

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part seventy-two

Sunday, March 8th, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

Teaching #1789 - Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church

JESUS REMOVES THOMAS' DOUBTS - ON SUNDAY

John 20:19-31 - "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 any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." [24] Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. [25] So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." [26] Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although 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, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." [28] Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" [29] Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." [30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

What a passage this is. No wonder "*the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord*" (20). This is the first recorded *corporate appearance* of the risen Lord. We are, this very Sunday morning, reading world history's major fact. Nothing else even comes close. Yale church historian, *Jaroslav Pelikan* puts it all together pungently - "*If the Resurrection of Jesus actually happened, then nothing else really matters. If the Resurrection of Jesus did not actually happen, then nothing else really matters.*" Bulls-eye.

1) **THE CHURCH WAS RIGHT TO TIE THEIR WORSHIP OF THE RISEN CHRIST TO THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK**

John 20:19-20, 26 - "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....[26] *Eight days later*, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus *came and stood among them* and said, "Peace be with you."

So much happens on this first day of the week. It's hard to imagine one day bearing so much significance - the *first believer in the resurrection* (20:8), the *first encounter with the risen Lord* (20:16), the *first corporate meeting with His disciples* (19-20), the *first commissioning into divine mission* (21-23), the *removal of Thomas' doubt and his proclamation of Christ's divinity* (27-28).

Significantly, John repeats the very same phrase as he describes Jesus' presence with His gathered disciples. First with all the disciples *minus* Thomas, and then with all the disciples *including* Thomas, John reminds us Jesus came and stood "*among them*" (19, 26). Many translations locate Jesus as "*right in the middle of them.*"

And I think there's something attention grabbing in the way John seems anxious to yank our minds back to Jesus' words regarding His less visible presence among His worshiping followers - **Matthew 18:20** - "*...where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*"

Remember, John reminded us Jesus was crucified *right in the middle of the criminals*. He was "*numbered with the transgressors.*" And He came right in the middle of His worshipers. This is the kind of Redeemer we all need. He sheds His blood right in the middle of sinners. And He gives His pardon and peace right in the middle of His worshipers.

2) **JESUS INITIATES HIS PRESENCE NOT WITH A COMMAND BUT WITH A GIFT**

John 20:19-20 - "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."

How beautiful the way John links Jesus' **words** of extending peace with the **gesture** of pointing to His wounds of atonement. The peace is tied to those scars. And Jesus **points** to that connection. John means for us all to understand that Jesus wasn't just **well-wishing** His disciples inner tranquility. He was guaranteeing a **purchased pardon**. Those scars purchased guilt-erasing peace with God.

There was so much **failure** in that room. Peter had **cursed Jesus** a few days earlier. All but one of this small Sunday crowd had **deserted** Jesus in His hour of trial and execution. One of this Sunday congregation had killed himself before this meeting with Jesus. And John means for us to note they were **all** afraid the Jewish leaders might link them up with their executed leader. They might be next. That's why they were holding-up in that locked room.

And Jesus doesn't mention any of it. And His first words aren't words of correction or command. Commissioning will come in a minute, but first there is grace. First there is the peace of forgiveness. And there is the warmth of un-earned, freshly-discovered joy - **"Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord"** (20). Not **ashamed**. Glad.

Perhaps Jesus' previous words came back to their minds - **John 16:22** - **"So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."**

If Jesus has conquered **death** the joy He gives is **eternal**. And If Jesus extends peace and grace to the **guilty** then the joy and peace He gives is for **everyone**. **Eternal** and for **everyone**. That's the bread and butter of life's deepest joy.

That's what that small Sunday congregation saw as Jesus offered **peace** while pointing to His **scars**. **First**, they saw their scarred Lord was the **conqueror of death**. He had taken their greatest enemy (why else were they locked in that room but the fear they would also be **killed**?) and crushed it. And **second**, they saw the **proof of their pardon**. Jesus' peace wasn't just an **emotional** moment. It was paid for with His life.

Jesus comes with **gifts**. We learn this is how Jesus comes to sinners. This is what John means for us to see. All sorts of things keep people locked up in fear. Shame is the common currency of our lives. And yet Jesus comes. He comes right in the middle of us this morning. And He brings grace and pardon and joy for those who will trust Him.

3) **JESUS DEFINES THE MESSAGE OF THE CHURCH IN THIS WORLD**

John 20:21-23 - "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 any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Jesus seemed less hesitant to centralize the issue of sin in the ministry of the church than we. **Forgiving** sin. **Retaining** sin. And this wasn't the first time Jesus planted this theme in the minds of His disciples:

Matthew 16:18-19 - "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. [19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Matthew 18:15-18 - "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. [16] But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. [17] If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. [18] Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Jesus makes it clear in our text today that these disciples are sent **in the same sense** that He was sent into this world by the Father - **John 20:21b** - **"...As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."**

"As" is the important word. Take away the issue of sin and actual human guilt before God and the coming and the **dying** of Jesus makes no sense at all. There is no **reason** for Jesus if the issue of sin is removed.

This is the purpose of those mission-filled words of Jesus to these disciples. The **meaning** of their lives as His sent ones is all bound up with the issue of human sin. Like Jesus - though not in the atoning sense - they will find their commission - their

identity as His church - in the pronouncement of **sins divinely pardoned** or **sins holding people under divine wrath**. And **both** messages are found in our Lord's divine summons. To leave either out is to cease being Christ's representatives in this world.

By the **fact** of Christ's crucified and resurrected body and by the **presence** of the Holy Spirit God invests great **significance** in what happens in the church. This service this morning is more than a **theological download**. Stuff happens in the lives of those filling the chairs in our sanctuaries. Eternal stuff. Invisible stuff, to be sure, but **eternally binding** stuff.

Bigger issues are settled, for better or for worse, in Christ's church than in any board room in the nation. Fasten your seat belt when you go to church. Sins are confessed and actually pardoned by God's grace or sins are carved into deeper, more eternally damming patterns of bondage.

4) DOUBTING THOMAS AND THE RISEN BODY OF OUR LORD

John 20:24-28 - "Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. [25] So the other disciples told him, **"We have seen the Lord."** But he said to them, **"Unless I see** in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." [26] Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although 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, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. **Do not disbelieve, but believe."** [28] **Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"**

As far as the text reports **John** is the **only** disciple to **"believe"** before seeing Jesus - **John 20:8** - "Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, **and he saw and believed....**" And what **John saw** was the grave clothes of our Lord. Not His body.

Everyone else came to believe **after** seeing the resurrected Lord in some encounter for themselves. All of which makes one wonder why the account of Thomas is so singled out by John. Is Thomas' coming to faith really **that** different from the others who either **rejected** or at least **doubted** the resurrection until they **saw** Jesus for themselves?

There is one glorious difference. And I think it is the reason John highlights the doubting and believing of Thomas. Thomas wants one thing more than the others mention. Thomas wants to **see** Jesus and **touch** the wounds of Jesus.

In other words, Thomas will be dissatisfied with a **substitute** for Jesus - someone **pretending** to be Jesus - even if others were taken in. And, just as important, Thomas will not be satisfied with some kind of **spiritual** body - a **non-physical** resurrected body. It must be Jesus and no one other. And it must be a **spacial, physically resurrected** Jesus.

Let's be honest. There's only one question that matters when we hear of the resurrection of our Lord. **Did this really happen?** That's what we all want to know.

So perhaps we should all pause in a moment of silence and thank Thomas for asking the only important question. He asked it for all of us in this room. Thomas **wants** to believe but feels **tied down by common sense**. Thomas is every honest person's representative. There stands our single biggest question - the one whose answer changes everything. Is this a fable? Is this just one of those **"religious"** truths - you know, the kind **"people of faith"** cling to?

Or is this a fact of history like the sinking of the Titanic, or the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or the existence of gravity? Thomas' desire for an answer is **every person's desire**. And John gives wonderful space for this blunt physical account.

Take just one moment looking at Thomas' declaration - **John 20:28** - "Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" John records Thomas' words carefully. And there's a reason for that. Thomas' words make clear Jesus can be addressed in exactly the same language with which Israel addressed Yahweh.

In Thomas' explosive worship we are witnessing the fulfillment of Jesus' words in **John 5:22-23** - "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, [23] **that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him."**

O, let that blessed sentence from Thomas long live in the heart and on the lips of the church of Jesus Christ!

5) WHY DIDN'T JOHN RECORD MORE SIGNS OF JESUS' POWER?

John 20:29-31 - "Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*" [30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, *which are not written in this book;* [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

You and I are in this text - "***Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.***" Jesus introduces a new era in the life of the church. All of Jesus' first disciples **saw** and believed. You and I have **never seen** and have come to believe. But our belief isn't groundless. Our faith isn't flimsy.

They **saw** and **heard** and **touched**. We can be grateful they weren't easily convinced. And they **wrote down** what they knew for certain:

1 John 1:1-4 - "That which was from the beginning, *which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— [2] the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— [3] that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you,* so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. [4] And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete."

We have enough evidence. More evidence wouldn't generate deeper faith. John could have written more. He says so. But more wouldn't add to what we have. We are given enough to **convince** those willing to see. And we are given enough to **condemn** those who refuse.

Some people will **never** believe. This is a sad fact from God's Word - **Luke 16:27-31** - "And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— [28] for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' [29] But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' [30] And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' [31] He said to him, *if they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.*"

John reminds us he wrote his account that people "***may believe***" [31]. Not that they might gain **knowledge**. But that they might come to **believe**.

Belief. It's a hard thing to pin down in most of us. **Francis Spufford** writes: "***When is it that you can say you believe? It's tricky, since belief is often so intermittent; is so often checkered....with disbelief; is so much something....sensed out of the corner of the mind's eye....Is it when you feel you've found something? Or is it much earlier; when you feel the need that will make you start looking? When do you start looking? When you fail to find anything and yet somehow don't give up the hope that you might find something some day?....But one point at which you can know you've started to believe is the point at which....the headroom you're giving to God....starts to have consequences of its own.***"

Is that where you are this morning? You can't even describe the restlessness in your soul - that knocking on the door of your heart. But something is churning in some still undefined way. You know you're being chased by the Spirit of God.

John says when you truly **believe** in Jesus there are consequences - "***....that by believing you may have life in his name***" [31].

Frederick Dale Bruner sums it up in a way that sparkles: "***Life exists, in the Gospel's conviction, where there is no longer the abysmal dread of death, the awful weight of guilt, the horrid emptiness of meaninglessness, the lifeless absence of God, and the futile quest of the world's multiple gods and idols. Life is present wherever Jesus and all that he means, is appreciated and, finally, trusted.***"