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John 20:19-29

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# THE RESURRECTION, THEN AND NOW

One of the foremost Jesus scholars of our day, N. T. Wright, says: "The Question of Jesus' resurrection lies at the heart of the Christian faith. There is no form of early Christianity known to us that does not affirm that after Jesus' shameful death God raised him to life again... [And to the question] 'Why did Christianity arise and take the shape it did?' To this question, virtually all early Christians known to us give the same answer, 'He was raised from the dead.'"<sup>1</sup>

Yet, to people living 20 centuries later, the message sounds like old news. We might admit its profound effect on those who first heard it, but we're not sure it has much relevance to the modern world, except perhaps to elicit for some a faint hope that there may be life after death. And in our multi-cultural world, the notion of life after death takes many forms:

There is a world of difference between the Muslim who believes that a Palestinian boy killed by Israeli soldiers goes straight to heaven, and the Hindu for whom the rigorous outworking of *karma* means that one must return in a different body to pursue the next stage of one's destiny. There is a world of difference between the Orthodox Jew who believes that all the righteous will be raised to new individual bodily life in the resurrection, and the Buddhist who hopes after death to disappear like a drop in the ocean, losing one's own identity in the great nameless and formless Beyond.<sup>2</sup>

In light of the recent excitement over the Gospel of Judas, we should also note that there is a vast difference between the Gnostic view of life after death and the way of salvation found in the four gospels of the New Testament. In the gospel according to Judas, death is viewed as a gift to free Jesus' imprisoned soul from his fleshly body. This makes Judas not a betrayer of the worst order but a welcomed friend to aid his master on his journey upward. The text quotes Jesus saying to Judas, "You will exceed all of them [the other disciples] for you will sacrifice the man who clothes me." Contrast this with Jesus' statement to Pilate in John's gospel, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin" (19:11).

On this Easter morning I want to briefly examine what exactly the resurrection meant to the first disciples. How did they know it was truly Jesus and not some apparition or a deluded dream? How did that encounter give a definite shape to their lives? And finally, How does the resurrection serve as a paradigm for our lives today?

Our text is John 20:19-29. This scene probably took place in the home of Mary, Mark's mother, where the disciples celebrated their last Passover meal with Jesus.

**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!" (John 20:19 NIV)**

## An Uninvited Break-in

Our text opens with the disciples cowering like frightened sheep in a secluded room in Jerusalem. A strange rumor of resurrection was circulating among a few women, but for these men it remained just that, a rumor. For them, terror had shut out all hope of light. They were totally inaccessible, barricaded behind bolted doors, paralyzed by fear. If their leader had been brutally killed, what was to become of them? It was a very dark Friday and Saturday: shattered dreams, silent screams, pain, isolation, pathos. But in the evening, the time of revelation, the risen Lord breaks in and stands in their midst. Jesus doesn't knock, or ask permission to enter. He simply breaks in and stands in their midst, announcing, "Peace to you." We can imagine the stunned silence. Eugene Peterson makes a telling observation, "However many resurrection 'hints and guesses' there may have been in the Hebrew, Mediterranean, and Near Eastern centuries preceding this, when it happened, it took those who were closest to the event and best prepared for it totally unawares... no one did anything to prepare for what actually happened."<sup>3</sup>

"Peace to you" was the conventional greeting representing the Hebrew *Shalom* 'aleykem. But the fact that Jesus repeats it twice, and remembering that in the upper room he had promised, "Peace I leave with you, not as the world gives" (14:27; 16:33), suggests there is more here than just an ordinary greeting. As Beasley-Murray writes,

Though a common word, *shalom* was also the embracing term used to denote the unqualified well being that would characterize the people of God once the eschatological kingdom had dawned. Jesus' "*Shalom!*" on Easter evening is the complement to "it is finished" on the cross, for the peace of reconciliation and life from God is now imparted... Not surprisingly it is included, along with "grace," in the greeting of every epistle of Paul in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

The *shalom* announced to these frightened disciples was a peace much larger than any of their petty fears, for the resurrection had ushered in the great climactic moment of God's

rule upon the earth. The cosmic battle was over. The good news of peace had arrived. Mankind's sin and guilt that stood between them and God has been permanently removed, and with it the last enemy of all, death itself.

### Seeing Through the Wounds

To demonstrate his point, Jesus shows them his hands and side, the place of his wounds.

**After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. (20:20)**

Carson gives the background to the placement of Jesus' wounds: "In Roman crucifixion, the victim was either tied or nailed to the cross. The nails were driven through the wrists, as the hands would not have supported the body weight. But both the Hebrew and the Greek word for hand can include the wrist and forearm. Nails were commonly driven through the feet, one spike through both feet, with one foot placed on top of the other."<sup>5</sup>

How ironic that Jesus, the perfect man, is disfigured with permanent scars: scars in hands that in life only extended that healing touch, and a grotesque wound in his side whose flesh enveloped his compassionate heart. Yet it is the appearance of these gaping wounds that causes the disciples to recognize him. When someone lets you into his life through his wounds, you know him at the deepest level. So it is with Jesus. Seeing the scars the disciples are drawn to him and their sorrow is turned into joy. This is what continually draws us to the risen Christ:

This one impaled by my spear  
with wounds so deep,  
yet draws me near.

Edward Shillito (1872-1948) was a Free Church minister just outside of London. In the aftermath of the pain and scars of World War I he composed a book of war poems to process the unspeakable grief and ravages of the war. As he attempted to come to grips with the sheer magnitude of death in "Hardness of Heart," the horror is almost too much to comprehend.

They are too many now  
For mortal eyes to weep, and none can see  
But God alone the Thing itself and live.  
We look to seaward, and behold a cry!  
To skyward, and they fall as stricken birds  
On autumn fields; and earth cries out its toll,  
From the Great River to the world's end – toll  
Of dead, and maimed and lost; we dare not stay;  
Tears are not endless and we have no more.

Overcome with immeasurable and unspeakable horror, it is only the image of the lacerating wounds of Jesus that is able to bring a healing balm to his war-weary soul in "Jesus of the Scars":

If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,  
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;  
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,

Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.  
The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;  
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;  
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

The resurrection sets before all mankind the truth that the way God chooses to establish his sovereignty over all the earth is not by coercion, but by his becoming vulnerable and suffering the consequences of man's sinful choices. It is God's seal that the cross of Christ was the only way to establish his sovereign will over all the creation, not by force but by sacrificial, unbounded love. The cross, the cruel cross, something no Gnostic would even recognize, and that which our culture disdains, forever remains the only way to salvation.

### The Resurrection Touch: Purpose, Power and Authority

Once the disciples recognize the risen Christ, he commissions them.

**Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (20:21-23)**

Note how the resurrection lifts them out of the fear of isolation and bonds them to Christ, to the Father, and to the world. No longer wandering aimlessly on the earth like vagabonds, they are given purpose to go. They become the sent ones to continue his mission that he was sent to do. Now, instead of being paralyzed by fear they are energized by "fear."

The crying need of the human soul is to be drawn into a purpose larger than oneself. Once you have been touched by the resurrected Christ you no longer live in isolation. The resurrection binds and unifies the whole universe together. It is not some isolated incident that makes us otherworldly. No. Now with a man in heaven, our once fragmented lives begin to come back together again. So the resurrection reorients the life of the disciples to live with the purpose of offering the saving life of the risen Christ to the world.

After Jesus commissions them, he anoints them. In an act reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, when God breathed into man's nostrils and man became a live being, the risen Christ exhales in their presence and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is the beginning of the fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision, when God's Spirit, depicted by the four winds, would awaken the "dry bones" of Israel and begin a brand new creation (Ezek 37:8-10). This act is a foretaste of what will occur on Pentecost, when the reality of the Spirit would come upon them in full measure.

With the resurrection a new era had arrived. The Jews understood history in terms of two ages: this present age, followed by the age to come. In their understanding, our present choices shape our future destiny in the resurrection, both for the unjust and the righteous. But to their great surprise, what

the Jews expected to happen at the end of history, God did for Jesus in the middle of history,<sup>6</sup> and with it, the future has mysteriously invaded the present. From now on the “age to come” would overlap the present age. Everything Christ visibly did *for* them while upon the earth he will now do invisibly *in* them by means of the Holy Spirit. They will no longer possess Christ in the flesh, but they will inherit his very life, vibrantly living inside them. And once endowed with that gift of life pulsating in their veins they will become bearers of that life-saving work that Jesus lived while he was upon the earth.

Having encountered the resurrected Christ, three things happen to the disciples: first, they are commissioned with a purpose; second, they are infused with life, Christ’s very Spirit living inside them; and third, they are granted authority to act in his name.

**“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (20:23)**

The reception of the Spirit is linked with the forgiveness of sins. But, as Marsh explains, we must understand the ultimate source of this authority. “But though this sounds stern and harsh, it is simply the result of the preaching of the gospel, with either brings men to repent as they hear of the ready and costly forgiveness of God, or leaves them unresponsive to the offer of forgiveness, which is the gospel, and so they are left in their sins.”<sup>7</sup>

It is also important to observe that the verb “forgiven” is in the passive voice, implying that it is God, not they, who are acting (Carson). Working through the disciples, the Holy Spirit, like Jesus before him, will continue to divide humanity into two groups: those who would believe and those who would refuse forgiveness. The Spirit who cleanses men and women and makes them holy, also gives them the power to pass that new life on to others. Paul calls this amazing status, “servants of the new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6). What a transformation! Fearful disciples are instantly transformed into apostles, who are granted purpose, power and authority!

And so the story lives on in our lives. The risen Christ breaks in upon us, finds us locked up in isolation, walled in to our fears, and draws us to a heavenly peace through his wounds. Those wounds draw us to him and integrate us to God, to one another and to the world, with purpose and life.

But on that first Easter, one apostle was missing.

### The Supreme Skeptic

**Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 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.” (20:24-25)**

For some reason, Thomas was absent when Jesus first appeared to them. Upon his arrival, the disciples enthusiastically pass on the story of the risen Christ to him. But he refuses to

believe the testimony of what they had seen and heard. In fact, he says emphatically that, unless he sees and touches those wounds, he will never believe. The verb is very graphic: “Unless I *thrust* my finger and my hand into the place of those wounds, I will never believe!” But a week later, on the following Sunday, our gracious Lord condescends.

### The Supreme Confession

**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!” 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.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” (20:26-28)**

At the same time, the first day of the week, and the same place, behind locked doors, the risen Christ suddenly appears again without warning. He breaks in upon them, and stands in their midst with the same greeting, “*Shalom ‘aleykem.*” The entire encounter is for the sake of one man encased in unbelief, Thomas. Along with the original invitation to “see his scars,” Thomas is further invited to touch his hand and side. “Go ahead, touch. Feel the depth of my wounds if that will shake you out of your unbelief! Become a believer!”

Notice carefully how Thomas is so captured in awe he has no need to touch or feel; the mere sight of the wounds transforms him from an unbeliever to a believer. One look at those gaping wounds elicits from Thomas the highest theological confession of Jesus found in the New Testament: “*My Lord and My God.*” Thomas attributes to the risen Jesus the title LORD, the term used in the Old Testament for the personal name of Israel’s covenant God, *Yahweh*. It is possible that it can also mean merely “sir” in Greek, but lest there be any confusion as to what he meant, Thomas adds the expression, “My God,” investing the title with full divinity. “This is the climactic expression of what it means to honor the Son as the Father is honored (John 5:23). It is the crowning display of how human faith has come to recognize the truth set out in the prologue, ‘The Word was God...and the Word became flesh.’”<sup>8</sup>

The supreme skeptic makes the supreme confession. What I find so amazing in this text is that it is through the wounds of the risen Christ that we perceive his deity and are overcome with Holy AWE. What a mystery, so radically different from the Gnostic religion of the second and third centuries. But this is exactly what Jesus predicted in John 8:28: “When you have lifted up the son of Man, then you will know that I am (the Old Testament name *Yahweh*) and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.”

### The Final Beatitude

Jesus concludes with a beatitude.

**Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (20:29)**

From now on, after this transition period of resurrection appearances, people everywhere will have to believe without seeing. They will believe based not on what they see, but on what they hear, the testimony of the apostles. Ironically, Jesus proclaims that that state is more blessed than that of the one who saw and believed. Why is that? One rabbi, Simeon ben Laqish (c. AD 250) put it this way:

The proselyte is dearer to God than all the Israelites who stood by Mount Sinai. For if all the Israelites had not seen the thunder and the flames and the lightnings and the quaking mountains and the sound of the trumpet they would not have accepted the law and taken upon themselves the kingdom of God. Yet this man who has seen none of all these things yet comes and gives himself to God and takes on himself the yoke of the kingdom of God. Is there any who is dearer than this man?<sup>9</sup>

### The Resurrection Now

I think that is true. But it is also more blessed, because the intimacy with Christ is greater. The resurrection has opened up the possibility of God's Spirit now dwelling in full measure within us. Thus the presence of Christ will be more real through word and Spirit, than his physical presence was while he was with the disciples. Decades later, Peter would testify to this great blessing that would give us inexpressible joy:

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and 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 1:3-9 NASB)**

Thomas was actually set up to be the model for all of us, but he refused, and Christ graciously condescended to him. But my friends, more blessed are we than Thomas. To be drawn to the risen Christ through his wounds, then to be bound to God and to the world with a life-saving purpose by his Holy Spirit, is an indescribable blessing. And that life is made available to us through suffering. The cross of Christ becomes ours. As we open up our wounds to the world, we, likewise, draw all manner of men and women to the risen Christ. And so the resurrection continues to remain "good news," or better put, the very "best news" for every generation.

**And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. (Rom 8:11)**

1. N. T. Wright, "Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus: The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical Problem," *Sewanee Theological Review* 41.2 (1998).
2. N. T. Wright, "Exploring the Easter Hope," Westminster Abbey Lectures, 2001.
3. Eugene Peterson, *Living the Resurrection* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 25.
4. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 379; quoted in D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 647.
5. Carson, *John*, 656.
6. I am indebted to N. T. Wright for this insight.
7. J. Marsh, *The Gospel of John* (Penguin, 1968), 641-642; quoted by Carson, *John*, 655-656.
8. Carson, *John*, 659.
9. Quoted in Carson, *John*, 660.

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