

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



John 20:19-31
“Using The Tools He Gave Us”

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(2nd Sunday of Easter)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

JOHN 20:19-31 "USING THE TOOLS HE GAVE"

Appearance + Instruction (Mt. 28:18-20, Lk. 24:36-49)

A. vv.19-23 RESURRECTION APPEARANCE TO TEN, THOMAS ABSENT (3 PARTS).

Only John: Appearances In Jerusalem & Galilee

Intro **1) v.19 Setting + Appearance (5): Date, Disciples, Door Shut, Appearance, Peace.** Commissioning

19 On the evening of that day (i.e. Easter eve), **the first day of the week**, **Time, Vision + Audition, //20:1 (Work Day)**
the **doors being shut** where the disciples were, for fear of the Judeans, **Empty Cloths! Jesus Killed 2 Days Before**

Confrontation **Jesus came and stood among them**, and said to them, **14:17, (vv.19, 24, 26) = Resurrection Intrusion, Corporeal**

Reassurance (1) **"Peace (Shalom) be with you."** **WORD, Mary Confirmed, "Peace world cannot give" //14:18-19, 27; 16:22, 33, Judg. 6:33**
//Ignatius Smyrneans 3:1-2 "He was in flesh even after the resurrection"

2) v.20 Demonstration And Reaction: Wounded Hands And Side, Disciples Glad. Continuity

20 When he had said this, **Progressives Deny Continuing Incarnation, 3x Hands and Side (vv.20, 25b, 27)**

Reassurance (2) he showed them **his hands and his side.** **ACT: Tokens, Glorified Wounds 19:14, 28, 34, Not A Ghost**

Reaction Then the disciples were glad when they **saw** the **Lord**. **Chap. 14-17 Prophesies, Kept Promises //15:11, 16:20-24**
Corporeal, Yet Has New Powers = Kingdom Prototype

Commission **3) vv.21-23 Speech Of The Risen Jesus: Church Commissioned As Mission (5 P'S).** //Mt. 28:16-20

21 a Jesus said to them again, **"Peace be with you."** **Peace: Assurance Oracle, Jesus' First Word, 14:27, 16:33 (1)**

b As the Father has sent me, even so send I you." **Program Sent (3:7, 5:36, 6:29) Commission, 14:12, 17:18 (2)**

22 c When he had said this, he blew on them and said to them, **(Preview?) Trinitarian, Gen. 2:7 LXX (God, New Creation)**
"Receive the Holy Spirit. Power: LXX Gen. 2:7, Through The Son, 3:8 Born Again, 1:33, 7:39, 16:7-11, 17:22 (3)

23 d1 If you forgive the sins of any, they *are* forgiven (i.e. by God); **Privilege: 1:29, Issue = Church Unity (4)**

d2 If you retain (hold fast) the sins of any, they *are* retained (i.e. by God)." **3:17-18, 16:7-11, Peril: Bondage (5)**
Alive (Resurrection), Exalted (Ascension), New Presence (Spirit) → Mission

B. vv.24-25 TRANSITION SCENE: THOMAS INFORMED (3 PARTS).

Objection **Flashback: Judas Dead, Thomas Absent: AWOL**

1) v.24a Setting. **Thomas Associated With Jesus' Death: 11:12, 16, 14:5, 21:1-2**

24 Now Thomas, one of *the twelve*, called *The Twin*, was not with them **when Jesus came**. **Now Only Ten**
Mary → Peter/Beloved/Disciples → Thomas → World

2) v.25b Report Of Group Resurrection Appearance. **1 Cor. 15:3-8, They Witness, He Confirms**

25 So the other disciples told him, **"We have seen the Lord."** **Communal Testimony // 20:18 Mary Magdalene 1st**
Report Of Spirit-Filled, Joyful, Missionary Disciples!

3) v.25c Speech Of The Skeptical Thomas, Objections Exposed.

But he said to them, **His Question = Have They Seen The Real Jesus? A Ghost?**

"Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, **Includes Wrist, Meets Jewish Criteria Of Strict Continuity**

and place my finger in the mark of the nails, **Insert Them, This Is How We Know Jesus Was Nailed At Cross**

and place **my hand in his side**, I will not believe."
19:34, Must Be Touchable, Formal Vow
Believers Must Be Evangelized As Well! On Doubt, Mt. 28:17

A. vv.26-31 RESURRECTION APPEARANCE, THOMAS PRESENT (3 PARTS).

1) v.26 Setting + Appearance (5): Date, Disciples, Door Shut, Appearance, Peace.

26 **Eight days later** (next Sunday), his disciples were again in the house, **Time, 1 Cor. 16:2, Acts 20:7, Unleavened Bread**
and Thomas was with them. **Rejoins Community As Least Tentatively**

Confrontation **the door was shut**, but **Jesus came and stood among them** **Again, Appearance From Other Side**

Reassurance and said, **"Peace be with you."** **Fear Of v.19 Is Omitted**

John's Evangelism: 1) Witness, 2) Objection, 3) Invitation, 4) Jesus, 5) Confirmation (1:35-47 [4x])

2) vv.27-28 Demonstration And Reaction: Hands And Side, Thomas' Concession.

27 Then he said to Thomas, **The Crucified Jesus Is The Risen Lord: Continuity, Beyond Synagogue Faith**

Sign **"Put your finger here, and see my hands;** **"It's me. See!" Demonstration Of Continuity: Pre/Post Easter Jesus**
and put out **your hand** and place it in **my side;** **God = Creative Power, Lord = Eschatological Power, Lk. 24:39**
and do not be faithless but believing."
No Trick, It's Me, Thomas, Commanded, Jesus Heard Thomas' Dare, 11:16

28 Thomas answered him, **"My Lord and my God."** **Emperor Domitian, Jesus = Deity // 1:1-2, 14, 18; 20:18, Rev. 4:11**

Rare Creed, Jesus As God: 1) John 1:1, 18, 10:33-36, 20:28; 2) Rom. 9:5, 2 Pt. 1:1, Titus 2:13, Heb. 1:8-9, 1 Jn. 5:20

3) vv.29-31 Speech Of The Risen Jesus And Preliminary Conclusion: The Nature Of Faith.

29 Jesus said to them, **Thomas Believes Because Of Empirical Evidence: A Sign**

a1 **"Because you have seen me (past/present) you have believed (past/present). Final Blessing, 1 Jn. 4:2, 1 Pt. 1:8-9**

Mission a2 **Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."// Earthly Career + Appearances // 17:20, 1 Jn. 1:3, 2 Esdras 1:37**

30 2 **Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book, No Vol. II, Miracles**

31 3 **but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, 1 Macc. 9:22, Purpose Of The Story**

4 **and that believing you may have life in his name. 17:3, 20, 1 Jn. 1:3, 5:12, Eternal Life Begins Now, Transcends Death**

A Brief Treatment Of John 20:19-31

This complex thought unit is the second of John’s four interrelated appearance stories. It falls into three subsections (A. vv.19-23, B. vv.24-25, A’ vv.26-31) with the first and last being appearances of the risen Jesus and the second a testimony of ten to an earlier appearance, “We have seen the Lord!” leading to a surfacing of Thomas’ skepticism about an event from which he was absent (v.24). Note that each of the subsections has the same three parts with minor variations : 1) Setting: vv.19, 24, 26; 2) Demonstration and Reaction: vv.20, 25b [witness], vv.27-28; 3) Speeches: vv.21-23 [Jesus], v.25b [Thomas], vv.29-31 [Jesus]). The verbal inclusions between the first (A. vv.19-23) and last (A’ vv.26-31) subsections are numerous: the time signature *On the evening of that day, the first day of the week* (v.19a) // the time signature *Eight days later* (v.26a); *door(s) being shut* (v.19a //v.26c); *Jesus came and stood among them* (v.19c // v.26c); *Peace be with you* (vv.19d, 21 // v.26d); verbs of sight: *saw/seen* (v.20c // v.29a, b); *Lord* (v. 20b // v.28). All three units have references to to the physicality of the risen Jesus in the phrase *his hands and his side* (vv.20a, 25b, 27). The overall surface structure has a 3:1 concentric pattern (A-B-A’) with the contrast of communal testimony (v.25b) and skepticism (v.25c) a the center. It’s ten against one; Thomas refuses to cave before their unified testimony. Hard head! Every church needs at least one.

It helps to distinguish between *surface structure* (i.e. patterns of repetition in a oral-and-now-written text) and *genre* (i.e. literary type). To ask, “How is the text arranged?” and, “Are there any antecedents in the Jewish or pagan tradition?” are different questions. Both are necessary to appreciate John who works at several levels at once. This is clear in our text which weaves together five genres: 1) **a recognition scene**: a) meeting (v.19b) resistance to recognition (v.19b); c) display of tokens (v.20a), d) recognition proper (v.20c) attendant reactions (vv.21-23); 2) **the model of commissioning**: a) introduction (v.10a), b) confrontation (v.19b), c) reassurance (vv.19c, 21a), d) reaction (v.20b), e) commissioning (vv.21-23), f) objection (vv.24-25), g) objections overcome (vv.26-28) and mission restated (vv.29-31); 3) **the pattern of witness in John**: a) preaching by a believer (1:35, 45 // 20:25a), b) invitation to come and see (1:39, 46 // 20:26), c) objections (1:46a // 20:25b), d) coming to Jesus (1:39b, 47ff. // 20:26c [Jesus comes to him = reversal of pattern!]), e) confirmation (1:39c, 47b // 20:28-29); 4) **the link of prophecy and fulfilment** between the farewell discourse (13-17) and the appearance scenes: *I am coming back to you* (14:18, 16:22) fulfilled in *Jesus came* (20:19); *Peace I leave with you* (14:27) fulfilled in *Peace be with you* (20:21); *Then your hearts will rejoice* (16:23) echoed in *Then the disciples were glad* (20:20b); *As you have sent me, I have sent them* (17:18) completed in *As the Father has sent me, even so I sent you* (20:21); *If I go I will sent the Spirit to you* repeated in *Receive the Holy Spirit* (20:22); 5) **the literary convention of a dual summary and conclusion** (vv.30-31 // 21:25). All these are in play.

The crucified Jesus is now risen into a transformed physicality with new powers. Continuity of identity is confirmed in his wounds; he’s not a ghost or apparition. Earlier promises are fulfilled, so Jesus is to be trusted in his new form. The church offers witness, but only Jesus through his Spirit provides experiential confirmation, subtle or overt. His followers are now his agents, sent as he was and empowered to grant and deny forgiveness and that people may believe and have life. Thomas’ confession of *My Lord and my God* is high Christology and a challenge to politicized religion (i.e. Emperor Worship) where Domitian (81-96AD) was hailed as *dominus et deus noster* (our lord and god). A Sunday gathering in a home, the greeting of Peace, the gift of the Spirit, the grant of forgiveness, discipline, a confession of faith, the worship of the Lord and the presence of doubters are all elements of early worship!

USING THE TOOLS HE GAVE

“As the Father has sent me, even so send I you.”

What if we tried to act on this?

J O H N 2 0 : 2 1 b

Atheist Penn Jillette is half of Penn and Teller, the duo that’s headlined Vegas for years with comedy and magic. To his credit, Penn’s never been shy about his disbelief. In a YouTube video, he references a Christian businessman who once gave him a Bible as a gift. He then turns it to an opportunity to point out that Christians who don't evangelize must really *hate* people. Here's his quote:

“I've always said, you know, that I don't respect people who don't proselytize.... If you believe there's a heaven and hell... and you think it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward; and atheists who think that people shouldn't proselytize, [saying] ‘Just leave me alone and keep your religion to yourself,’ uh, how much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them? If I believed beyond the shadow of a doubt a truck was coming to hit you, and you didn't believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there's a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.”¹

I love it when God uses unlikely prophets. How easy to treat Jesus as a decoration on the good life otherwise defined, a sort of Christian hood ornament that reveals our brand. But keep quiet, and never bring up the name *Jesus* in public. Never witness or explain the faith. Don't tell your story; don't be pushy; don't impose. Hope they will get it from TV or a book or something, not from you- a living witness God put close with hopefully some credibility. When this mindset takes over our thinking, Jillette's critique is uncomfortably true. We hide the light of Christ because we've lost our intellectual and spiritual nerve.

¹ Edited from PreachingToday.com search under John 20:19-31.

I find there are six things you can know about everyone you meet. The first is that- unlike any other of the amazing creatures of the earth- people alone are made in God’s image and stamped with God’s likeness, which means they have the latent capacity to interact with their Creator. Made by God, made for God, a capacity for communion designed into the hardware. Dignity and worth are not add-ons but standard equipment. Achievements are earned, but worth is a given- and here the Catholics have it right: it’s from conception to natural death, which is why they are so keen and well-argued on both beginning and end of life issues. Before conception you simply are not, and after death how you are treated passes to a higher authority, but here on earth the image of God and its inherent dignity is from conception to natural death, and ought to be so under the law as well. In contrast to us and how the image of God is defaced, Jesus shows what the image of God looks like when it is fresh, unmarred, and not shattered. He is- in a singular fashion- what we were all meant to be: loving God in the full strength of all we are, and out of the overflow loving people in the midst of the good but transient creation. Jesus shines, and everyone needs to have the image of God in them repaired by him.

The second insight is that each person has several big problems, none of which they can overcome on their own. Three interlocking powers render every human being vulnerable, and the big three anti-human powers- as the Bible sees it- are sin, evil, and death. From the start, something within us already points in the wrong direction, a kind of inbred suspicion against God and God’s wise boundaries called *sin*.² They also- like you- live behind enemy lines with a spiritual foe who is 24/7 working to deceive and destroy, the one Jesus called a *liar and a murderer from the beginning*.³ The third *biggie* is they’re going to die, and know it ahead of time! Life is a battlefield in which all are casualties; no one walks off the field of conflict alive. Your internal compass- unless reset- already points in the wrong direction; someone of immense evil intelligence is after you; you will die and return to the dust from

² For a review of the history of this idea, see Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008). United Methodist have a strong statement on original sin in our doctrine, “Article VII- Of Original or Birth Sin: “Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually” (*Book of Discipline* 2012:65).

³ John 8:44ff.

which you came. We are made in God's image- and that is our glory; we are also mislead, easily deceived, and finally mortal- and that is our common plight. Only Jesus was without our moral disease; only he saw our enemy clearly, and he is the only one- thus far- to be given the new edition of the human body beyond the destructive power of these forces. We have Version 1.0; he alone has Version 2.0. Jesus is the victor, and everyone needs him as their champion.

The third thing you can know is that along the way each has constructed a belief system or worldview to make sense of their inner and outer experience and offer a map for how to function in the world. To call it a *belief system* makes it sound more formal than it usually is. Put simply, it's the way I see the world: *what's real and unreal, what's possible and impossible, what works, and how I ought to live.*⁴ This vision answers the three big question that emerge in childhood and shortly after: Why am I here? What shall I do with my life? What happens to me at death?⁵ Everyone lives in line with the map we build up along the way. It's our vision of what's true, and it changes only with great difficulty. Our faith has a heart and a head challenge. Only Jesus had the totally accurate map of what's true precisely because he was fully transparent to God. In him was no deception, no agenda except to love vertically and express it horizontally. His words are true and reflect the deepest grain of the universe, and everyone needs him as their rabbi and professor.

A fourth thing you can know is that everyone has deep hopes that involve love, joy, and a sense of purpose, even if the circle has grown tight and small in circumference down to them alone. To love yourself is at least a beginning, if not recommended as an end point. Even a man so utterly depraved as Hitler claimed to love the idea of a purified race, found exhilaration in his rise to power, and had a sense of purpose so compelling others were willing to follow him to death. Everyone loves something or someone; everyone finds joy somewhere- even if the sources are dark and perverse; and everyone lives with some sort of direction or purpose. It's the unvarying human script. Jesus had a especially fierce love, an earthy joy and a passionate purpose on display every day. It's one of the reasons so many found him attractive and others so annoying they killed him rather than have him go on

⁴ See Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008); David Nagle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁵ John Carroll, *Ego & Soul: The Modern West In Search of Meaning* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008), 2.

displaying the kingdom of his Father in the power of the Spirit. What you are looking at a deep level for can only be found in him.

A fifth thing about everyone is that- through the working of the Holy Spirit called either *divine providence* or *prevenient grace*- God is arranging events to get their attention. So when you listen to a person's story, be alert to being shown where God is at work, because till death the lights are on, even if flickering. To witness to someone is not to start from scratch; God was active before you showed up and- in a sense- waiting on you to do your part as a face-to-face factor in the cumulative case God is building that life can have a new center that holds. Life is full of clues, all of which- when properly read- point in the direction of Jesus Christ. Noting this in yourself and others turns life into an adventure of following the Lord's lead. You do not have to be the last link in the chain of witnesses, just the next one.

A sixth truth is they will spend the-life-that-comes-after-this-life within the blessed embrace of the Triune God in the new creation with a resurrection body like Jesus, or in a place so despairing all good is gone.⁶ It frankly surprises many modern-minded, tolerant United Methodists to find- often to their embarrassment- that their church in its official doctrines has a brief but blunt statement on the two destinies, and here it is- titled *The Judgment and the Future State*:

“We believe all men (and women) stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and *the wicked to endless condemnation* (ital. ad).”⁷

The two destinies are either the expansive kingdom of God where love is explored without end, or the kingdom of the shrunken self, frozen in rage against life's true source. In the one realm we become more and more human, and in the other less and less who we were designed to be, precisely because we've said a persistent No to the One on whom life depends.

⁶ For a recent treatment of ultimates by a Christian philosopher, see Jerry Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: A Protestant View of the Cosmic Drama* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015).

⁷ *The Book of Discipline* 2012: 74. A gift of the EUB's! Also the sermon of John Wesley, “On Hell,” <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/73>.

A plant with good soil and plenty of water and light flourishes; without these, plants wither till you can hardly tell what they once were. We see it in our gardens; the same is true with people. Life is a morally serious event, not flip or careless- as some pundits would have us believe. You only go around once- no reincarnation, no do-over. Life has moral weight, and each day you're becoming a person who is either more or less fit for the reality that is coming our way and for which we pray, "Thy kingdom- the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit- come."

Jesus is the quality control for the new reality that's already cropping up in our world. The kingdom of God is a gated community, and Jesus is the only doorway into that reality.⁸ If life is not moving towards him- from however far way and across however many barriers, it's aimed in the wrong direction, and life aimed in the wrong direction is a dead end of everlasting frustration.

The one thing I cannot escape is the sheer fact and unavoidable significance of my own life. It's there waiting on me every morning. This is the grand human drama; everyone's on stage and can't get off. In his book *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis put it memorably:

"Remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would strongly be tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."⁹

So Penn Jillette- for all his lack of subtlety- is right, "How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them?" A church that won't tell the story of Jesus outside its walls is going out of business, and that's the challenge of Main Street: Do you know Jesus well enough to tell someone who he is and what he means to you in a natural manner? Is it embarrassing to you?

⁸ John 10:7, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep."

⁹ PreachingToday.com search under John 20.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

A. vv.19-23 A Load Of Jesus-Centered Divine Revelation.

At the heart of classic Christian faith, and by this I don't mean the thin, self-help, individualistic Americanized version most of us grew up with, is the passionate belief that in a single life- Jesus of Nazareth- God has addressed the whole of the human condition. The medicine needed for the multi-symptom illness we share has been provided. In his life we see the human face of God, hear the human voice of God, and observe the holy love of God challenging and overcoming all that's wrong with us and our world. What in other religions is compatible with Jesus may be celebrated as deposits of grace; what is not in line with him is a distraction and to be discarded.

That first Easter evening, twelve hours or so after Mary Magdalene came with a confession that explained the confusing evidence about the moved stone and the empty linens and the angelic honor guard, "I have seen (and held) the (risen) Lord." On that evening a flood of divine revelation came to ten of the former twelve who were gathered in fear behind locked doors, Judas being dead and Thomas AWOL. That they had to stew on her report for most of a day is itself an insight that the normal way to come to faith is through the testimony of others that we mull over.

After the initial series of appearances which founded the church, appearances of the risen Jesus came to an end, the marker for which is the *Ascension*, as we recite in the Creed, "On the third day he arose from the dead (and appeared), ascended into heaven (the appearances stopped), sitteth at the right hand of the Father, from whence he shall come (at the end) to judge the living and the dead."

Visions of Jesus from heaven continue, often as dreams in Muslim world, but there are no more resurrection appearances of the same order as the first ones. The next time Jesus pops into our space-time continuum- as the Creed says- will mark the end of the world as we've known it. But it was important that all the certified witnesses received a visit because it was the climax of all that Jesus was about and illumined all that came before. It was also important they stopped after forty days plus Paul, else nuts would be coming along all the time claiming a new revelation because Jesus showed up in their bedroom! Those who had observed his life as official witnesses for three years don't yet have the whole story without Jesus breaking into their midst, which is just what John reports in verse 19, and here we must use our imaginations to visualize Jesus stepping out of invisibility into visibility

in a closed room with the doors locked, not as a bodiless apparition, but in a new body which bears the marks of the old and has new powers, like appearing in closed rooms. It's a group appearance with a visual track for the eyes, an audio track for the ears, and eventually- a week later with Thomas, a tangibility track for touch. The risen Jesus is fully multi-sensory, verse 19: "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, *Jesus came and stood among them*, and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'"

The other world opened without ringing the door bell, and out stepped Jesus into the room. We are not free to step out of our world into his; he is free to step out of his into ours, which may be one of the reasons it's so difficult to precisely coordinate all the appearances the New Testament reports. His world is equidistant from all our 3-D coordinates. He doesn't have to travel to show up. Heaven as God's dwelling place, the upper story of creation, is not far way, just invisible and inaccessible from our side, unless it chooses to be revealed. Jesus' body is not less than ours but more, and freed from the limits of space and time. It requires a new physics for which we do not yet have the model or the equations.

Jesus came, and his first gift was peace- *shalom* in Hebrew- which means wholeness in all dimensions. How dizzying, how disorienting to stand at the junction between this world and the coming kingdom with Jesus as the single touch point. Rather than stop their hearts with a mass heart attack, he administered an anti-anxiety treatment that worked as soon as he spoke it, "Peace be with you."

They were hiding in the fear of what happened to him happening to them - a cross for each one, and it was not an unreasonable fear; to this was added the numinous fear of having the fabric of reality suddenly ripped open by the unexpected appearance of a dead friend. And it was only when he showed them his credentials that fear became joy, verse 20: "When he said this, he showed them his hands and side. *Then*, the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord." It was an emotional roller coaster: fear of arrest, fear of a cross, terror at his appearance, now an enveloping peace that put them at the center of divine care and safety. Well, no one ever promised life with Jesus wouldn't have ups and downs.

The confirming experience Mary had early that morning was now theirs. She had told the truth, and there was only one conclusion: the Father with the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead and sent him back as proof. It was not merely the resuscitation of the old mangled corpse back to this life but a new body which used up the old in

the energizing transformation of resurrection. Lazarus went into death as a revolving door and was spit out back on this side still wrapped in the stinky rags of death and needing to be unraveled, but Jesus went into and through death into the kingdom of God leaving the linens behind, a process in which his mangled corpse was used as raw materials for a new bodily prototype. And in this amazing moment of group revelation, all the terror and horror of the last three days was immediately reframed in a larger perspective. It wasn't a tragic accident; it was the will of God. The cross was not the last word, only the next-to-last word. It would take years and much re-reading of Scripture and reflection to think through the implications of what was now before them, but at this moment the world forever changed. It was now full of wonderful new possibilities and strange new ideas. The Trinity, a new creation, a missionary church, the potency of forgiveness, the presence of the Spirit, and the promise of their own resurrection was revealed in a moment, and to it Jesus gave articulation in verses 21 through 23, which is a kind of Constitution of the church.

So why did Jesus come back so suddenly and with such undeniable resurrection credentials? Because his earthly life, from conception to ascension, is stage one of the divine mission to alert the world to the kingdom of God and its present activity. It laid down the deposit for who God is as sealed in Jesus' resurrection. Now begins the second part, which is the mission of Jesus through his people as empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. We are his extensions, his personal agents..

This mission is for the whole world and grounded in a peace the world cannot give, "Jesus said to them *again*, 'Peace be with you,'" and whenever the church loses this deep gift in a flurry of activities, it has little to offer. Abiding in the peace of Jesus through prayer and worship and listening together to his voice is not a distraction from the real work; it is the real work in a world chock full of other agendas. Spirituality in community is the spring of action, which is why it precedes the mission, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." We are sent with the peace of Jesus, the wholeness only he brings to fractured human life. For all its flaws and failings, for all its corruption and embarrassments, the church- even in its disunity and weakness- remains the tool God uses to get the word out. The sins of the church and its leaders- ugly as the are, shameful as they are- are no surprise to God, and in the end not an impediment. Who else has God got to use but us? And when we fail, God raises up a new wave. We will always fall short, always be an embarrassment, never live up to the full demands of holiness, but still every church is an outpost of the risen life of Jesus Christ. We are the flawed container of an immense divine gift.

Peace is his gift; the sending is his mission; the Holy Spirit is the presence he blows into us to give life within. What would it have felt like to have the risen Jesus- whose breath you'd seen on cold Galilee mornings- blow his warm, sweet breath into your soul and set up residence within? Something inside now came alive which bound them to him and one another. They were *born again* from above, when the one who was Jesus' constant companion took up residence within.¹⁰ Verse 22, "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" And with the Holy Spirit came the possibility of all the gifts and fruits of the Spirit: from prophecy to tongues to healings to exorcisms to the illumination of Scripture, to the formation over time of the character of Jesus in the life of each believer. With the person of the Giver come all the gifts and the possibility of all the virtues over time.

The growth process towards become more like Jesus is now divinely energized. We are to live in his peace and go in his power to offer people a healed relationship with God. And while the next authorization has often been misused- even turned to church profit as in the selling of indulgences- it's what we are about. To the church is given the amazing trust of announcing to people the mind of God concerning their sins, whether they shall be released from them, or whether the burden shall grow heavier because they have not been named and turned away from. Dwelling in the peace of Christ, and sensitized and instructed by the Holy Spirit, God promises divine backing to what we say to people. Rightly used, we either release people from their prison camps or leave them behind the barbed wire fences of their own construction.¹¹

When sin is named for what it is- rebellion against God with terrible, multi-level consequences, and when with the confession is the desire to be rid of the thing itself and not just its consequences, there the church announces the mercy of divine pardon, verse 23: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven (by God)." So also the opposite; when people resists naming things precisely and when the desire is only to be rid of the negative effects and not the thing itself, the second phrase is operative, "If you retain the sins, they are retained (again, by God)." If I only want relief from the consequences of my wicked behavior without a change of character, then what I want God will not give. The true fruit of forgiveness is a healed relationship with

¹⁰ See the Nicodemus discussion in John 3.

¹¹ For a fresh history of confession by a Protestant pastor and theologian (Presbyterian), see Annemarie S. Kidder, *Making Confession, Hearing Confession: A History Of The Cure Of Souls* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

God and a new life of love and good works. Listen to the Trinitarian formula of absolution with fresh ears:

“Almighty God have mercy upon you (your only hope);
forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ (your only source);
strengthen you in all goodness (your only protection against further sin);
and keep you in eternal life (the only sufficient protection).”¹²

It’s a good thing to agree with God whenever your sins are revealed. Call it what God’s calls it; don’t fudge with some psycho-babble, politically correct evasion. It’s a good thing to see them in all their ugly, deceptive power, precisely that you may have a desire to turn from them:

To see gossip not as inside news but as a community cancer;
to see pride as a devilish attitude of superiority;
to see prayerlessness as the neglect of the divine lover;
to see fornication or adultery as the crass use of another’s body without regard
for the tenderest feeling of which they are capable or their long-term
welfare;
to see unrighteous anger as pouring scalding water on others to be a bully;
to see disobedience as the treason it is;
to see sloth as neglect of duty, and on and on.

To see the ugly power of sin is not a curse but a blessing, not an assault on your precious self esteem but the motivation to take up the fight. For God to say, “This is weed,” is an opportunity to hoe your garden. For God to say, “There’s a cancer in your soul,” is to seek out a surgeon. The biggest problem I have is me- Pastor Phil. I often wonder if there’s a better deal and happier life out there somewhere beyond the constraints of holy living. This is the only way to life, and- as Jesus said- it’s not broad and easy but narrow. So Jesus came without their permission, and he came in an amazing new resurrection body that bore the wounds of the old, as if to say:

“It’s really me, fellows; we’re back in business. Need my peace? You have it. A stake in my mission? It’s yours. How about the Spirit that set me on fire every day so people came just to watch me burn? How about my authority to free the captives or keep them bound in the pain of their

¹² *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 890.

resistance? The keys are yours. As you follow me, things will happen, and when they stall, when conversions are few and miracles scarce and boredom replaces delight, check in for a course correction.”

This is who we are, and everything else- the buildings and the funds and the theology and the traditions and the institutions and the pastors- are either a resource or a distraction. First a relationship with the risen Jesus which shows up as his peace and power, then the overflow of mission- which involves being sent with the both offer of forgiveness and the warning of judgment. Carrot and stick together!

B. vv.24-25 Thomas’ Absence And Bold Dare.

It interests me that while the risen Lord could have appeared at the same time to Thomas- wherever he happened to be- he did not. Apparently Jesus did not want to encourage the notion- widely popular in our culture- that you can have Jesus without having to bother with his people. Whatever else this faith may be, it’s a team sport.¹³

I like Thomas. Thomas was a realist; to him a dead Jesus and a silly report from a once-lunatic woman was no reason to keep getting together, so he skipped out. Went fishing, watched the Masters, got plastered, hated himself for three wasted years betting on the wrong horse, who knows? Verse 24, “Now Thomas, one of *the twelve*- now a title rather than an accurate count- was not with them when Jesus came.” Someone looked around, “Where’s Thomas?” How hard it must have been for him to hear their unified testimony; it was much harder to dismiss them as a group compared to Mary Magdalene’s solo song. These are men you’ve traveled with for years, faced danger with, dreamed and laughed with, so when they say in a baritone chorus, “We have seen the Lord,” the weight of testimony is great. We tend to trust the reports of people with whom we have a high level of trust. They’ve never lied to me before; why now? But not Thomas, not today, and not after what he’d seen on Friday, so Thomas sets the bar high. He’s come to be known as *Doubting Thomas* but I prefer *Conditional Thomas*, and his thinking went something like this:

“I must be convinced- according to the best thinking on the resurrection- that there is bodily continuity. We know people have visions of the deceased, but this not what you claim. You claim bodily resurrection for

¹³ For an excellent treatment of Christian community, see Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2009).

our dead rabbi in the middle of time, not at the end as we all thought. The stakes are too high for a man like me, so here is my dare, and if he is alive- as you say- he hears me now, ‘Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place by hands in his side (since it is a larger wound), I will not believe.’¹⁴

Jesus heard the dare and let them sit for a week. Mary had her encounter early that morning; Jesus did not appear to the ten till that evening. Now, after they say to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord!” everyone waits a full week. Why? There’s coming a day when appearances end, when the only evidence is the testimony of others plus the witness of the Spirit. What others will soon face- which is no immediate verification- the Lord puts them all through. He doesn’t short-circuit the discussion. They seek to convince Thomas apart from demonstration, and he- apparently- sticks to his guns. Only Jesus tips the scales; the convincing is finally up to him, and we don’t control him. Eleven convinced believers and one skeptic.

A’ vv.26-31 Appearance With Thomas Present.

Verse 26, “Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house.” Thomas was with them, and again “the door was shut, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’” He came for one, and Jesus’ words are an echo of Thomas’ demands, “O.K old friend, put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side; and do not be faithless but believing.” But there’s no evidence Thomas followed through. What he saw and heard convinced him, and what comes forth is one of the few places in the New Testament where God language is applied directly to Jesus.¹⁵ For the Jews this was blasphemy, a move in back in the direction of polytheism; for the Romans it was a direct political challenge that the Emperor was not Lord and God. But for Thomas, and the church after him, it is the confession that in Jesus we meet one who is no less than God the Son.¹⁶ Thomas

¹⁴ On what resurrection did and did not mean, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008), Chapter 3, “Early Christian Hope In Its Historical Setting,” 31-78. For a brief treatment by the same author, *The Challenge Of Easter* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2009).

¹⁵ Others are Rom. 9:5, 2 Pt. 1:1, Titus 2:13, Heb. 1:8-9, 1 Jn. 5:20.

¹⁶ On the tortured history of working this confession out intellectually, politically, doctrinally, and ecclesially, see Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars* (San Francisco, CA:

answered, “My Lord and my God,” which is a confession of faith and politics, the rough equivalent of, “I worship you; you are the world’s only rightful ruler.”

It is then in verse 29 that Jesus again addresses the mission, only this time with an eye to those who are to come to faith without such an appearance as Thomas received, “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.” The final issue is, Is Jesus trustworthy? Not, Has he jumped through every skeptical hoop we could put in his path? Over and over we’ve heard of *his hands and side*? Why? To demonstrate it was the same Jesus they knew before and that his new life did not involve the downgrading of his presence to a disembodied soul but the divine enhancement of his body in resurrection form. Salvation is not finally about eternal souls in a spiritual heaven far off somewhere but about resurrection bodies in a new heaven and earth with Jesus as the preview. And if this world and human bodies have such value to God, then we should not act like a bunch of escapists who ignore the needs around us but get about the kingdom witness of healing and justice and peace-making and challenging all forms of evil. It’s time to regain our intellectual nerve and to relearn the skills of effective witness.

CONCLUSION

All four Gospels are selective portraits.¹⁷ What we have is enough to see an outline of the life and work of the one we call Savior. In line with the practice of other ancient biographers- John freely admits that the stature and deeds of his hero exceeded the physical limits of his papyrus scroll,¹⁸ and while much film remains on the editor’s cutting floor, the purpose of the whole is clear:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, *which are not written in this book*, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing *you may have life in his name.*”

HarperOne, 2010). This is a book that I will read again.

¹⁷ On the credibility of the Gospels, see Mark D. Roberts, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossways, 2007).

¹⁸ Craig Keener, *John, Vol. 2* (Peabody, MA: Henrickson, 2003), 1213-1216.
