

My Lord, My God!

John 20:19-31

November 6, 2022

Read John 20:19-31

This is the Word of the LORD

Today, we continue with John's account of the resurrected Jesus. It is difficult to imagine how confusing was that day. On the one hand, Peter and John had run to the tomb with Mary Magdalene and discovered it empty; just like she said. Later, she went back and reported to all the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

On the other hand, dead people do not get up. Yes, Jesus, talked about rising from the dead; but, to repeat: dead people do not get up. Ok, yes, they had seen Lazarus, but Jesus raised him from the dead. Now, it was Jesus who was the dead one – and none of them had gone out to his tomb to raise him; they had only seen that the tomb was empty. And...well, there's no real delicate way to put this...Mary Magdalene was a woman. Who knows what she saw or experienced? They all knew that the testimony of a woman was – at best – suspect.

So, there were two options: one, she was mistaken; or, two, she was telling the truth. Neither was a wholly attractive alternative to the disciples.

If she was mistaken, even the rumor of a resurrection of Jesus was going to generate a massive manhunt for the disciples so that all of them would be executed. If the general public thought Jesus had risen from the dead, and the messianic prophecies were fulfilled, then the Romans were going to crack down hard on any revolutionary fervor. The Jewish authorities were going to have to make a strong showing of taking affirmative action to put it down or the entire nation was going to suffer. That put the disciples in the crosshairs. What happened to Jesus was what was in store for them. If this was a rumor that Mary was going to spread, it was going to present them with huge troubles. Thus, they were in a house where the doors were locked for fear of the Jews.

If she was not mistaken – if she was telling the truth – the risen Jesus was probably going to be looking for them. Although she had reported on him favorably, she was not one of the twelve (now eleven) who had overtly deserted him. It is not difficult to project onto Jesus how I would have felt, or how many of us would have felt, if all our closest friends and associates had abandoned and deserted us in our most dire time of need. Sure, he had told them ahead of time that this was going to happen; but...actually happening? It was awful – they fulfilled all of the things Jesus said they would do that they thought they would *never* do. What would Jesus' be like when he came to the disciples? At worst, he would be angry. At very worst – even though they had never seen this in him – he might be vengeful. At best, he would be disappointed.

The worst feeling in the world I ever experienced was my dad saying, "I am so disappointed in you." It was worse than any spanking or any grounding or any other scolding – as bad as those were. Disappointment carried with it the longer-term prospect that somehow my character was not what he had hoped or wanted from me, and that I was always going to be less in his eyes.

And then, suddenly, Jesus was there among them.

My suspicion is that their stomachs were instantly tied up in knots. I know mine would have been. What about you? They had to be asking themselves, how would Jesus be with them? How *will* Jesus react to us? How *will* Jesus receive us?

Peace be with you.

In ministry I have encountered so many people for whom this is a debilitating stumbling block for their faith. Despite what Jesus said, despite what Jesus did, despite how he responded to the disciples when he appeared in this chapter, even Christians keep their distance from Jesus because they are afraid that what they have done has been too much for Jesus to handle. They know what the gospel says and they think it is true, but the disconnect comes from the guilt hold onto for they have done. "I am a believer and yet I still did this...how can God love *me*?"

You can know the right stuff. You can have all the right answers to the questions on the theological pop quiz. You can be doing all the right things that people say people of faith should do. You can do all these things and still not embrace the peace that Jesus proclaimed as his first post-resurrection words to the disciples. "Peace be with you."

This is where faith and the maturity of faith come into play. It is where what we know or what we think is what we embrace as truth. Let me say that again: the maturity of faith comes when what we know or what we think is what we embrace as truth.

Jesus came and stood among them. How he did it is so much less important than *that* he did it. In between the lines, it is not hard to imagine the awkward pause that followed his presence being with them; the full range of emotions, thoughts, and reactions must have gone through each of the disciples. Then, Jesus showed them his hands and his side – that he was alive, that he was not angry or disappointed or anything other than happy to be with them – and, *then*, ...then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

With that one statement and his presence, Jesus transformed the whole scene. It was then that the disciples embraced as truth what they had known or thought. Part of Jesus' mission was to manifest God's love for us *because* of our failings, not *despite* them. Jesus came to deal with our sin, not despite it. The gospel is so powerful because he was victorious through the fullness of human rejection, rebellion, and brokenness. Grace is the gift of redemption through Christ's obedience for us; grace is not followed by a bill for services rendered. There is no other shoe to drop. There is no other hammer to fall.

Guilt is great when it drives us to repentance and seeking God's mercy and forgiveness. Guilt is misplaced and debilitating after repentance and seeking God's mercy and forgiveness. What is the difference? The first – that which drives us to repentance and seeking God's mercy and forgiveness – is a gift: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It is what brings us back to Jesus, thankful for God's great love in sending him to be our great high priest – and – to become sin so that we do not incur the consequences of our rebellion. Now, to be clear: Jesus' coming does not give us a license to sin or to disregard God; just remember the cost he paid. But even in our ongoing struggle with sin, we can be assured of God's love *because* Jesus paid that cost.

Guilt after forgiveness is holding onto what is no longer yours – God has purchased it and, as far as the east is from the west, has removed it from you. Carrying it says that Jesus’ sacrifice was not sufficient for you. We know that is not true, but believing it and living into it requires that we embrace the truth.

Jesus said to the disciples, “Peace be with you.” He meant it. Peace is the gift of his kingdom. In 14:27 and 16:33 Jesus promised that this peace would be his gift to them; now he has delivered it.

Greet. Commission. Empower.

So Jesus came to the disciples and said, “Peace be with you.” “Shalom.” What happened next must have been something to witness. In that room, it must have looked like the locker room of a team that won the World Series. It must have been chaotic. Or, maybe it was like the lyrics of *I Can Only Imagine*,

Surrounded by Your glory
What will my heart feel?
Will I dance for You Jesus
Or in awe of You be still?
Will I stand in Your presence
Or to my knees, will I fall?
Will I sing hallelujah?
Will I be able to speak at all?
I can only imagine

We do not get a timeframe for all the rejoicing that happened during this time together. Rest assured; it was probably a good long time. When all that energy had been released and the disciples were in a place that they were ready to listen again, Jesus repeated, “Peace be with you.” But then he added, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Time and again throughout the gospel – fourteen recorded times – Jesus talked about being sent from the Father. Now, Jesus was sending the disciples to carry out the mission: proclaim the gospel and demonstrate its power.

Jesus’ journey with the disciples over the course of his ministry prepared the disciples for this mission. They had heard Jesus teach. They had seen his deeds of power. They had experienced transformed lives. They knew – that is, they embraced the truth, fully now in the light of the resurrection – they knew the hope of salvation that Jesus embodied.

As he was sent, so he was sending them. Jesus did what the Father showed him. The disciples would do what Jesus had shown them. Immediately, though, Jesus did something that changed them and shows us that our pursuit of mission and ministry will not be limited or thwarted by our weakness, brokenness, failures, or imperfections. Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Our pursuit of mission and ministry is done in partnership with the Holy Spirit – who is not subject to our weakness, brokenness, failures, or imperfections.

Remember, Jesus told them previously,

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Jesus commissioned the disciples with the power of the Holy Spirit. He breathed on them or, “in them”, depending on how the preposition is translated. “On them” makes more sense from a narrative standpoint; “in them” would be more consistent theologically, in that it reflects the breathing of life into humankind in Genesis 2 and the breath of the Holy Spirit in Ezekiel 37 giving life to the multitudes. Again, the mechanics of how Jesus breathed on them are less important than *that* he did it. Whatever was the mode John was trying to communicate, the reality was that Jesus was commissioning the disciples to undertake the ministry with the power of the Holy Spirit in them.

Today is not the day to try to reconcile why John has the giving of the Holy Spirit here and Luke has it on Pentecost. We have been looking at John as a contained witness, and within this gospel, the giving of the Holy Spirit is a climactic point. It was the demonstration that Jesus’ coming continued on in the lives of the disciples and continues on in the lives of disciples.

In the presence of the risen Lord and with the giving of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were commissioned and sent. Jesus included with that charge the responsibility for church discipline, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” The Word Biblical Commentary is helpful here. “There is a double aspect of the mission: that of declaring salvation and judgment. ...Disciples proclaim forgiveness of sins and so entry into the saving sovereignty of God through the redemption of Christ, and judgment on those who reject the revelation and redemption of Christ.”¹

Friends, please be aware that this remains our charge today: it is not exclusivist or “phobic”(of any strain) to proclaim the gospel. It is *good* news, not bad. It is our only hope and our only salvation. It is life for those who believe and judgment on those who reject it. It is not hardship that this is the only way; rather, it is joy that there is **A** way – that God loves us so much that He made **A** way.

Thomas

Then, we get to Thomas. John pointed out that Thomas was not with the rest when Jesus came. Where was he? We have no idea; we only know he was not in the room with the rest. For us, thank God he was not there. Why? Because Thomas provided the very response we all encounter at some point when we are trying to share Jesus.

When Thomas did arrive, Jesus had come and gone. The other disciples were clearly euphoric. They told him, “We have seen the Lord.”

Thomas’ response could have been from our own era – “yeah, no. I am not buying it.” He needed empirical evidence. He needed something scientific, something tangible, something he could touch,

¹ George Beasley-Murray, Word Biblical Commentary, John, vol 36, p. 383-384.

measure, or experience for himself. Their testimony was not enough. “Unless I see the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, *I will not believe.*”

Does that sound familiar? Isn't it ironic that the very first incident of the disciples' responding to Jesus' commissioning with the good news was to someone who had travelled with Jesus – and, it resulted in this reaction?

How many people have you heard say, “Unless this ...(whatever it might be), *I will not believe.*” Another variation of this would include, “If God does this for me, I might believe.” I have often asked people who want to argue me out of faith, “What would it take for you to believe?” Thomas offered up the gold standard for doubters.

Do you think that may be why John included this in the gospel?

It is important to note that Thomas was representative, not normative. That is, Thomas' doubts are shared by many, and Jesus' response was to all. Jesus was not (and is not) required to show up to any and all who make Thomas' demands. Jesus answered Thomas and – by doing so – answered all the rest. Jesus answered by coming again when – this time – *all* the disciples were together. Jesus again said, “Peace be with you.” To the rest, this was a welcome greeting. To Thomas, it was the beginning of his understanding.

Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.” In other words, Jesus was inviting Thomas to satisfy his reservations by proving the resurrection; that Jesus had physically risen from the grave. Jesus did not back down. Not only did Jesus not back down, he escalated the situation. It seems unlikely that Thomas actually moved.

“Do not doubt but believe,” Jesus said. Thomas' doubts vanished. Instantly. His doubts were gone. He knew. He proclaimed – the first one recorded – “My Lord and my God!” As the Word Biblical Commentary notes,

So it comes about that the most outrageous doubter of the resurrection of Jesus utters the greatest confession of the Lord who rose from the dead. His utterance does not simply acknowledge the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, but expresses its ultimate meaning, i.e., as revelation of who Jesus is.²

Thomas declared both who Jesus was – his identity – and his relationship to Jesus, “*My Lord and my God!*” Again, this was more than simply an intellectual acknowledgement of some abstract truth; no, instead, Thomas personally embraced with his entire being the truth that had been revealed to him. Thomas believed. Jesus' response was a word of encouragement to the rest of us, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Though this is not the end of the gospel, at this point John inserted his editorial comment that we have repeated a number of times as a reminder, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written. But these are written,” – why? Why are these written? – “so that *you* may come to believe” – what? What are we to believe? – “that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

² George R. Beasley-Murray, Word Biblical Commentary, John, vol. 36, p 385.

Communion.

That brings us to this table. Jesus commanded his disciples to “do this in remembrance of me.” What we do here today, we do in partnership with the Holy Spirit. We may not be perfect in our performance of the litany and liturgy of communion, but our obedience is not tainted or thwarted by our weakness, brokenness, failures, or imperfections. We can have confidence because what we do is done in partnership with the Holy Spirit – who is not subject to our weakness, brokenness, failures, or imperfections.

This table is where what we know or what we think is what we embrace as truth. It is a tangible expression of an intangible truth; it is a physical action taken on a spiritual truth; it is an act of obedience in time in service to the eternal king. In this meal we proclaim the Lord’s death – for us – until he comes again. In this meal we proclaim the Lord’s victory over death. We say with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Amen.

Questions:

1. When you think about encountering the risen Lord Jesus, are you filled with excitement or dread? What is necessary for peace about that meeting?
2. How many Thomas’s have you met? How do you treat their doubts and reservations about the gospel? What, in your walk of discipleship (whether lifelong or only recent), helps?
3. How have you experienced the Holy Spirit working with you in your pursuit of the mission and ministry God has set before you?