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John 20:19-31

Fifty-seventh Message

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RESURRECTION BLESSINGS

Chapter 19 of 1 Kings tells the story of Elijah's encounter with God on Mt. Sinai. As Elijah stood on the mountain there came a mighty wind, an earthquake, and fire. But God was not in any of these powerful forces of nature. Rather, God spoke to Elijah in a still, small voice, a sound that was barely audible.

When God raised Jesus from the dead, he also spoke in a still, small voice. There was no press conference, no CNN coverage, no ticker-tape parade, just the quiet appearances of Jesus to Mary and his disciples. If we were God, we would have done it much differently.

In chapters 20 and 21 of his gospel, John relates four resurrection appearances of Jesus. In the first part of chapter 20, the scene is the empty tomb where Jesus appears to Mary. Now the scene changes from the empty tomb to the anxious gathering of the disciples. When Jesus appears to the disciples he inaugurates a new kingdom and announces the blessings of this kingdom to his followers. Our focus this morning is the resurrection blessings and responsibilities of this new age.

So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." (John 20:19-23 TNIV)

It is now the "first day of the week" (the same phrase used in verse 20:1), presumably the evening after Mary, Peter, and John discovered the empty tomb. The phrase "that day" would have been familiar to the Jews. It is the language of the OT that speaks of the day of the Lord and the inauguration of an eschatological kingdom, the beginnings of a new creation and new order. The phrase also echoes what Jesus said in 14:20: "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you." The day of the Lord had arrived, the kingdom that would consummate with a new heavens and earth.

The disciples are gathered in a room in Jerusalem. This group would have included the twelve, minus Judas and Thomas. The doors are shut because the disciples feared the Jews. Their leader had been killed and now they feared for their own lives. Suddenly Jesus appeared among them. The closed doors emphasize the miraculous appearance of Jesus. Just as his body had passed through the grave clothes, so it passed through the walls of the house.

At Christmas many years ago, my wife's sister and husband flew in from the Midwest to surprise her parents. On Christmas morning, the visitors sneaked into the house through a side door. When the mother came into the living room she saw them and about had a heart attack. We thought she might faint from the shock. I don't know how the disciples kept from fainting when Jesus appeared. What a shock!

Standing in the room with his disciples, Jesus initiates, proclaims, and confers three blessings of the new age upon his disciples and those who would come to believe in him.

The first blessing is peace. We see this in the twice-repeated greeting, "Peace with you." The same phrase is repeated again in verse 26. The word was used to denote the unqualified sense of well being that would characterize the people of God in the new age. This is the peace that Isaiah foretold:

**"How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace
And brings good news of happiness,
Who announces salvation,
And says to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isa 52:7)**

The Old Testament idea is *shalom*. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. On the cross, Jesus claimed the decisive victory in the battle with evil and sin, and now sinful man could be reconciled with God. This is the peace that Jesus promised his disciples in the upper room:

"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (John 14:27).

"These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

This is the peace that Paul talks about in Romans 5:1: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Because of the fall we lack peace, the sense of well being we desire. Our lives are out of tune and out of touch. We are stained and tarnished with guilt and doubt. We are restless, unanchored, and anxious. We are worried about what is happening to us or not happening to us. The troubles and difficulties of life unsettle and shake us. We want that safe, calm, tranquil harbor where we can rest. If ever we sensed our need for peace it was last week as we watched the global economic meltdown. The 700 billion dollar bailout didn't give peace. But Jesus does.

When I think of peace, I recall a line from the T.S. Eliot poem “Little Gidding”:

All shall be well, and
All manner of thing shall be well.

Eliot was quoting Julian of Norwich, the great English mystic, and the answer she received when she questioned God about the harm that sin had created. God’s response to her was that all would be well. And indeed all is well in Christ.

This is what we often sing:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

The second blessing of the resurrection is joy. When Jesus showed the disciples his nail-scarred hands and wounded side, they rejoiced. His wounds verified the fact that he was the person who was crucified and was now raised from the dead. They were his credentials, his resume, his letter of introduction to the claim that he was the Messiah. The disciple’s grief was turned to joy just as Jesus had promised:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy. Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world. Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you” (John 16:20-21).

The disciples were afraid and so are we. Fear is what holds us captive and shuts us into a small place. Fear forces us into isolation, timidity, and passivity. The people and the things that make us afraid have power over us and take away our freedom. Fear arises from the harsh world that crucified Jesus. We fear being hated and not being loved. We fear being left out and forgotten. We fear failure and pain. Just last week someone spoke to me about how so many people in our body are suffering and in crisis. These occasions create fear. Most of us have felt the deadly effects of fear in our lives. But even though the burdens can be great, the resurrection gives us the blessing of joy. This joy is the joy of the new age, the wedding joy that will be fully realized in the marriage supper of the lamb. Isaiah talks about this joy:

And it will be said in that day,
“Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.” (Isa 25:9)

When we make other people or events or circumstances the source of our joy, eventually fear, sorrow, and compulsions will grow. But the joy of the Lord is independent of people and circumstances. Even death cannot diminish the joy of the resurrection. Jesus blesses his people with heavenly joy, not earthly happiness. Because of the resurrection Paul can urge: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” (Phil 4:4)

The third blessing we see in our text is the blessing of the Holy Spirit. But this blessing carries with it a responsibility or commission. Jesus now sends his disciples into the world even though they no longer belong to the world (15:19). This commission is consistent with the sending theme in John and Jesus’ prayer in chapter 17. Forty times in this gospel Jesus is described as the one sent by the Father. The Son is perfectly obedient. Now Jesus sends the disciples.

The purpose for their sending is to continue and complete the mission of Jesus. The disciples do not replace or duplicate Jesus. He had already achieved salvation through the cross. The disciples are now commissioned to carry on and implement Christ’s work, not to begin a new one. “This mission wholly defines the nature of the Church as a body of men and women sent into the public life of the world to be the bearer of that peace which Christ has wrought ‘by the blood of the cross.’”¹

The means for implementing this mission is the Holy Spirit. Through Ezekiel, Joel, and others (Ezek 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29), God spoke of a day when the Spirit would be given to his people. In the upper room, before his death, Jesus promised to send the Spirit. There are five Spirit passages in that discourse. Now Jesus breathes and tells his disciples to “receive the Holy Spirit.”

This is a beautiful moment in the gospel. The word “breathe” is the same word used in Genesis 2:7 when God breathed into man the breath of life and man became a living being. Both in Hebrew and Greek this word can be translated breath, spirit, or wind. Genesis 2 tells the story of the first creation. Here we see the beginning of a new creation. The fall has now been reversed and man can live as God intended. The theme of new creation began in the John’s very first verse: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The disciples are now raised to a new creation with the same Spirit that raised Jesus.

The disciples “live resurrection-formed lives, not by watching him or imitating him or being influenced by him, but by being raised with him. . . . Resurrection is no more an add-on to human life than Creation is an add-on to that Adamic lump of clay. It’s life itself – the God-breathed, Jesus-breathed beginning of who we are and who we become by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Breathing.”²

However, this moment is a bit confusing. We wonder how this worked in light of Pentecost (Acts 2). Did the disciples actually receive this Spirit at this moment? And if so, why are they still behind locked doors a week later? Why do they go fishing? If the Spirit had actually come, the results were disappointing.

Literally, the phrase is, “Jesus breathed and said to them.” There is no direct object; the words “on them” have been added in our English translation. It is only the words “receive the Holy Spirit” that make the reader think that he was breathing on them the Holy Spirit.

I am greatly helped by an insight from Lesslie Newbigin. In John’s gospel it becomes clear that “John does not separate resurrection, ascension, and the giving of the Spirit in the way that Luke does.”³ In other words, John sees all these things as part of the whole of Jesus’ glorification. We also see that John does not

confine himself to strict chronology: the cleansing of the temple appears in chapter 2; the last supper appears to be a day earlier. Finally, several times in John there is something said that is imminent, but not immediate (12:20, 13:31, 17:5). Such is the case here.

The giving of the Spirit is tied to the commission by the phrase, “and saying this.” And what the disciples do through the Spirit is what Jesus did – give a message that deals with sin and restores humanity to God: “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.”

John spoke of Jesus in chapter 1: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” The disciples through the Spirit continue the mission of Jesus as the one who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus told the disciples in the upper room that he would send the Spirit of truth and that this Spirit would “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (16:8).

The disciples don’t actually have the authority to forgive and retain. The verbs are passive perfects, meaning, “they stand forgiven” and “they stand not forgiven.” The passive voice means that it is God who forgives.

The mission for disciples is to share the gospel, the work of the cross, the forgiveness of sins. The result of sharing the gospel is that people either repent and find forgiveness or they are unrepentant and remain in their sin. John 9 is the illustration. Jesus gave sight and faith to the one who knew he was blind. However, to those who thought they could see, he tells them “your guilt remains.” The Spirit continues the two-edged work of Jesus through the disciples.

This has been the mission of the church for centuries and it is our mission too. We are sent into the world with resurrection life and Spirit power to preach the gospel of Jesus as the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. We are in the business of reconciliation. Some will believe and be forgiven and some will reject the gospel. We don’t have to worry about the results; that is God’s job. And we don’t have to worry about being smart enough or clever enough; that’s the Spirit’s job. We just have to show up and talk to people as if their life depended on it, because it does.

Most of us are trying to figure out life and make sense of where we are and where we should go. We wonder why we ended up in this career, this city, or this neighborhood. Often we feel like we are in the wrong place. But the truth is that we are right where God wants us. Why are we working next to some knucklehead in a company that isn’t all that great? So that we can love him and give witness to Jesus. How is it that we live next door to an annoying neighbor? So that we can invite her over for coffee and love her. God has planted us right where he wants us so that we can give witness to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit — and if necessary we use words.

Thomas was not present the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples:

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless

I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” (20:25-25)

This is the third time we encounter Thomas, one of the twelve, in this gospel (11:16; 14:5). Previously he seemed to be loyal but pessimistic. This portrait of Thomas is consistent with his statement in 11:16, when he was willing to die (“Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, so that we may die with Him”), and his question in 14:5, when he asked about the way to where Jesus was going (“Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?””)

Thomas’s problem is that he does not accept the report of the disciples concerning Jesus. He wants to see for himself. He wants tangible and specific evidence to link the appearance to the man he knew and saw crucified. The gospels reveal that the disciples are slow to believe. Thomas is last but not least.

After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you.” Then He said to Thomas, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.” Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.” (20:26-29)

So eight days later, i.e., the Sunday after Jesus was raised from the dead, the disciples are gathered behind closed doors because they feared the Jews. Suddenly Jesus appears and stands in their midst, and again announces peace. The implication is that Jesus has heard the disciples even when he was not physically present with them.

Jesus addresses Thomas and invites him to investigate his hands and side. We are not told if the disciple actually did this or not. Jesus then exhorts him to not be disbelieving but believing, to not be an unbeliever but a believer. The implication is that Thomas was a disciple but not yet a believer and that he should have believed his friends.

Thomas responds with one of the great Christological confessions in the NT: “my Lord and my God.” The confession is addressed not to God but to Jesus. And it is personal, indicated by the person pronoun “my.” Thomas addresses Jesus as “Lord,” which becomes an early post-resurrection title for Jesus. He also addresses Jesus as God, i.e., not only does he believe in the resurrection but he also grasps the deepest meaning, that Jesus is God.

What Jesus said in John 8:28 is fulfilled: So Jesus said, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.” Jesus gives a beatitude: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (The gospel has one other beatitude: “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (13:17).

John saw and believed (v 8) and now Thomas and the others saw and believed. Soon Jesus will ascend to the Father, and all

who come to faith must do so without seeing. Jesus anticipates this next step and pronounces a blessing on the ones who come after. They are as equally blessed as the disciples in joining the great company of those who believe. The word “see” is repeated throughout the chapter. The disciples give testimony to what they saw, and others believe without seeing.

Mary’s grief was transformed into mission, the disciple’s grief and fear were transformed into joy, and Thomas’s doubt was transformed into faith. This is the effect of the resurrection through the work of the Spirit.

Thomas’s confession is the climax of the book and brings to a close what many feel was the original end of the gospel. Following the confession we read:

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (20:30-31).

The grammar of the text connects these verses to what precedes in verse 29. John selected a small portion of the miracles so that people would believe without seeing. The story tells how the disciples came to believe and to confess Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. John’s purpose is that his readers will be brought to the same confession as Thomas and declare Jesus as their personal Lord and God. The words believe (1:12-13), Christ (1:41), Son of God (1:49), and life (1:4, 3:15-16) summarize the entire book.

In recent years, some have argued that John’s gospel was written to believers in response to events in the Johannine community, to establish the faith of Christians. But I agree with others who claim that the purpose of the book is evangelism, primarily Jewish evangelism. John redefines the Jewish Messiah. While many Christians have been comforted, instructed, and edified by John’s gospel, this is the result, not the purpose.

The fundamental question is not “Who is Jesus?” but rather, “Who is the Messiah?” The Jews expected and anticipated the appearance of the Messiah. In chapter 1, the Pharisees asked John the Baptist if he was the Messiah. The book now comes full circle with the confession of Thomas. This is the purpose for the book – that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus.

And the goal of coming to Christ, of believing that Jesus is the Messiah, is not to join a church, not to sign a doctrinal statement, but to have life in his name. The life that Jesus offers is resurrection life, the life of the new creation, the life of the kingdom that is already but not yet. This life brings joy, peace, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. As John says in his first epistle, “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in the Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son does not have the life” (1 John 5:11-12).

I made my confession of faith at the end of my college years. The late 60s was a tough time to grow up and be on a college campus. I had no peace, no joy, no life. I didn’t “see” Jesus. But I began to read the gospel and I believed the testimony of what the disciples did see. There were no fireworks or dramatic miracles, but everything changed. I had a peace and joy and life that I had never experienced. I knew that the Spirit of God had been poured out into my heart. Perhaps you can remember that day in your life when you make the confession of Thomas and became a new creation. This is the blessing of the gospel.

As we close this morning I want to remind you that you have that life in Christ. The encouragement is to live in that life, the life of the age to come, the life that gives peace and joy. The apostle Peter reminds us “though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet 1:8-9).

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 268.

² Eugene Peterson, *Living the Resurrection* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 109.

Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 270.