly woman walked slowly into a Life Insurance office out in Minneapolis back during the worst days of the Great Depression and wanted to know if she could stop paying the premiums on her late husband's Life Insurance policy. "He's been dead now for some time" she said, "And I can't afford to make any more payments". The clerk behind the desk looked up her husband's policy and discovered that it was now worth several hundred thousands of dollars. This poor lady was wealthy, but she didn't know it for no one had ever explained to her how life insurance works.

Perhaps no one has ever stopped to explain to you that as a follower of Jesus, you, too, are rich....and that He is available to you - His love, His power, His joy, His peace....it's all there for you. There's no case here of mistaken identity. He is Who He says He is! Remember that. "My Lord and MY God" said Thomas.

Remember those beautiful lines from "Footprints" by Margaret Powers. How do they go....

"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow You, You'd walk with me all the way, but I have noticed that during the most troublesome times of my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why...when I needed you most, you would leave me".

The Lord replied, "My precious, precious child. I love you, and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and of suffering....when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

PRAYER

Come to each one of us in these quiet moments, O God...and wrestle with each one of us in those dark and hidden corners of our lives where anxiety and despair, pride and prejudice, selfishness and meanness may be lurking. Help us to see Jesus more clearly....to love Him more dearly and then to follow Him more nearly....that His Risen Life may be in us. In His name we now pray. Amen.