

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ *On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you."* ²⁰ *When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* ²¹ *(Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* ²² *And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. ²³ Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."* ²⁴ *Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.* ²⁵ *So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."* ²⁶ *Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you."* ²⁷ *Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe."* ²⁸ *Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!"* ²⁹ *Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."* ³⁰ *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of (his) disciples that are not written in this book.* ³¹ *But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.*

Context

In the Johannine narrative our gospel occurs on what has been a full day: "*On the evening of that first day of the week.*" It was only that morning that Mary Magdalene had visited the tomb and confessed, "*They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him*" (20:2) – ironically echoing one the decisive misunderstanding of Jesus' ministry: from where did Jesus come and where is he going (e.g. 7:33-36, 8:21-23). Mary became the first disciple of the good news of the empty tomb conveying the word to Peter and "*the one whom Jesus loved.*" Slowly the implications of the empty tomb and the burial linens come to the disciples and they begin to understand – each in differing ways and to varying degrees. The disciple whom Jesus loved "*saw and believed*" (20:8), however "*they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead*" (v.9).

At this point, it is perhaps that their faith is as complete as faith in the empty tomb can be, but as many commentators have noted, to assign to the disciples a full belief in the Resurrection is to rush the story. Resurrection faith begins when Mary encounters Jesus in the garden and he is revealed as the Risen Christ and Good shepherd – he knows his sheep by name and they respond to his voice (10:3-4, 12,16, 24; cf Is 43:1). In telling Mary "*stop holding onto me*" (v.17) Jesus lets Mary (and the reader) know that the unfolding of the events of the *hour* are continuing.

Commentary

Meanwhile the disciples, still reeling from the events of the last three days, gather in the upper room. In Matthew 28:8, Mary Magdalene's reaction to the encounter with Jesus was "*fearful but overjoyed.*" Perhaps this too is the experience of the disciples. All John tells us is that they were gathered together, hiding as it were, *for fear of the Jews* (v.19)

These are the disciples who scattered and fled at Jesus' arrest, who stood at a distance from the cross, and in the case of Peter denied Jesus. These are disciples that upon seeing Jesus appear within the room would have likely experienced shame as they remembered all they had done and failed to do. Yet Jesus' words are not words of recrimination or blame, his first resurrected words to the disciples as a group is "*Peace be with you.*"

Peace be with you

What is this “peace” (*eirēnē*)? Often we assume “peace” describes either an absence of conflict or an inner personal tranquility, but one should note it most often describes the relationship between two people. The verbal form (*eirēneuō*) always refers to relationships between people in the NT (Mk 9:50; Ro 12:18; 2C 13:11; 1Th 5:13). Given John’s emphasis on the disciples’ love for one another (13:35), a communal meaning is highly indicated. It is also possible that the meaning of *eirēnē* refers to messianic salvation, since “peace” is an essential quality of the messianic kingdom. Still, this does not suggest that the “peace” of the kingdom is primarily a personal, inner tranquility, but the way people and all creation and God will relate to each another in whole and complete ways.

This greeting of peace (v.19) is the word of reconciliation and wholeness for the disciples. They are forgiven for their failings and are brought back into relationship with the risen Jesus. Their experience of Jesus is “seeing” but at the same time a moment of graced restoration; these cause the disciples to rejoice (v.20).

Between his greetings of peace, Jesus shows his hands and side to the disciples. Like the earlier encounter with Mary, this action stresses the continuity between the “earthly” and the resurrected Jesus – yet at the same time, the fact that Jesus can enter the locked room also shows there something new here – death has been conquered and more.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you

The Fourth Gospel often speaks of Jesus being sent into the world by the Father: to do his will (6:38–39; 8:29), to speak his words (3:34; 8:28; 12:49; 14:24; 17:8), to perform his works (4:34; 5:36; 9:4) and win salvation for all who believe (3:16–17).

That these same actions would be expected of the disciples, continuing the words and works of Jesus, is foreshadowed at various places in the Gospel. Jesus had urged them to see fields ripe for harvest, and told them he had sent them to reap where others had labored (4:35–38). Jesus told them that those who believed in him would do the works he had done and greater works than these because he was returning to the Father (14:12). The charge to bear fruit was made clear: “*I ... chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you*” (15:16). When Jesus prayed for his disciples he said to the Father, “*As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world*” (17:18). All of this points to a post-Resurrection mission that was larger than simply the confines of historical Israel, but rather a mission to the world.

So I send you... an excursus

There has been (and will be) lots of discussion about who the evangelist intended as “you.” While clearly plural, the question is whether the intention was to address the apostles present, a wider group of disciples that may have been present – John never enumerates the people in the room – or an even wider audience of believers. Who is intended to go on “mission” (v.21), who was to receive the holy Spirit (v.22), and who was to carry the power to forgive sins (v.23). Fr. Raymond Brown (1034-45) writes:

Some would argue from 21 that the disciples cannot represent all Christians, for this verse refers to an apostolic mission; and even if historically the apostolic mission was entrusted to a larger group than the Twelve, nevertheless all Christians were not apostles (see I Cor xii 28-29). Yet in 21 John has modified the apostolic mission by making it dependent upon the model of the Father having sent the son, and usually for John the Father-Son relationship is held up for all Christians to imitate. Can we be certain that John means “As the Father sent me, so do I send you” in a more restricted sense than he means “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” (xv 9)? Nevertheless, even if 21 does give some support to the idea that only the Twelve/Eleven are in direct view, vs. 22 points in the

opposite direction. As we shall see, this verse recalls Gen ii 7 and is meant to symbolize Jesus' new creation of men as God's children by the gift of the Spirit. Certainly this re-creation, this new beginning, this gift of the Spirit is meant for all Christians.... However, it would be risky to assume that this same wider horizon is in mind in vs. 23, which is a modified form of an ancient saying of Jesus."

Fr. Brown continues (1040-45) with this latter thought by pointing to Matthew 16:8 and 18:18 wherein the power to bind and loose are given to the limited group of the apostles and the context seems clear that this involves not only community discipline, but also welcoming members back into the community, as well as placing someone outside the community. Such responsibility would also include the formal authority to forgive sins in the name of the Lord. Fr. Brown notes that the meaning, extent and exercise of the power to forgive sins has been divisive in Christianity. The Reformers of the 16th century and late held that the power to forgive sins was offered to each of Christ's faithful. The Catholic position remained the same as it had been for centuries, that the power to forgive sins was retained in the Sacrament of Penance and was exercised by ordained priests.

As Fr. Brown points out, on the basis of Scripture alone, there will be no conclusive argument made. Each interpretive position relies on other held beliefs and interpretations of the meaning and intent of other passages of NT Scripture. The Catholic position was indeed universal for well more than a millennia in the faith, practice, tradition and teaching of the church. The Reformers would say that it is never too late to correct an error. At the core of every interpretive position is a held ecclesiology, i.e., how one understand "Church."

"Receive the holy Spirit"

The sacred writer had already introduced the giving of the Holy Spirit in John 7 in a scene during the Feast of Tabernacles in which the Spirit is promised at a future time when Jesus was glorified. In the Fourth Gospel it is at the crucifixion that Jesus is glorified in that his willing obedience manifests the nature of God, which is love. It is there on the cross that Jesus deliver the Spirit into the world (19:30), symbolized immediately afterward by the flow of the sacramental symbols of blood and water.

And now, at his first encounter with the believing community, Jesus breathes the Spirit again as a re-creation (*cf.* Gen 2:7) of God's people. The word used for 'breathe' is *emphysaō*, which, though found only here in the NT, occurs several times in the LXX where it refers to God breathing life into the man formed from the dust (Gen. 2:7; *cf.* Wisdom 15:11), Elijah breathing into the nostrils of the widow's dead son while calling upon the Lord to restore his life (1 Kgs. 17:21 LXX), and Ezekiel prophesying to the wind to breathe life into the slain in the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:9). The allusions to the life-giving work of God in creation seems clear.

In many places in the Fourth Gospel the promise of the Spirit is foreshadowed (1:33; 4:10, 13-14; 7:37-39; 14:16-17, 26, 28; 15:26-27; 16:7-15). Could it be that v.22 is the fulfillment of these promises? There are scholars who have identified 20:22 as the Fourth Gospel's equivalent of Pentecost, but there are problems with such a view. Thomas was not included (20:24), nor was there any great change in the disciples' behavior—they were still meeting behind closed doors when Jesus next appeared to them (26). Others have suggested it constituted a lesser bestowal of the Spirit to be supplemented with a greater endowment at Pentecost, or that what Jesus was bestowing was not the personal Holy Spirit but some impersonal power/breath from God. There is little to support either of these views in the Fourth Gospel. Finally, there is the view that Jesus' action was symbolic, foreshadowing the bestowal of the Spirit to take place on the Day of Pentecost. But then these problems mainly arise as people attempt to harmonize the gospels. There are many scholars who suggest that we simply leave John to narrate the gospel as the Spirit inspired him.

Thomas

Although many translations include "doubt" in v. 27 -- and thus lead to the phrase "Doubting Thomas," but there is no Greek word for "doubt" in the verse. The phrase *do not be unbelieving, but believe* contrasts *apistos* and *pistos* -- the only occurrence of both these words in John. Simply, put the word does mean "doubt" and Greek does not lack the equivalent words: *diakrinomai*, *dialogismos*, *distazō*, *dipsychos*, *aporeō*, and *aporia*. Lowe and Nida (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*) give three definitions for the adjective - *pistos*.

- pertaining to trusting -- *one who trusts in, trusting*
- pertaining to being trusted -- *faithful, trustworthy, dependable, reliable*
- pertaining to being sure, with the implication of being fully trustworthy -- *sure*

Thus *apistos* would be "not having trust or faith or certainty."

Questioning God is an aspect of faith. If one is asking God questions or seeking answers from God, there is an intrinsic faith present. To ask the question implies a fundamental trust that if an answer is given that it will be correct. Similar, to ask the question can point to a desire to sure. All this point to a "becoming" (a valid translation of the verb being used). Thomas seems to be at a crossroads in his life. What will he become? What adjective will describe him: trusting or not, faithful or not, certain or not?

John Westerhoff III in his book *Will Our Children Have Faith* offers a model of becoming in faith that may shed some light on Thomas' evolving faith (found in Brian Stoffregen's text)

- (1) EXPERIENCED FAITH (preschool and early childhood) -- imitating actions, e.g., a child praying the Lord's Prayer without understanding the meaning of all the words -- "This is what **we** do. This is how **we** act."
- (2) AFFILIATIVE FAITH (childhood and early adolescent years) -- belonging to a group, which still centers on imitating what the group does -- "This is what **we** believe and do. This is **our** group/church."
- (3) SEARCHING FAITH (late adolescence, young adult) -- asking questions, "Is this what **I** believe?" Thomas is our example of this. He will not blindly accept what others have said, but needs to find certainty for himself. This stage of faith is adding the "head" to the "heart" of the earlier stages. This is a point at which many young adults drop-out as well as when many are recruited to causes and cults
- (4) OWNED FAITH (early adulthood) -- this stage comes only through the searching stage. After exploring the question, "Is this what I believe?" one, hopefully, discovers a Christian answer that declares: "This is what I believe."

The Thomas scene ends with an "owned faith" and a personal confession: "*My Lord and my God*" -- a confession we don't hear from any of the other disciples who did not go through the same questioning as Thomas. However, this is the strong, personal faith that one witnesses to and one is willing to die for.

The Ninth Beatitude

In response, Jesus told Thomas, *Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*. Thomas came to believe because he saw the risen Lord, but Jesus did not praise Thomas' pathway to faith; rather, he pronounced a blessing upon those who have not seen the risen Jesus yet have believed in him nevertheless. These are those who hear or read the witness to Jesus borne by the disciples and confirmed by the Spirit (15:26-27). This is the second pronouncement of blessing by Jesus in the form of a beatitude in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 13:17: "*If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it.*")

Now Jesus did many other signs

Verses 30–31 form a conclusion, the ending to the original edition of the Gospel. What the evangelist has written — which is not all that he could have written — is meant to urge and strengthen belief in Jesus as the Christ — and as the Son of God. John has already given us this profession in 11:27 on the lips of Martha in the context of another raising from the dead. To live, to really live, is to believe this: that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Messiah. *Vere homo, vere Deus*. Truly man, truly God.

..that through this belief..

John's theology becomes evident through observing the reactions of the participants. How do they arrive at belief in the risen Lord?

- In the opening scene, Mary, a minor character, sees the stone moved from the tomb. Her reaction is the natural one: “*They have taken the Lord from the tomb*” (v. 2). She does not yet believe.
- Peter and the Beloved Disciple, the central actors, proceed to the tomb with haste (and hope). They see the burial clothes and head wrapping. Peter remains perplexed, but the response of the Beloved Disciple is one of faith. “*He saw and believed*” (v. 8). This loved and loving disciple saw only the minimum yet believed.
- In the following scene (vv. 11–18), Mary now becomes a major character. She still holds the natural explanation (vv. 13, 15 repeat the substance of v. 2). She comes to faith only when she has heard (v. 16) and seen the Lord (v. 18). Jesus' sheep recognize his voice (10:4).
- The disciples, introduced in Scene 2, become central in the scene that follows (vv. 19–25). Beginning in a state of fear, they pass from fear to joy “*when they saw the Lord*” (v. 20). For them, too, faith comes through seeing.
- Thomas, a minor character in verses 19–25, becomes central in the final scene. His stance is one of extreme incredulity. He will not believe unless he sees and touches (v. 25). And so Jesus invites him to faith through sight and touch (v. 27).

The evangelist is reviewing all these varying reactions and possibilities *for people of his own time*. What will be their reaction, continued reaction, to the resurrection? Will it be the perplexity of Peter? Will it be that of the Beloved Disciple, who, united so intimately with his Lord in love, believed immediately with minimum evidence? Will it be that of Mary Magdalene and the other disciples, who believed only when they saw and heard? Will they be like Thomas, who refused to believe unless he saw and touched, unless placed in a position in which unbelief became impossible? The evangelist is saying to his own fellow Christians: “*Those first disciples were by no means exemplary, nor was their situation so fortunate. Faith was almost forced upon them. That is not something to be envied. Our own situation can be more positive, more profitable, more Christian. Let us follow the example of the Beloved Disciple, who believed with such little evidence. We can be gifted with the “ninth” beatitude: ‘Blest are they who have not seen and have believed’ (v. 29). And indeed, blest are we who, without seeing, believe in the risen Jesus, our Lord and our God.*”

Notes

20:19 the disciples: by implication from John 20:24 this means ten of the Twelve, presumably in Jerusalem.

Peace be with you: although this could be an ordinary greeting, John intends here to echo John 14:27. The theme of rejoicing in John 20:20 echoes John 16:22. Literally, the Greek expression is *eirēnē hymin* – there is no verb – meaning “*peace to you.*” Many translator prefer the declarative statement that peace is already among the disciples.

20:20 Hands and . . . side: Luke 24:39-40 mentions “hands and feet,” based on Psalm 22:17. Where the Lucan account is apologetic in nature, here the Johannine description is revelatory.

20:21 As the Father has sent me, so I send you: By means of this sending, the Eleven were made *apostolos* (apostles), that is, “those sent” (see John 17:18), even though John does not use the noun in reference to them. A solemn mission or “sending” is also the subject of the post-resurrection appearances to the Eleven in Matthew 28:19; Luke 24:47; Mark 16:15. Especially in John one must also keep in mind the Messiah’s mission: “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:17).

To express Jesus’ being sent by the Father, here the evangelist uses the verb *apostellō*, while for the disciples’ sending by Jesus he uses the verb *pempō*. However, nothing should be made of this, as the words are used synonymously in the Fourth Gospel for the sending of Jesus by the Father (e.g. 3:17; 5:36/4:34; 5:23), the disciples by Jesus (e.g. 4:38/20:21), John the Baptist by God (e.g. 1:6; 3:34/1:33), and various people sent by the Jewish leaders (e.g. 1:19, 24/1:22).

20:22 he breathed on them: The word used for ‘breathe’ is *emphysaō*, which, though found only here in the NT, occurs several times in the LXX, where it refers to God breathing life into the man formed from the dust (Gen. 2:7; cf. Wisdom 15:11), Elijah breathing into the nostrils of the widow’s dead son while calling upon the Lord to restore his life (1 Kgs. 17:21), and Ezekiel prophesying to the wind to breathe life into the slain in the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:9).

Receive the holy Spirit: In many places in the Fourth Gospel the promise of the Spirit is foreshadowed (1:33; 4:10, 13–14; 7:37–39; 14:16–17, 26, 28; 15:26–27; 16:7–15). The clearest of these is 7:39, where, following Jesus’ promise of streams of living water for those who believe in him, the evangelist adds, ‘*By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*’ In John 7:39 we learn that the Spirit will be given when Jesus is glorified because until this moment, the role the Spirit is to point to Jesus (14:26, 15:26), but now the Spirit becomes the animating *dynamis* for mission in the world. This scene is often understood as the Johannine version of Pentecost.

There are problems with such a view. Thomas was not included (20:24), nor was there any great change in the disciples’ behavior—they were still meeting behind closed doors when Jesus next appeared to them (v.26). If in addition one is trying to harmonize all the Gospels, then one wonders how to explain Pentecost (assuming harmonization is a valid way to compare the Synoptic Gospels and John – and there are serious questions regarding such an effort). Some scholars have suggested v.22 constituted a lesser bestowal of the Spirit to be supplemented with a greater endowment at Pentecost, or that what Jesus was bestowing was not the personal Holy Spirit (the promised Paraclete) but some impersonal power/breath from God. There is little to support either of these views in the Fourth Gospel. Another view is that there was a real impartation of the personal Spirit on this occasion, but that the Spirit was only experienced as the Paraclete, the one who replaced Jesus’ earthly presence, after Jesus’ final post-resurrection appearance and ascension. Finally, there is the view that Jesus’ action was symbolic, foreshadowing the bestowal of the Spirit to take place on the Day of Pentecost. All the explanations’ problems assume a harmonization with Pentecost and do not simply let John tell his account.

20:23 Whose sins you forgive: These words have affinities with the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus said to Peter, “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 16:19). It also has affinities to what he said to the disciples generally in relation to those who would not heed admonition who must be treated as pagans or tax collectors: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in

heaven” (Matt. 18:18). The reference to forgiveness (or lack thereof) may echo the reference to “the key to the house of David” in Isa. 22:22. If so, what is at stake is the authority to grant or deny access to God’s kingdom. In a Jewish context “binding and loosing” described the activity of a judge who declared persons innocent or guilty and thus “bound” or “loosed” them from the charges made against them.

This is the only place in the Fourth Gospel where forgiveness of sins is spoken about, though the idea of sins remaining unforgiven is mentioned a number of times (8:24; 9:41; 15:22, 24; 16:8–9; 19:11). The non-forgiveness of sins is always related to refusal to believe in Jesus. It is important to notice the passive voice used in the statements in this verse regarding the forgiveness and non-forgiveness of sins. They function as divine passives reminding us that God alone forgives sin (cf. Mark 2:3–12; Luke 5:17–26) and Jesus’ disciples declare what God does.

20:21-23: The disciples’ commissioning in 20:21–23 climaxes the characterization of Jesus as the sent Son and shows Jesus’ followers as drawn into the unity and mission of Father, Son, and Spirit (cf. 15:26–27; 17:21–26). Succession is important both in the OT and in Second Temple literature. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus succeeds the Baptist and is followed by both the Spirit and the Twelve (minus Judas), who serve as representatives of the new messianic community. OT narratives involving succession feature Joshua (following Moses) and Elisha (succeeding Elijah).

20:24 *Thomas, called Didymus:* lit. “be identical.” The Greek name is derived from the Aramaic name ܦܘܡܐ, “twin.”

20:25 *Unless I see the nail marks:* Thomas’ refusal to believe is expressed using the double negative (*ou mē*), showing he was adamant about this matter. The same double negative is used describing Peter’s refusal to allow Jesus to wash his feet (13:8). While it may appear that Thomas was unbelieving, more so that the other disciples upon receiving their first witness, this is not necessarily the case. Earlier references to Thomas reveal one who was dogged in his commitment to Jesus (11:16) and honest about his doubts (14:5). Thomas is the one who questions, and perhaps by his questioning comes to a deeper faith than the others.

20:26 *the doors were locked...stood in their midst:* This account points to a clear bodily resurrection against a doxastic tendency to spiritualize the Resurrection. At the same time, the account points to a post-Resurrection body that differs from earthly life.

20:28 *My Lord and my God:* this forms a literary inclusion with the first verse of the gospel: “*and the Word was God.*” A number of commentaries note that a possible origin of the confession “My Lord and my God” is derived from a contemporaneous expression: *Dominus et Deus noster*; “our lord and god”) used by Emperor Domitian for himself. Domitian was emperor when John is believed to have set his gospel in final written form. It is possible that John is making things clear for who truly is “Lord and God.” And it is not Domitian, or anyone or anything else to whom/what we might give our allegiance.

20:29 *Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed:* This verse is a beatitude on future generations; faith, not sight, matters. This is the second pronouncement of blessing by Jesus in the form of a beatitude in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 13:17: “If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it”).

20:30-31 *come to believe:* These verses are clearly a conclusion to the gospel and express its purpose. While many manuscripts read “come to believe” (*pisteusēte*), possibly implying a missionary purpose for John’s gospel, a small number of quite early ones read “continue to believe,” (*pisteuēte*) suggesting that the audience consists of Christians whose faith is to be deepened by the book (cf. John 19:35). Perhaps, this is to read too much into the choice of tense, because elsewhere in this Gospel *pisteusēte* can denote both initial faith (1:7; 4:48; 6:30; 8:24; 9:36; 11:42; 19:35) and ongoing faith (11:15, 40;

13:19; 14:29), and *pisteuēte* is used to denote both initial faith (6:29; 10:38; 17:21) and continuing faith (6:35).

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