

John: sermon #24
The Power of Jesus' Resurrection
(John 20:19-31)

Introduction

The news that Jesus had risen from the dead spread rapidly among his followers—at first with skepticism, then hesitation, but finally with enthusiasm and joy. At first, even his disciples did not believe the reports, and Thomas demanded proof. But wherever people were confronted with the reality of Jesus' resurrection, lives were transformed. In the latter part of John 20 we find the unfolding of this transformation in three steps: *from fear to courage, from unbelief to confidence, and from death to life.* May we too travel this journey in the presence of the Risen Lord.

1. From Fear to Courage (20:19–23)

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. 21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus apparently rose from the dead before daybreak on Sunday (Mark 16:9)—the day referred to by early Christians as “The Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10). It was on Easter Sunday that the Risen Lord first appeared to his followers: to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11–18), the other women (Matt. 28:9–10), Peter (1 Cor. 15:5 and Luke 24:34), two disciples walking the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–32), and the disciples minus Thomas (John 20:19–25). The following Sunday Jesus

appeared again to his disciples. This time Thomas was present (John 20:26–31).

In these Sunday encounters, the Lord transformed his disciples' fear into courage. What did he do to accomplish this? Four things:

1. He came to them

We do not know where these ten frightened men met behind locked doors, but Jesus came to them and reassured them. In his glorified human body he was able to enter the room without opening the doors. This resurrection body was solid—he asked them to touch him—and he ate some fish (Luke 24:41–43). But it was a different kind of human body, one that was not limited by what we call “the laws of nature.”

It is remarkable that Jesus' disciples were afraid. The women had reported to them that Jesus was alive, and the disciples walking to Emmaus had given their personal witness (Luke 24:33–35). Moreover, it is likely that Jesus had appeared personally to Peter sometime that afternoon (Mark 16:7; Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5). No wonder Jesus reproached them at that time “for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe” (Mark 16:14).

Nevertheless, **Jesus' first word to them was the traditional Jewish greeting, “peace be with you.”** He could have rebuked them for their unfaithfulness and cowardice the previous weekend, but he did not. Indeed, the work of the cross is peace (Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:14–17), and **the message these followers of Jesus would soon carry to the world is the Gospel of peace** (Rom. 10:15).

2. He reassured them

He showed them his wounded hands and side and gave them opportunity to discover that it was indeed their Master, and that he was not a phantom. But the wounds meant more than identification; they also were evidence that the price for salvation had been paid and **man indeed could have “peace with God.”** **The basis for all our peace is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He died for us, he arose from the dead in victory, and now he lives for us.** In our

fears, we cannot lock him out! He comes to us in grace and reassures us through his Word.

3. He commissioned them

In his prayer to the Father in the upper room, Jesus had said of his disciples, “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). Now comes their actual sending: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (verse 21). The Son’s mission in the world is now entrusted to these disciples, since he is returning to the Father. What a tremendous privilege and what a great responsibility this is! It is humbling to realize that Jesus loves us as the Father loves Him (John 15:9; 17:26), and that we are in the Father just as he is (John 17:21–22). It is equally humbling to realize that he has sent us into the world just as the Father sent Him. As he was about to ascend to heaven, he again reminded them of their commission to take the message to the whole world (Matt. 28:18–20). It must have given the men great joy to realize that, in spite of their many failures, their Lord was entrusting them with his Word and his work. They had forsaken him and fled, but now he was sending them out to represent him. Peter had denied him three times; and yet in a few days, Peter would preach the Word (and accuse the Jews of denying him—Acts 3:13–14) and thousands would be saved. You

4. He enabled them

“And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (verse 22). Jesus’ action here reminds us of Genesis 2:7 when God breathed life into Adam. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for “breath” also means “spirit.” The breath of God in the first creation meant physical life, and the breath of Jesus Christ in the new creation meant spiritual life. The believers would be baptized with the Spirit at Pentecost and be empowered for ministry (Acts 1:4–5; 2:1–4). This filling of the Spirit would enable them to go forth to witness effectively. The Spirit had dwelt *with* them in the person of Christ, but now the Spirit would be *in* them (John 14:17). By now, the disciples, (with the exception of Thomas) were sure that the Lord was alive and that he was caring for them. They had both “peace with God” and the “peace of God” (Phil. 4:6–7). They had a high and holy commission and the power provided to accomplish it. And they had been given the great privilege of bearing the good news of

forgiveness in Jesus to the whole world. **All they now had to do was wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit would be poured out.**

Does John 20:23 mean that Jesus gave his followers (or a select group of his followers) the right to forgive sins? No. Jesus was not here setting aside his disciples (or their successors) as a “spiritual elite” who would deal with the sins of the world. A more accurate translation of the Greek text here (and the similar text in Matthew 16:19) is “Whosoever sins you remit [forgive] shall have already been forgiven them, and whosoever sins you retain [do not forgive] shall have already not been forgiven them.” In other words, the disciples did not provide forgiveness; they proclaimed forgiveness on the basis of the message of the work of Christ. As the early believers went forth into the world, they announced the Gospel of salvation in Christ. If sinners would repent and believe on Jesus Christ, their sins would be forgiven them. Only God can forgive sin; but Christians are called to announce that forgiveness. We can authoritatively declare to sinners that their sins are forgiven in Jesus, and invite them to repent (turn to Jesus) and to accept that forgiveness in faith (trust).

2. From Unbelief to Confidence (20:24–28)

²⁴ Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." ²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Why was Thomas not with the other disciples when they met on the evening of Resurrection Sunday? Was he so disappointed that he did not want to be with his friends? Or perhaps Thomas was afraid. But John 11:16 seems to indicate that he was a

courageous man, willing to go to Judea and die with the Lord. John 14:5 reveals that Thomas was a spiritually minded man who wanted to know the truth and was not ashamed to ask questions. There seems to have been a “pessimistic” outlook in Thomas. We call him “Doubting Thomas,” but Jesus did not rebuke him for his unwillingness to believe; rather he confronted his doubt and exhorted him to believe: “Stop doubting and believe.”

What was it that Thomas would not believe (verse 25)? The reports of the other Christians that Jesus was alive. The verb *told* in verse 25 means that the disciples “kept telling him” that they had seen the Lord Jesus alive. No doubt the women and the Emmaus pilgrims also added their witness to this testimony. On the one hand, we admire Thomas for wanting *personal* experience; but on the other hand, we must fault him for laying down conditions for the Lord to meet.

Thomas is a good warning to not miss meeting with God’s people (Heb. 10:22–25). **Because Thomas was not with the other disciples the previous Sunday, he missed seeing Jesus Christ, hearing his words of peace, and receiving his commission and gift of spiritual life. He had to endure a week of fear and unbelief when he could have been experiencing joy and peace!**

The other ten disciples had told Thomas that they had seen Jesus’ hands and side (John 20:20), so Thomas made that the test. Thomas had been there when Jesus raised Lazarus, so why should he question our Lord’s own resurrection? But, he still wanted proof; “seeing is believing.”

Thomas’ words help us to understand the difference between *doubt* and *unbelief*. Doubt says, “I cannot believe! There are too many problems!” Unbelief says, “I *will not* believe unless you give me the evidence I ask for!” In fact, in the Greek text of verse 25, there is a double negative: “I positively will not believe!”

Jesus had heard Thomas’ words; nobody had to report them to him. So, the next Sunday, the Lord appeared in the room (again, the doors were locked) and dealt personally with Thomas and his

unbelief. He still greeted them with “Shalom—peace!” Even Thomas’ unbelief could not rob the other disciples of their peace and joy in the Lord.

How gracious our Lord is to stoop to our level of experience in order to lift us where we ought to be. There is no record that Thomas ever accepted the Lord’s invitation. When the time came to prove his faith, Thomas needed no more proof!

Our Lord’s words at the end of verse 27 translate literally, “Stop becoming faithless but become a believer.” Jesus saw a dangerous process at work in Thomas’ heart, and he wanted to put a stop to it. The best commentary on this is Hebrews 3, where God warns against “an evil heart of unbelief” (Heb. 3:12).

It is not easy to understand the psychology of doubt and unbelief. Perhaps it is linked to personality traits; some people are more trustful than others. Perhaps Thomas was so depressed that he was ready to quit, so he “threw out a challenge” and never really expected Jesus to accept it. At any rate, Thomas was faced with his own words, and he had to make a decision.

Verse 29 indicates that **Thomas’ testimony did not come from his touching Jesus, but from his seeing Jesus.** “My Lord and my God!” is one of multiple testimonies that John records to indicate the deity of Jesus Christ. The others are: John the Baptist (John 1:34); Nathanael (John 1:49); Jesus Himself (John 5:25; 10:36); Peter (John 6:69); the healed blind man (John 9:35); Martha (John 11:27); and, of course, John himself (John 20:30–31).

It is an encouragement to us to know that the Lord had a personal interest in and concern for “Doubting Thomas.” He wanted to strengthen his faith and include him in the blessings that lay in store for his followers. Thomas reminds us that unbelief robs us of blessings and opportunities. It may sound sophisticated and intellectual to question what Jesus did, but such questions are usually evidence of hard hearts, not of searching minds. Thomas represents the “scientific approach” to life—and it did not work! After all, when a skeptic says, “I will not believe unless—” he is already admitting that he does believe! He believes in the validity of the test or experiment that he has

devised! If he can have faith in his own “scientific approach,” why can he not have faith in what God has revealed? **Everyone lives by faith in some way—the question is, what is the object of that faith? Christians put their faith in God and His Word, while unsaved people put their faith in themselves.**

3. From Death to Life (20:29–31)

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." 30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John could not end his book without bringing the Resurrection miracle to his own readers. We must not look at Thomas and the other disciples and envy them, as though the power of Christ’s resurrection could never be experienced in our lives today. *That was why John wrote this Gospel*—so that people in *every* age could know that Jesus is God and that faith in him brings everlasting life.

It is not necessary to “see” Jesus Christ in order to believe. Yes, it was a blessing for the early Christians to see their Lord and know that he was alive; but that is not what saved them. They were saved, not by seeing, but by believing. The emphasis throughout the Gospel of John is on *believing*. There are nearly 100 references in this Gospel to believing in Jesus Christ.

The signs that John selected and described in this book are proof of the deity of Jesus. They are important. But sinners are not saved by believing in miracles; they are saved by believing in Jesus Christ. Great crowds followed Jesus because of his miracles (John 6:2); but in the end, most of them left him for good (John 6:66). Faith in Jesus’ miracles should lead to faith in his Word, and to personal faith in him as Savior and Lord. Indeed this is John’s purpose in writing this book (John

20:31)—to “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

“Life” is one of John’s key words; he uses it at least 36 times. Jesus offers eternal life to sinners through personal faith in him. Sinners need this life because they are spiritually dead: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Salvation is not mere resuscitation; it is resurrection (John 5:24). The lost sinner is not sick or weak; *they are dead*. And this life found in union with Jesus comes “in his name.” What is his name? In John’s Gospel, the emphasis is on his name “I AM.” Jesus makes seven great “I AM” statements in this Gospel, offering the lost sinner all he needs.

The eternal life Jesus offers is not merely “endless time.” Rather “eternal life” is *the very life of God*—not experienced just ‘in the sweet by-and-by’, but right now. Eternal life is not about *length* of life, but about *quality* of life in an ongoing committed relationship with the Father and Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is the spiritual experience of heaven on earth today. The Christian does not have to die to have eternal life; he possesses it in Christ today and continues to experience it in communion with Christ forever.

Conclusion

The disciples were radically changed because they knew the risen Lord. And now, in verse 31 John invites everyone who has read the book of John to experience a similar transformation—it begins by receiving eternal life in Jesus Christ by faith. If you have already done so, give thanks to God for his precious gift! If you have never made a personal commitment and turned to Jesus in faith, placing your trust in him as God’s Son and your Savior, you may do so right now. Jesus invites you to believe and in believing to receive what is yours in him: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life...” (John 3:36).

What Did We Learn Here Today? What Is Useful To Us Personally (*Seeing, Living and Sharing Practical Theology in Jesus*)? Looking *through* the window of the Bible and *seeing* Jesus

helps us to **understand** that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and that humanity is **adopted** through Jesus into this **Triune Life** as children of the Father. It is this knowledge of Jesus that we are **called to preach** and it is this knowledge of Jesus that **enables** us to know **why** we are here, **how** we should live, and how we are **created to relate to each other**. So, the Bible is not [just] an instruction book on how to live. Nor is it an instruction book on [just] how to do ministry. It is a window to help us see Jesus. Jesus shows us **how to live** and **how to do ministry**. He does not do it by giving us a set of written instructions to be followed. He shows us **what life is** and **how to live**, and **what ministry is** and **how to do it**, by **living with us in relationship** and **participating with us in life**. So, what did we carefully hear, creatively listen to and spiritually learn today to help us apply (through, with and in Jesus) in our relationships and in our life? God's Word (**this pericope – selection of God's Word**) was being spoken for our participation, our appreciation, our response, our benefit, our edification, and our joy of salvation. God was-is-will be speaking to us! Jesus is the ultimate person and the ultimate human --- today. As the ultimate personalizing person and the ultimate humanizing man, Jesus spoke to us today! **What did we feel, hear, smell, see, taste through-with-in Jesus (in union and communion) that we can live, practice and share in our daily theology (study of the Triune God) with a personal focus through-with-in Jesus.**

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