

A Present Savior

By Horatius Bonar, 1867

"She did not know it was Jesus." John 20:14

When Jesus comes the second time there will be no mistake as to who he is. He comes in his own glory, and in his Father's glory, and with his mighty angels—in majesty, and power, and brightness. Every one shall know him then. The Jew shall know him, for he shall "look upon him whom he has pierced, and mourn." The Gentile shall know him; for it is written, "Every eye shall see him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him." The saint shall know him—for he comes "to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all those who believe." The sinner shall know him, for "he comes to take vengeance upon those who know not God, and that obey not his gospel." No one shall mistake him in that day; for it shall be either Jesus the bridegroom coming to be recognized and rejoiced in by his long-waiting bride—or it shall be Jesus the Judge and avenger coming to break his enemies in pieces with his iron rod.

But when he came the first time he was mistaken—few knew that it was Jesus. He passed in and out, yet was he unknown. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and yet the world knew him not. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not." Nazareth, where he had been brought up, knew him not. Capernaum, where he dwelt, knew him not. Bethsaida knew him not, and even Jerusalem knew him not. He was full of grace and truth; He was the messenger of the Father's love, and the declarer of his own, yet men knew him not. He passed through this world unhonored and unrecognized; One in whom man saw not the Mighty God, the Incarnate Word, the Eternal Son of the Father.

But even to his own chosen ones, who had received him, he was sometimes strangely unknown. The two Emmaus friends knew him not. Thomas knew him not. More than once we read that the disciples knew him not, and even Mary "did not know it was Jesus." One would have thought this impossible in any circumstances, and yet here we find it so. Even Mary's eyes discerned him not. He stood before her, yet she knew him not. The keen eye of love, the quick-sighted eye of woman failed to recognize him. One wonders how it could be so. Could Jacob see his own Benjamin, his own Joseph, and yet not know them? Could Jonathan meet David, and yet not know him? Yet Mary met with Jesus, and knew not that it was he.

What hindered the recognition? It was nothing in Jesus himself. He was not unwilling to be known, nor reluctant to be saluted and recognized as of old. He did not veil himself. He did not stand aloof. What was it then?

1. *She was seeking the living among the dead.* She had gone to the tomb to find him—her only hope seemed there. She knew that he had died, and she expected to find him among the dead. She forgot that he was the living One, that death to him could be, at the most—but the matter of a day. She sought him where he was not to be found, and when he appeared, when she expected him not, she knew not that it was Jesus. Like the foolish child that would dig for the star in the little pool where it mirrors its beam, and does not recognize it shining in its living beauty above his head; thus Mary sought the living among the dead; the heavenly amid the earthly. No wonder that she knew him not. Beware of seeking, in like manner as Mary did, the living among the dead; a living Christ amid dead forms, and duties, and devotions, and rites; lest, when he does appear to you, you know him not.

2. *She was laying too much stress on the mere body of the Lord.* She had known it in other days. She had seen him on the cross. She had helped to lay him in the sepulcher, and her whole thoughts were therefore occupied with the *body* of her Lord. When last she saw it, it was pale and cold, torn and bleeding, no life remaining. Her thoughts reverted to that scene. She could not realize anything else; and now this remembrance of the body of her Lord came between her and the Lord himself. She was attaching too much value to his mere corporeal frame; here was a rebuke to her for so doing. She was so much occupied with the thought of his body, that the real Christ was hidden, the Christ himself, so that, when he appeared, she knew not that it was Jesus. Let us not allow anything pertaining to the outward form of Jesus—in which sentimentalism may indulge—to hinder our beholding the real, the living Savior. Let us beware lest some particular aspect in which we expect to see him, be just the very thing that hinders us from seeing him at all. If we have made up our minds only to see him in one form, under one aspect, and in one way, it may be we shall not see him at all; or when he does stand before us, we shall be, like Mary, not knowing that it is Jesus.

3. *She was blinded by her overmuch sorrow.* Sorrow had filled her heart and absorbed her soul on one object; her dead Master. This blinded her to the living one. Sorrow dimmed her eye with tears, and she failed to recognize through those tears the very Christ whom she was seeking, the very being over whom she was weeping. Her excessive grief raised up a thick mist between her and her Lord. Let us beware of being blinded by overmuch sorrow. In the world we shall have tribulation; we may reckon upon that as our lot; yet, let us not be blinded by overmuch sorrow; or have our eyes so dimmed with tears as to be unable to recognize or to realize a present Lord. Sorrow should produce a very different result. It should not veil—rather, it should unveil Christ. It should not throw you to a distance from him, or bring in some mountain of separation between you and him; it should increase your nearness; it should bring you nearer to him and him to you. It should make him to be felt as more precious,

more desirable, more entirely suitable, more indispensable. It should make you more quick-sighted in your love; instead of being, like Mary, less quick-sighted, so that you may know that it is Jesus when he appears.

4. *She was hindered by her unbelief.* Like the disciples, she was slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken. The rising from the dead was a thing which she but darkly understood. Like the others, she could not believe that the Messiah would die, and now that he is dead, she does not believe that he can rise again. Her faith did indeed cling to his person; that person was precious to her—but all her need of him she did not know. Her need of his dying, her need of his rising she knew not. She knew enough of him for faith and love to rest upon; but not enough to keep her from falling into error or unbelief. It was unbelief which hindered her from prompt and full recognition of her beloved Lord. Is it not in our case still the same as in Mary's? Is it not unbelief still, which comes between us and the Lord? He draws near to us; he stands before us, yet we know him not. Perhaps we seek him, seek him earnestly, and he comes, yet, when he comes, we recognize him not; we know not that very Jesus whom we were seeking—if he comes not in the way that we expect. Unbelief has suggested that it is not thus that we are to expect him to appear, that it is not in this place, or in this way, or in this form, that we may expect to find him and to meet him.

He presents himself to us as a risen Christ, an almighty Savior, all that the sinner needs, full of grace and truth, with forgiveness upon his lips and eternal life in his hands; with every heavenly blessing held out to us; and yet we recognize him not; for unbelief has given another representation to him, and we are not prepared to recognize him, except in that form which we ourselves would prescribe to him, in that aspect that we have made ourselves think that he will surely appear to us in. Faith makes no such conditions as unbelief does. Faith does not attempt to prescribe to the Lord in what form, or at what time, or in what way, or in what circumstances he shall appear. It is ever ready to recognize him in any condition, and under any garb. It is glad to find him anywhere.

Mark then the peculiar position occupied by Mary. She thought that she was seeking an absent Lord, *whereas she was refusing to recognize a present one*. Most sinful mistake and full of evil to herself, robbing her of that fullness of blessing which was at her very side! Had you asked her what ailed her when she was weeping, she would have said, my Lord is absent, I have been seeking him and I cannot find him anywhere, whereas it should have been, my Lord is present and I do not know him. This was her sin. While professing to seek an absent Lord, *she was refusing to recognize a present one*. This was her sin, this was her calamity. "She knew not that it was Jesus." This kept her in sorrow, and in darkness.

Is not her position precisely that which we ourselves too often occupy? Is not that sin of hers too often ours, and is not that calamity which overtook her just the very calamity which we so often bring upon ourselves? Her case resembles ours. We thrust away blessings from us in the same way that she did; we shut out the Lord just as she did. *Christ is present*; let us keep this in mind—"Lo, I am with you always." He is no distant, no absent Savior to any believer—but ever near. He is at our very side, at the very side of each, so that no one can complain of distance in him any more than they can complain of estrangement or lack of love. He is never absent, nor repulsive, nor unwilling to be recognized as Jesus, whether by saint or sinner. He does not veil himself to prevent our seeing him. He does not repel our advances. His grace never varies. Always is he the same. His ear is the same willing ear, his eye the same loving eye, and his hand stretched out—the same gracious hand. To sinner and to saint, Jesus is near.

This nearness of Christ is what faith recognizes; for the office of faith is not to make him present, as so many seem to imagine; it is not to bring him down from above. The office of faith is not to seek an absent—but to *recognize a present Lord*. And what a mighty difference there is between these two things! **Unbelief seeks an absent Lord; while faith recognizes a present Lord.** *Recognition is faith's special office*; and the Savior whom we preach is not far distant and inaccessible in yonder heaven—but near; and not only near—but the nearest of all near beings; the nearest thing to you on earth or in heaven. We preach a present Christ. Let faith simply recognize him as such, and all is well. And just as faith recognizes this present Christ, instead of going in quest of him as if he were absent, unbelief blinds the eye to him. It cannot, indeed, thrust him away; that is impossible. It cannot, with all its efforts, make him the absent one; it cannot empty him of blessings—but it refuses to recognize him. It knows him not, it treats him as the distant one, in order thereby to be furnished with a ground for self-righteous efforts in seeking him. It treats him as an unloving one, as one hiding himself, one reluctant to appear; and thus it puts away that blessing which is at hand, in all its fullness. It keeps us in sorrow and in darkness; it prevents communication between us and the Lord. For, let us remember, that earnestness is not faith. There is an earnestness which is pure unbelief; and this earnestness of unbelief shows itself by going in quest of an absent Savior while the earnestness of faith shows itself in recognizing a present one.

Yes; Christ is at our side, though unseen and unknown. When he works in us, effectually drawing the soul to himself, he cannot be hidden; but, for a time he may. A man does not always recognize him at first, even when he is really working in him, and drawing him to himself. Many things hide him, and yet he carries on his work as though he were hidden.

He has hidden ways of leading the sinner to the Father. It is, perhaps, sometimes a long way; there are many windings in it, and it seems when we look at it, as if there was nothing but common events, common providences, common mercies, common trials; and yet it was Jesus in each one, Jesus himself, though we knew him not. We saw the process, though we did not realize what it meant. We knew not that Jesus was in it, that he was in each of these events, in each of these providences, in each of these mercies, in each of these trials. There is danger in not giving Christ credit for his own work—but in taking the credit to ourselves for it, or giving the credit to chance, or to the common course of events. It is one thing to take to ourselves too much credit, and it is another thing not to ascribe enough to him, or not to realize him in certain things, because we think these things are not so remarkable as we would have expected him to work by; but, how blessed does the discovery come, when at length we find that it was really Jesus who was working, though we long refused to believe him, and that what we imagined to be just natural feeling, natural sentiment, was, after all, Jesus himself, carrying on his work in us.

He has hidden ways of giving peace to the troubled. The wounded spirit looks around for rest, and for healing; yet it comes not. It expects something outward, something visible, something striking, as Naaman did, and it is disappointed when there is nothing of this kind. It refuses to take peace in a way so simple; it refuses to taste and recognize the gift, because it is not presented to it in some striking way; until, at last, the soul is led to ask, What if, after all, I am putting away a present blessing, and refusing to recognize a present Christ? What if all these gleams of peace which I am putting away from me be real? What if it be the light of his countenance which I am refusing to receive? Thus, the soul begins to learn that it is really so, and that it has been Jesus all along, and yet we knew him not.

Again, he has hidden ways of comforting and gladdening the spirit of the afflicted. Trials oftentimes come strangely, very strangely, and we do not see Jesus in them. They are not the kind of trials we looked for, nor such as we would have thought best for us—and so we refuse to be comforted. But, perhaps, at some unexpected turn of the way we make the blessed discovery that it was really Jesus, and none but he! How much do we lose of consolation by failing to recognize Christ in each, even the commonest, even the unlikeliest, even the most untoward and adverse events that befall us. He is seeking to purify us. Each event, be it dark or light, be it sunshine or shadow; each event is tending to this. All is full of meaning, full of rich, deep meaning, though we know it not. We find, in spite of ourselves, a process moving onward, moving unaccountably, perhaps imperceptibly, on; and though, for a time, we discern it not fully, yet at length it unfolds itself in all its blessedness, and we see that the Lord was in it all, purifying us as silver. These changes that were taking place in us

were not natural changes, the result of natural causes—but wrought by his own Almighty hand, though not in the way that we expected.

Let us learn, then, to recognize a present Lord! This is faith's especial office, and no amount of sin on our part, can reverse this state of things, this order which God has established. When we begin, because of felt guilt, or of conscious evil, and unworthiness, to seek an absent or a distant Savior, we are giving way to unbelief in one of its worst forms. And never shall we return to our quiet rest again, until we have learned the sin of going in quest of an absent Lord, instead of doing what he desires we should at all times do—*recognize a present Jesus!*