



## SO I SEND YOU

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 20:19-31

41st Message

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In his excellent new book, *Psalm 23: The Song of a Passionate Heart*, David Roper introduces one section by summarizing a hit movie of a few years ago:

In the motion picture "City Slickers," three New York men head for the Old West, hoping to find the "one thing" that satisfies. The main character was Mitch Robbins, a wisecracking, thirty-nine year-old advertising salesman who had "lost his smile." Mitch had a lot going for him — a charming wife, two handsome children, a spacious apartment on Roosevelt Island, two good buddies, and a quirky sense of humor. But the joy had gone out of his life. His birthdays, which used to bring him such happiness, now filled him only with sadness, each one reminding him that he still had not found out what life was for. Mitch's two friends, Ed and Phil, shared his malaise and dreamed up the idea of joining a cattle drive from New Mexico to Colorado. (The year before they ran with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain.) The Old West seemed just the right place to shake off their unhappiness. When the three men got to the ranch they were greeted by the last of the Marlboro Men, a leathery, old cowboy named Curly, whom Robbins characterized as "a saddle bag with eyes." Under Curly's stern tutoring, Robbins and his friends learned to ride and rope before joining the sweaty brotherhood of drovers. In Robbins' eyes, Curly was a kind of elemental male — a gruff, earthy man who rarely spoke, wore a perpetual smile, and was fearless, invulnerable and all-knowing. While trailing the herd, Robbins asked Curly the secret of his assurance. Curly replied, "You've got to find that one thing." The trouble was, Mitch had no idea what that "one thing" was and Curly wasn't talking. Then the old buckaroo died before anyone could uncover the secret of his poise. The moral of the movie, if there was one, is that each of us must find that "one thing" that will turn us into satisfied, self-assured versions of ourselves. The only problem is, when the house lights go up we're still in the dark. We have no idea what that "one thing" is.

Many of us go through life with that sense of "wanting" drawing us on, promising that satisfaction lies just ahead. We are restless, desiring something we can't quite identify, yet we want it so much we can almost taste it. We look for this something in different arenas — education, marriage, success, retirement. But God understands our sense of wanting. He placed it there inside of us. I believe that all of our wantings are simply reminders that he is calling us.

In our studies in the gospel of John we come now to chapters 20-21. Here we will look at the last words of Christ, words of comfort, healing, and life. We often refer to Jesus' last words as those which he spoke from the cross, but these chapters contain Jesus' actual "last words," those which he spoke to the disciples following his resurrection. In my studies in this book I have found much joy and com-

fort in trying to picture the events described. I trust this has been true for you as well.

Having already taken the opening verses of chapter 20 earlier this year, on Easter Sunday, actually, we begin reading today at verse 19 of chapter 20:

**20:19** When therefore 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, "[Shalom] Peace {be} with you." And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples therefore rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

It is Easter Sunday evening, and this is the first ever Sunday evening service in the church. From this point on, the church began to worship on Sunday. This was a gathering of most of the Christians of that time. "Disciples" is what John calls them. Luke describes them as "the eleven disciples and the others," i.e., all the others who had followed Jesus during his ministry. Forty days later, on the Day of Pentecost, there were 120 gathered. This must have been a small group on this Sunday evening. They were squeezed into a room in a house in Jerusalem. The doors were locked, because they were afraid that at any moment a policeman could enter with a warrant for their arrest. They were afraid, too, that, like their Lord, they would be tried and executed.

As they huddled together they were discussing their experiences. Some had seen the risen Lord. Mary Magdalene must have told how she had been standing in the darkness in the tomb, and she saw a man whom she thought was the gardener. She began to talk to him, and she discovered it was her Lord. He spoke to her and said, "Mary . . ." She realized it was her teacher, and she fell at his feet. She touched him. He was real. He wasn't a ghost.

And Peter and John must have told how they ran to the tomb. John, arriving first, looked in and saw the grave clothes. Then Peter ran past him and went into the interior of the tomb. They saw the grave clothes, set up like a plaster cast, following the contours of Jesus' body. They saw the covering that had been on his torso, and, next to it, on a ledge, the coverings for his head. In between, in the space where his neck should have been, there was only air. John realized that his Lord had passed right through the wrappings. No one had unwrapped him, and he hadn't wiggled out of them. Jesus indeed had risen from the dead. And Peter, who had seen the wrappings, later saw the Lord himself. Jesus made a special appearance for his sake, to comfort and encourage him.

There was another man in that gathering on Easter Sunday evening. Earlier, he had been traveling with a friend to his home in Emmaus, a few miles from Jerusalem. On the

way they conversed about the events of the day, expressing their sadness and disappointment. Suddenly a stranger appeared alongside them and began to chat with them about the Old Testament, explaining how the Scriptures predicted that the Messiah would die and rise again. Later these two men said their hearts "burned within them" as they listened to him. Arriving at their destination, they invited the stranger to spend the night. As they sat down to a meal, the man picked up bread and broke it. The Scripture says that at that point their eyes were opened and they realized who the stranger was. Perhaps it was Jesus' hands that gave him away. The men ran all the way back to this meeting to tell the disciples that they had seen the Lord.

As they were discussing these things on Easter Sunday evening, John says that Jesus came and stood in their midst. He said to them, "Shalom." I always imagined that Jesus passed through the wall, but I think what happened was that he was present, but invisible, all the time, listening to their conversation, and he suddenly appeared to them. He was there while Mary was weeping uncontrollably outside the tomb. He was there when these travelers began their journey to Emmaus. He was there, invisible but present, when John went into the tomb — just as he is *among us* today.

When our Lord ascended into heaven, I don't think he did so in a short ascent, and then disappeared. I don't think that heaven is somewhere "up there." We use these spatial terms merely because they are helpful to us. I believe that heaven is another dimension. Heaven is all around us. It is the realm of the unseen, but it is just as real as the realm of things that we can see. I believe our Lord is here today in this room, just as he was in that room in Jerusalem. He will be with you as you drive home today. He will be with you at the picnic you are planning later. He is with you when you go on dates. He is with you on business appointments. He is with you in school as you sit at your desk. He is with you in the kitchen. He is with you in your office, in your shop, in your garden, at your computer, on the baseball or soccer field. Wherever you are, our Lord is there. He is present.

After the resurrection, one of the first things Jesus said to the disciples was, "Touch me." Luke says they were frightened out of their minds, because they thought he was a ghost. Jesus told them to touch him to assure them that he wasn't, that he was present in the same body that had been put in the grave. He even ate a piece of fish to assure them that he wasn't a ghost. He was real. He wasn't putting on a magic show. And he is still here today, just as real, just as present as he was in that room. He is not "up there" somewhere. He is right here in this room. He knows what we are thinking; he hears what we are saying. How important it is to remember this in every situation we encounter.

Jesus said four very significant things to the people in that room. First, he said, "Peace be with you." That was the standard greeting then in the Middle East: *Shalom*. The Jews still say that today. But Jesus had more than mere a greeting in mind. In fact, three times in this passage he says, "Peace be with you." That is because his legacy to us, what we receive as a result of his presence with us, is peace, inner calmness, tranquillity. Jesus told them earlier: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

The peace that the world gives is short lived. It is dependent on circumstances: a success you have achieved; the way other people think about you; a sports result; a foreign substance you ingest. But the peace that Jesus gives endures. It is the unqualified sense of well being we feel when we realize that he is present with us. These words complement Jesus' words on the cross, "It is finished." The work on the cross is finished, and we now have peace with God. It isn't surprising that the apostle Paul uses this term, together with the word "grace," in the greeting to every one of his epistles.

Jesus said, "I will never leave you or forsake you. He used a double negative, something we don't do in English: "I will never, under any circumstances, forsake you." Friends fail us, spouses walk out on us, parents disappoint us, therapists don't return our calls, but the Lord is with us every moment of the day. We need to dwell on his presence, to acknowledge that he is with us, as real as he was in the days of his flesh. He will never say "Good-Bye." Will you remember that today when someone forgets to do what they were supposed to and you are feeling resentful? His word to you is, "Shalom: My peace I give to you." When you are all alone at night and there is no one to share your bed, or maybe there is, but you still feel nobody in the world cares or understands, he is there, just as real as he was in that room in Jerusalem. He still offers that peace. When the husband whom you depended on for many years to make decisions is no longer there, remember that Jesus is. Don't run from the pain. Richard Foster said, "God becomes a reality when he becomes a necessity." At times we don't know he is all we need until he is all we have. And his first words are an offer of tranquillity.

His next words provide us with an activity. Verse 21:

**20:21 Jesus therefore said to them again, "Peace {be} with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you."**

He not only offers tranquillity, but he provides us with an activity: We are to do what our Lord did in the world. What a noble calling! If we took a poll this morning, some would say they enjoy their work, others would say they do not; yet others would say they would like to be able to work. But we will never find ultimate satisfaction in our work. It is because the ground is cursed; it grows thorns and thistles. But what *will* satisfy is if our preoccupation, not our occupation, is to do in our world what our Lord did. "As the Father sent me, so send I you." We are to do the work that Jesus did.

And what is that? Some years ago, Ray Stedman pointed out to us in a staff meeting that in Luke 4, Jesus himself told us the work that he came to do. Our Lord was in a synagogue in Nazareth, his home town. As was the custom, he went to the front of the synagogue and took out the scroll of Isaiah and unrolled it to the section where Isaiah said: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor [the poor in that day were the ruined, the down and out]. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners [the enslaved, whether it is to six-packs, sex, drugs or ambition; those passions that drive and control us and ultimately destroy us] and recovery of sight for the blind [the de-luded, deceived], to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." This was the fiftieth year, the year of Jubilee, when prisoners were released, debts forgiven, and land went back to its original owners. In the OT, this year

was symbolic of the Messianic era, when the Messiah would come and prisoners would be set free and people would be rendered free of their guilt. On this occasion, Jesus concluded, "I am here to proclaim that this year of favor has now come true." And that year does not last a mere 365 days, it lasts forever.

That was what Jesus did. He went about giving words of grace to the down and out, helping the deluded to understand, setting free the oppressed, the abused and the misunderstood. That is our task as well. What a calling, to do precisely what our Lord did in this world, using our spiritual gifts in whatever way God has motivated us to love.

Our Lord's promise to his disciples is inner tranquillity and worthwhile activity. He continues:

**20:22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.**

This is a difficult verse. I still am wrestling with the theology of it. One question that immediately comes to mind is, "If this was when the disciples received the Holy Spirit, then what was Pentecost all about?" What ministry of the Holy Spirit is this? Is it regeneration, or the filling of the Holy Spirit? And, while we are at it, what was the Spirit doing in the Old Testament? Regenerating people? We don't have complete answers to these questions, because the OT is by design ambiguous on the subject of the Holy Spirit.

I believe that this phrase, "He breathed on them," is taken from Genesis 2. God made man out of the dust of the ground and, "He breathed into him the breath of God, and he became a living soul." In other words, man was given physical life when God breathed into him his life. I think that here our Lord was breathing into his disciples the breath of God so that they received the life of God. That is what the Holy Spirit is — the life of God, the life that never comes to an end. So we are referring to the eternal life of God. This is what Jesus gave to the disciples as a resource. He gave them the task of doing something in the world, and then he gave them God himself to empower them and indwell them to carry out this task. It is unclear if it was at precisely this point they were regenerated. Remember he had told them, in the Upper Room, "you are already clean." Apparently they already belonged to him then. But we know that at this point, on this Easter Sunday evening, they received the life of God.

What happened on the day of Pentecost for these disciples is possibly what we could call the "filling of the Spirit" for service, when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church. We know from Scripture that when a person becomes a Christian, he immediately receives the Holy Spirit. We don't have to pray for it or wait for it. Remember Jesus' words, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" He wants to pour his life into yours. And that is what happened here. The image reminds me of the scene in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, when Aslan breathed on the children and they received the life of God.

Our Lord promises his disciples that they would have his tranquillity, his activity, his vitality, his peace, his work, and his life.

Jesus makes a fourth statement, one that also is hard to understand:

**20:23 "If you forgive the sins of any, {their sins} have been forgiven them; if you retain the {sins} of any, they have been retained."**

What kind of authority is this? Is it authority to forgive people of their sins, or to refuse forgiveness to a hurting individual who wants to be forgiven? Part of the solution lies in the tenses of the verbs, but discussing that would bore most of us to death. Jesus is not talking about the actual forgiving of sins, but about the announcement or declaration of forgiveness. The passage makes clear that forgiveness comes first, and then comes the announcement of that forgiveness. Forgiveness always comes on the basis of what Christ has already done. And on the basis of the work that he did on the cross (remember his declaration, "It is finished!") and our acceptance of it, we can announce to people that their sins are forgiven.

What a message this is! All around us people are filled with guilt. A number of years ago, I read some literature from the Menninger Clinic which said that three-quarters of the patients in mental hospitals are there because of the problem of guilt. They are consumed with shame over things they did and said or things that were done to them. But here Jesus is saying we can tell people they don't need to feel guilty any longer. When someone accepts the sacrifice that he made on the cross, we can say to that person, with authority, "Your sins are forgiven!" And sadly, when someone rejects Christ, we have to say, "Your sins are not forgiven."

There is no other way to receive forgiveness. There is no way we can go on living sinlessly and pay for the past. Someone has to pay for that. And Jesus did. Thus we can boldly say, "If you put your trust in Christ, you will receive forgiveness of sin." In Acts 10, Peter, using this principle, declared: "And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that *through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.*" Peter came out of that Upper Room knowing what it meant to offer forgiveness for sin. Though he was the leading apostle he could not discriminate and offer forgiveness to one individual and not to another. This verse has been misinterpreted to say that Peter, as the first pope, could give absolution for the remission of sins. That isn't the point. He could announce forgiveness only on the basis of Jesus' sacrifice.

So this was Jesus' last word to his first church. And it is his word today to the church in Cupertino. The promise of those who welcome his presence is inner tranquillity, significant activity, and a supernatural vitality; and the result of these things is that we can tell people that their sins are forgiven.

I recently came across this poem that beautifully renders this passage in these lines:

*No distant Lord have I, loving afar to be.  
Made flesh for me, He cannot rest, until he rests in me.  
I need not journey far, this dearest friend to see.  
Companionship is always mine, He makes his home in me.  
I envy not the twelve, nearer to me is he.  
The life he once lived here on earth, he lives again in me.  
Ascended now to God, my witness there to be,  
His witness here am I, because His Spirit dwells in me.  
O Glorious Son of God, incarnate deity;  
I shall forever be with Thee, because Thou art with me.*

The story of Thomas follows:

**20:24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus** ["Didymus" means "twin." We don't know much about Thomas, but he was someone's twin], **was not with them when Jesus came** [which is a good reason why you should never miss church service!]. **The other disciples therefore were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I shall 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."** And after eight days again His disciples were 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 your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into My side; and be not 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." Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

This passage is often regarded as a rebuke to Thomas, that he had to see to believe, but blessed are those who had not seen. But a careful reading of the chapter makes it clear that the disciples and the other believers were present that Sunday evening *because* they had seen something. Peter and John saw the grave clothes; Mary Magdalene, Cleopas, Peter, and the disciples in the Upper Room all saw the Lord. Jesus is not comparing Thomas with the other disciples and rebuking his need for hard evidence. Rather, he is addressing us.

Notice that John follows those words by saying: "*Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been*

*written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*" That statement of blessing, the last beatitude if you will, is addressed to us who did not have the opportunity to see the Lord but who have to depend on the eyewitness reports of those who did see him and wrote it down. That is the point. Jesus is not rebuking Thomas. Thomas wasn't there that Sunday. Maybe it was a beautiful day and he was fishing. He naturally was skeptical when others shared their discovery. He said, "I need to see it myself." And he was there the next Sunday, because he was an honest seeker. He had an open heart, and the Lord revealed himself to him.

That is what he will do for you this morning if you have honest doubts. Perhaps you suspect there is some truth to these stories about Jesus. You have a lot of doubt, but you still hunger after God with all your heart. If that is your condition, then Jesus is going to look you up and reveal himself to you. That is the kind of Lord he is. If you have doubts this morning, welcome to the human race. If you have never had doubts, I would be a little concerned if I were you.

We can be grateful for Thomas' expression of doubt, because he voiced the doubts we all feel at times about the stories of the resurrection. Thomas merely wanted to be sure that the Jesus he had known and the risen Jesus were one and the same person. What makes Christianity unique is that it is historical. It really happened. We can date Jesus. We know exactly when he lived. We know that he was tried and executed under Pontius Pilate, and he was laid in a cold, hard tomb. When he came back to life the nail wounds remained in his hands. He even ate a piece of fish to demonstrate that he was not a ghost. This story is not myth; it is historical fact. People observed these things, wrote them down, and passed them on to us, so we can trust them. John wrote that he was there. Jesus appeared. He saw him, heard him and touched him. And, John concludes, "Blessed are those who read this book and believe."

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