

The Easter Commission

John 20:19-23

David Sunday

April 8, 2018

Church, do you know who you are. why you exist and what the power that is at work within you is like? Jesus, the risen Lord, wants us to know this. He wants us to know who we are, why we exist and what kind of power dwells within us. On the night of His resurrection, He met His disciples and spoke to them about these things.

This is a message that helps us as a church to remember our identity. We find some powerful words in John 20:19-23. Let's read them:

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."

Lord, I pray for Your help now. By Your Spirit, would You strengthen me to proclaim Your Word, and give us ears to hear and faith to respond. May our lives be transformed by what we hear to live for You in this world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I see three things in verse 19 that we in the 21st century church, in the western suburbs of Chicago, have in common with the disciples that Easter Sunday:

1. They're hiding behind locked doors.
2. They are afraid.
3. Jesus is standing among them.

First, here we are today behind closed doors. We don't lock the doors, because the fire code wouldn't allow that, and because we're happy for guests to come and be among us. But let's face it, it's safe to be a Christian in this room. No one in here is going to tell you you're crazy if you believe that Jesus died to forgive your sins and that He rose from the dead. No one is going

to threaten or reject you. This is a safe place to worship Jesus. This is a safe place to read the Bible, learning and growing as disciples.

When we gather here, week after week, we can take a breather from life out there and be recharged and refreshed—and that’s all good. I’m a firm believer in the importance of Christians gathering on the first day of the week to hear the Word and worship our great God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It’s good that we can gather behind closed doors and enjoy the warmth of communion with God and fellowship with one another. It’s good, as long as we don’t stay here; as long as we don’t think that what happens here is what church is all about.

Because, friends, in the biblical sense, you didn’t come to church this morning. I get it. I know what we’re talking about when we say we’re going to church. I say it myself. But what we’ve really done here is gathered as the church. This building is not the church. This meeting behind closed doors doesn’t define what the church is. The church has a mission outside these walls. Whenever we shrink our vision and purpose to what happens here on Sunday mornings, we diminish the church and disengage from our Leader’s vision and purpose, which He describes here in these verses. Jesus doesn’t want His church to stay behind closed doors. Jesus doesn’t want us to think church is only something we do on Sunday morning. He’s given us an identity, a purpose and a power that is much larger and greater than that.

But we are afraid, which is the second thing we have in common with these disciples on Easter Sunday night. You and I are fearful by nature. These disciples had good reason to be afraid. Their Leader has just been crucified by the Roman and Jewish authorities, and they’re thinking, “If they treated Jesus like that, who’s to say they’re not going to come after us as well?” So they gathered together in a holy huddle and they bolted the door shut for fear of the Jews.

The church can become like that. It can become a hiding place from the world—a place of isolation. Everyone in here knows you’re a Christian. Everyone in here accepts the fact that you’re a Christian. But how many people “out there” know you are a Christian? How willing are you to identify as a follower of the crucified Messiah “out there,” outside these walls? It’s not easy, is it? We’re afraid. We’re afraid we won’t say the right thing, afraid people will think we’re weird, afraid that our own faults and failings disqualify us from being effective witnesses for Christ.

Last fall, Kate and I wanted to meet our new neighbors where we’d moved, in hopes of building relationships. So Kate made some banana bread and we went knocking on a couple doors. It didn’t go so well. We probably rang the doorbell one too many times across the street, because one neighbor had clearly just gotten out of bed to answer the door. We felt kind of awkward standing there, trying to strike up a conversation. But this is our mission and we must

not give up. We must not shrink back in fear. Jesus gives His fearful saints some fresh courage in this passage.

The third thing we have in common with these Easter-night disciples is that Jesus is standing among us. We don't know how Jesus got through those locked doors, any more than we know how Jesus rose right through the grave clothes in the tomb on Easter morning. We do know this: Jesus, right now, has a glorified human body. Today, in heaven, Christ is truly God and truly human. He lives forever in a glorified human body.

Jesus didn't have to knock on the door. Jesus didn't need a key to open it. He didn't need to wait outside until someone let Him in. He simply appeared. He was suddenly there, in their midst, y that Easter night. I love how John Piper reflects on the meaning of this:

Today in your life, Jesus can go where no one else can. He can go where no counselor can go, or no doctor can go. He's got access into your heart. He can do things there for you. He can solve complex problems. He can act in your life in ways that no one else can. He can penetrate where no one else can go.

Jesus comes to us in our fear. He doesn't wait for us to get our act together. He doesn't wait until we have enough faith to overcome our fears. He comes to build faith in us. He comes to give us courage. Just like He said to Joshua, *"Be strong and courageous...for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go"* (Joshua 1:9). Or like He said through the prophet Isaiah, *"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand"* (Isaiah 41:10).

That's what Jesus is doing on Easter night, and that's what Jesus can do for us today. He doesn't wait, stay at a distance and call to us from the outside. If we believe Jesus is alive and we believe His Spirit is at work in His church, then we have to believe He is with us right now, in our midst, ready to do in us and through us much more than we could ask or imagine.

Jesus is here today, but He will also be there with you on Monday morning, wherever your "there" is. He will be there with you on Tuesday night. He will be there with you on the airplane, when you're commuting somewhere this week. He will be there with you on your school campus. He will be there when you see your neighbor in the park. Jesus wants to move us from "here"—behind these closed doors—to out "there" in the world, with courage and with power.

So let's pay attention to what Jesus says and what Jesus does with His disciples, as He stands among them on Easter night. There are three things He wants them to believe and know—three things that, if we take them to heart, will help us move from "here" behind closed

doors to out “there” in a world that desperately needs the ministry of God’s people. So how do we move from “here” to “there”? Three things Jesus wants us to know and believe.

1. We are forgiven.
2. We are sent. And
3. We are empowered.

This is our identity, church. We’ve got to believe these things if we want to make a difference in the world.

1. We are a forgiven people.

Just think of all the ways Jesus could have addressed His disciples that night. They fled from Him. They forsook Him. They abandoned Him in His hour of greatest need. Jesus could have come and rebuked them. He could have made them feel ashamed. He could have said to them, “You really betrayed Me.”

But the first words He says are, “Peace be with you. Peace be with you.” It was a common greeting in the Middle East and still is today. But Jesus invests this greeting with deep significance. He says it twice to drive it home. What Jesus is saying to His disciples is, “I know all your sins. I know all your shortcomings. I know how weak and fearful you are. I’m not shocked by what you’ve been struggling with. I’m not surprised or overwhelmed by your failures and doubts. I do not hold your sins against you.”

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). Jesus doesn’t merely speak words of peace; He accomplishes peace. He makes peace through the blood of His cross. He accompanies His words with a physical sign in John 20:20. Do you see that? *“When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.”* This risen Christ still bears the wounds of His sufferings. We have a scarred Savior, a wounded King, a suffering and exalted Lord.

Jesus accompanies His word of peace with a sign. That’s why in the church Word and sacrament go together. Jesus has come to us this morning at His Table. He has said to us, “Peace be with you who trust in Me.” And with these emblems that we have held in our hands, taken into our mouths and eaten together, Jesus is showing us His hands and His side. He is renewing His covenant of peace with us today. He is pledging to us His sanctifying grace. He is reminding us of what He has done for us to accomplish peace.

When we remember our sins, we feel pain. But the pain doesn’t have to paralyze, because the penalty has been paid. Our consciences can be cleansed. Our shame can be healed. One of the main reasons we stay behind closed doors and don’t go boldly to our neighbors and love

people in the name of Jesus is because so many of us are carrying around a burden of guilt and shame from our sins. The devil accuses us. Our own consciences condemn us. As pastor J.D. Greear says, "Guilt is a huge demotivator."

As long as you are under the burden of guilt and shame, you're not going to go to someone else and talk to them about Jesus. You're going to say, "I'm not good enough yet. I'm not Christ-like enough yet. I'm never doing enough for God's Kingdom. If you only knew the sins I battle with on a daily basis." So many Christians think that in order to live on mission, you've got to gain victory over all the sins in your life. Once you've won the inner battle, then you can look outside.

The problem with that way of thinking is that you'll never perfectly win the inner battle. Part of the way God wants you to gain victory over inward sins is by looking outward and serving others. More importantly, when we act like that, we forget that mission is about Christ in us, working through us. It's not about what we do for Him. It's about what He is doing in our lives. We have a living Savior Who died for us, cleanses us and stands on our behalf as our Advocate. He says to us, "Peace be with you," not because we've got it all together, but because He has established peace through His cross. We are forgiven and there is freedom when we embrace that reality.

We see the freedom of the disciples at the end of verse 20: "*Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.*" Jesus wants us to be glad when we see Him. He wants us to know that there's a smile on His face, there's a welcome in His embrace, there's a warmth in His heart toward His people who trust in Him. He's forgiven us. But He doesn't want us just to bask in the gladness of having our sins forgiven and knowing we're at peace with God. He wants the freedom of forgiveness to propel us outward. Once we've experienced His peace, He's got work for us to do. That brings us to the second aspect of our identity in Him.

2. We are a sent people.

Jesus says some remarkable words here in verse 21: "*Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you.'*" He repeats it. Then He says, "*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.*" Friends, this is our identity. We are sent by the Father, just as Jesus was sent. The whole Bible is a story about mission. Let me explain that. God created humanity in His image, to reflect Him, to represent His rule in this world. We fell into sin. We rebelled against our King, so the image of God was marred, defaced and damaged.

But God promises to restore His image, to undo the damage caused by our sin. That's what He promises in Genesis 3:15. Someone is going to come Who's going to crush the head of

the serpent who deceived us into sin. God is on a rescue mission. He's going to save a people for Himself. The whole Bible is unfolding this story line of God's mission. And where does the Bible end? It ends with people from every tribe, tongue and nation worshipping Christ, the Lamb.

Why did Christ come? He came as an expression of the missionary heart of God the Father. He was sent by the Father into the world. His reason for coming was to do what God the Father called Him to do. He preached, healed and forgave sins, because this is why the Father sent Him. Jesus did not wait for people to come to Him; He went to them. He went to the sick, not to the healthy. He went to the sinful, not to the righteous.

So the Father sent His Son, and now the Father and the Son send their Spirit, then the Father and the Son and the Spirit send us into the world. We are being sent into our communities to do what Jesus did in the world. Just like Jesus, we are to leave our places of security, going to people where they are. We aren't to wait for them to come to us. We're to travel to them, to enter onto their turf and show them the love and truth and mercy of Christ. This can feel daunting.

Maybe you've heard of this TV series on ABC called "Designated Survivor." The story begins in the U.S. Capitol Building, as the joint houses of Congress are gathered to hear an address by the President of the United States, like a State of the Union type of address. While they're all under that Capitol dome, an attack occurs. A bomb goes off, the whole Capitol Building caves in and all the people in the line of succession are killed, including the President himself.

But there's one person who's the designated survivor, who has been sequestered away in an undisclosed location. He's the most unlikely person in the Cabinet to ever become President. He's the H.U.D. Secretary, way down at the bottom of the totem pole. He never thought he'd ever become President of the United States. Suddenly, the doors open, the Secret Service come in and a judge administers the oath of office to this man, who is now in the seat of highest power at the time of greatest crisis in our nation. He feels totally ill equipped for this task. He never planned on being President.

That might be how you feel when Jesus says, "As the Father sent Me, so I am sending you into this world." You might be saying, "Wait a minute, Jesus. I never planned on that. I don't think I can do that. I'm too weak for that. I'm too sinful for that. I don't have the power for that." But friends, here's the good news: Jesus is not dead. He's not leaving you as the lone designated survivor. No, Jesus is alive, He's reigning and He's continuing His work in the world through His church. So mission is not a new work that we are called to start up; it's the continuation of the work of the risen Christ, as He works through us.

Pastor Patrick has done some great thinking on this topic. I was almost tempted to make him finish this sermon, but instead I'm just going to take some things he wrote and express them to you. Look at how he describes the church: "The church is God's embassy on earth as a witness to the nations of a better King and Kingdom that invites all to defect from the kingdom of darkness." That's what the church is. We are God's embassy on earth, saying, "There's a better King. There's a better Kingdom. Defect from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of His dear Son."

That's what we are called to be and to do, and that's what Jesus is doing through us. What Jesus is saying in this passage is that this mission must be as important to us as it is to Him. Listen, friends—the world and its destiny ultimately hang upon the church being the church in the world. You might say, "Wait a minute. What about the sovereignty of God, that He will save His chosen people?" Yes. Yes, that's what gives us hope. But how will He save His chosen people? He will do it as we are obedient to the mission of Christ. We must act as God's fellow workers in the ministry of sowing and harvesting.

That's why Jesus was so serious about this. In Luke 10:2, He tells us to pray, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*" It means ask with urgency. Plead and beg God to do this. Beg God to send us out as ambassadors on His mission. Friends, a non-missional church is an oxymoron. Our fundamental identity is that we have been given a mission from God Who is on mission. We are a missionary people. If we forget this, if we lose sight of this, we will become stagnant. We will end up emphasizing personal holiness, personal relationship to God, personal doctrine, growth and knowledge. But we will miss the massive implications all of this has on the world around us.

I think it's very encouraging that our church gives 22% of its budget to global missions. That's wonderful. But I think we also need to be careful not to congratulate ourselves about that and think somehow now we've delegated the mission work of our church to a few people who have been sent far away to represent Christ in unreached people groups. We need to support them financially, but we need to realize that this is our identity too. This is what it means to be the church. We are in relationship with God and we've been sent into the world, just as Christ was sent.

What does it look like to be a church that is sent by Jesus just like He was sent by the Father? How would you describe what that's like? I think John Stott does a good job of describing it. He says it involves words and it involves works. It involves saying things and it involves doing things. I like the way he describes the relationship between the words and the

works. He says, “Words remain abstract until they are made concrete in deeds of love.” People just hear abstract ideas. But when they see our deeds of love, then the words mean something.

Stott also says, “Works remain ambiguous until they are interpreted by the proclamation of the gospel. Words without works lack credibility; works without words lack clarity.” Words without works lack credibility. People say, “I hear your talk, but what are you doing in the world?” Works without words? “I see your works, but why are you doing them?” The words bring clarity. So we do both the work of Christ and we speak the words of Christ—that’s the mission Jesus is sending us to do, that He is working through us. “So Jesus’ works made His words visible; His words made His works intelligible.”

We’re called to show the heart of our Father by doing good, by being a blessing, by spreading His Word and multiplying His church. We’ve got to be joyful about this—seriously joyful—dreaming of reaching the lost, willing to die daily for the sake of making Christ known to others. As Jesus was sent into the world to die for us, so we are sent. It’s going to cost us something. This is sacrificial.

We need to be willing to sacrifice so that churches can be planted, not only around the world but here in our region. We need to be willing to sacrifice so that justice can be administered, because the Kingdom of God is about justice too. We are to bring a distinctively Christian witness in our vocations and be willing to disciple other people. This is part of our mission. This is what it means to be sent. Now, if this sounds daunting to you, as it does to me, then you need the encouragement of the last point today.

3. We are an empowered people.

We are forgiven. We are sent. But we are also an empowered people. Just like Jesus showed His hands and His side when He said, “Peace,” to give them a sign, likewise when Jesus says in verse 21, “*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you,*” He gives them a sign in verse 22: He breathes on them. This is an acted-out parable. He is illustrating for the disciples the fullness of the Spirit they are soon going to receive on the Day of Pentecost.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for them to feel the breath of the risen Jesus upon them? He was just in the tomb—now He’s alive. He’s breathing again, and He breathes on them, saying, “*Receive the Holy Spirit*” —the very life of God, the very power of God. He’s saying, “Through the Spirit I was raised from the dead. Now He’s going to come and dwell in you. My resurrection power is going to dwell in you. My Spirit of holiness is going to dwell in you, conforming your character to Mine, making My mission your mission.” When Jesus sends His

Spirit, He shows them the power that raised Him from the dead is going to work in them, carrying on His work in the world. They can only do this through the power of the Spirit.

I don't know about you, but we may sometimes think the power of the Spirit is just automatically granted, now that we live 2,000 years after Pentecost. And it's true that everyone who believes in Christ receives the Holy Spirit. But we are not to take the gift of the Spirit for granted. We are to seek the Holy Spirit in our daily lives, for the empowerment to live for Christ in this world. What did Jesus say in Luke 11:13? "How much more will the heavenly Father give His Holy Spirit to those who..." do what? Ask Him. Seek Him. The Holy Spirit comes in power to a prayerful people.

When we do not pray, we're really saying two things. First, we're saying, "I've gone AWOL from the mission of Christ" —absent without leave. We're just disengaging. "I'm not going to do this." When we don't pray, we're just saying, "Yep, I'm checking out." The second thing we're saying when we don't pray is, "I'm content to live without the active empowerment of the Spirit. I don't need the Spirit tomorrow, so I'm not going to pray tomorrow." That's what we're saying when we don't pray.

I heard about a Christian leader from Korea who visited this country a while back. When he was asked what he thought about the church in America, he said, "It is amazing how much American Christians can accomplish without the Holy Spirit." That's an indictment, friends, on the prayerlessness that pervades so much of our Christian activity. Yeah, we can get a lot done. We can build big kingdoms. But is it the Kingdom of Christ? Is it the mission of Christ that's advancing?

Friends, Jesus our Lord did not accomplish anything without the Holy Spirit. He depended on the Spirit from birth until His resurrection. He depended on the Spirit for everything He did and the whole way He lived. He was filled with the Spirit. And so must we be. When we are, we will carry His authority. We will speak and demonstrate the gospel in His power.

As we share the gospel, those who respond in faith will be forgiven. Those who refuse to believe and respond in faith will remain unforgiven. That's what's at stake. That's what verse 23 is talking about. Whoever believes is forgiven. Whoever does not believe remains in their sins. Heaven and hell are at stake. Eternity is at stake with this mission of Christ.

I want to ask: how does this connect with our daily lives? We can easily get mission fatigue. We can easily hear a message like this and think, "You know, I really don't know what that means for me on Monday morning and throughout my week. I don't know how this affects the things I have to do." So I want to give you three pastoral suggestions. Don't take these as

commands. Don't receive these as burdens. Hear them as suggestions—wisdom, perhaps. Some ideas of how you can take seriously what Jesus is describing here about our identity as His people.

1. See your job as a mission field assigned by God. As an average person in our church, you're going to spend 100,000 hours of your life doing your job, your vocation. You're going to spend approximately 10,000 hours in church environments—going to worship services, going to small groups, going to youth group. Ten thousand hours “in here.” One hundred thousand hours “out there,” doing your work in the world. Being on mission doesn't mean you stop doing those 100,000 hours out there, that you be like Bill and Rosamary Roup or Dave and Pam Wilson who are sent to unreached people groups. No.

What if you started seeing yourself as sent by Jesus into the place of your vocation? What would that look like? Maybe it would look like making a list and praying for your co-workers as you drive to work. Or talking to other people who have followed Christ a little longer than you, who are in a similar vocation, similar career. Ask them, “How do you approach your vocation in a distinctly Christian way?” Ask them to disciple you in that. Say, “I really want to be more intentional about living as a missionary in the place where the Lord has assigned me.”

Or maybe you could take a book read Tim Keller's book, Every Good Endeavor—which is about the vocation of Christians in this world—and think about how this wisdom applies to your vocation.

That's suggestion number one: see your job as a mission field. Maybe I should make that stronger than a suggestion, because actually, that is what Jesus wants us to do. He wants us to see our jobs as mission fields.

2. Take a prayer walk through your neighborhood. Now, I'm going to do this this week with Kate. So you can ask me next Sunday, “David, did you do that prayer walk?” All right; I realize tomorrow there might be snow. But I checked the weather—Thursday we're supposed to have highs in the 60s and sunny. Is anyone looking forward to that? What if 200 members of New Covenant committed to walking through our neighborhoods on Thursday, in the late afternoon—around 5:00 p.m., when it's sunny, in the 60s—and we pray through our neighborhoods, “Jesus, send out workers into Your harvest field here”?

Isn't that what we're supporting people to do in places like Turkey and Morocco? Shouldn't we think the same way here? Shouldn't we be praying, “Lord Jesus, send us out here”? Pray for the people living in those homes. Pray for the people you see in the parks and walking on the sidewalks. Pray that the Lord would give you a fresh vision for your neighborhood.

Maybe you've lived there a long time, but you haven't seen much happen yet. Has it been a subject of focused prayer? Why wouldn't it be?

What if we all did that together? Wouldn't it make a difference if 200 people from New Covenant did that this week? What would be stopping us from doing that? Is it because Jesus is not alive? Is it because Jesus doesn't expect us to do things like that? Is it because we feel too guilty and too ashamed? Is it because we're afraid?

Well, have we heard His message to us today? Have we taken it to heart? Do we believe that His peace is with us, that His presence is empowering us and that He is sending us into the world, just as the Father sent Him into the world? Do we believe this? Then why not get out there and pray for our neighbors, asking God to give us a vision for our neighborhood, for the people we meet.

3. Begin praying about joining a gospel community. More information is going to be coming soon on this. Patrick is going to preach in May and talk some more about this. But what we're doing right now is training and preparing to relaunch our small group ministry as a church. Actually, in the eight years New Covenant Bible Church has been together, we've never had such a focused, intentional training for small group leadership as has been going on from January until now.

Each group is going to be focused on mutually caring for one another so we can experience the peace of Christ in our lives. Also, we'll focus on mutual discipleship—helping one another grow as followers of Jesus, challenging one another. “What are you going to do about what you've heard from God's Word?” So mutual care, mutual discipleship, and third, mission in our communities. How can we labor together to make Christ known, to serve, to be a blessing, to meet needs, to do good in our community, to administer justice? How can we reflect God's image together in this community?

Praise God that this isn't something we have to do alone. You're part of a church. You're part of a community. We share together in this as a family. We're loved by our heavenly Father. We have Jesus as our Leader and Guide. His Spirit is energizing us and empowering us for His glory. As the Father sent Jesus, so He sends us. Are you ready to embrace that? Is that what you want? Do you want to obey Christ as a sent one in this world?

Let's express together our hearts' desire through these lyrics:

You have called us out of darkest night
Into Your glorious light
That we may sing the wonders of
The risen Christ

May our every breath retell the grace
That broke into our strife
With boundless love and deepest joy
With endless life

Chorus:
May the peoples praise You
Let the nations be glad
All Your blessing comes
That we may praise
May praise the Name of Jesus

All the earth is Yours and all within
Each harvest is Your own
And from Your hand we give to You
To make Christ known

May the seeds of mercy grow in us
For those who have not heard
May songs of praise build lives of grace
To spread Your Word

This our holy privilege to declare
Your praises and Your name
To every nation, tribe and tongue,
Your church proclaims

Holy, holy is the Lord Almighty
Worthy, worthy is the Lamb Who was slain
Holy, holy is the Lord Almighty
All creation praise Your glorious Name

[May The Peoples Praise You by Keith Getty, Kristyn Getty,
David Zimmer, Stuart Townend and Ed Cash]

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