

BIBLE BACKGROUND

John 20:19-31

Verses 19-23

On the evening of the first day of the week with the doors closed where the disciples were because of the fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the middle and he said, "Peace be with you." After saying this he showed them his hands and his side. Therefore, when they saw the Lord, the disciples rejoiced. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, I am sending you. Having said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they have been forgiven and if you hold sins against anyone, they are held against them."

John is quite precise about the appearance of Jesus to his disciples. It happened on the evening of the day of resurrection, after the risen Lord had appeared to Mary Magdalene. The first day of the week is literally, **on the first of the Sabbath. The first day of the week**, the day after the Sabbath, became the very special day of the week on which Christians worship and our calendar observes as the first day of the week, namely, Sunday (Acts 20:7).

The fear of the Jews kept the disciples indoors, in fact, behind **locked doors**. While in John, the Jews are a focus because of their animosity towards Christ and his followers, John has in mind here the leadership, not the Jewish people. Therefore, Jesus' greeting takes on a special significance. It is more than a natural greeting; it is literally the gift of **his peace** to fearful disciples (14:27). Christ has within him a peace that banishes fear and gives encouragement to believers under pressure because of their faith. But the doors are no barrier to Christ and we are meant to deduce from the phrase **Jesus came and stood in the middle** that the risen Lord appeared without going through the door. He kept his promise of 14:19.

Luke records the shock of the disciples in his accounts (24:37-43) and the need to prove his bodily presence amongst them. **The showing of hands and side** convinced them of Jesus' identity and his resurrected state. Skepticism is not a modern phenomenon and for these first believers it was necessary that Christ show himself to them to establish the resurrection and ensure that they could be eye-witnesses of his new state. Since Christ, through his resurrection, and is amongst people to give eternal life, experiencing the risen Christ is the foundation for personal evangelism. That **the disciples rejoiced** is probably an understatement (16:20,22). In the presence of the risen Christ, there should be rejoicing and our worship ought to be exuberant.

The resurrection is the time of mission for the church. Christ's victory over death, sin, the devil and the law is news the world needs to hear and believe. There is a line of authority: the Father sends the Son and the Son sends the Spirit, and through the Spirit, the Son sends the church into the world. In the ancient world, to be sent by a dignitary was to act under the authority of the person and in a sense, be that person whilst the task is carried out. Following the command of Christ, **I am sending you**, he then empowers them, not only with his authority, but with **the Holy Spirit**. Again, this should not be seen purely in mechanistic terms. The disciples have more than mere power; they have the person of God, in his Spirit, working through the disciples. Jesus' act of **breathing** reminds us of Gen 2:7 and Ezek 37:9. The word **breath** ἐνεφύσησεν comes from the word for the natural state or condition of existence and gives us the English word physical. So it means to breathe in to the natural state and take it beyond its present life-condition to a new level of existence. The Spirit does not only provide physical life to the planet but for his people, something very special, life with God, life connected to the Father and a life lived in his special love and friendship. In a spiritual sense, we are dead without this breathing because our lives are separated from God.

The church conveys, in its mission, the life of Christ. His life is essentially the atoning sacrifice on the Christ and the life-giving act of the resurrection. In a word, it is the **forgiveness of sins**. The office of the keys is the special application of the gospel (Matt 16:19), which reveals quite starkly, the authority the church has to forgive, to act on behalf of Christ, in a sense, to be little Christs to

others, as Luther would say. This function is carried out by special officers Christ has ordained but it is also the whole church's possession.

Verses 24,25

Thomas, one of the twelve, the one called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. Therefore, the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he replied to them, "Unless I see in his hands where the nails went and I put my finger into the mark of the nails and put my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Thomas is like the person who is disappointed in not seeing a great event and others have. Is he merely feeling left out and demanding some compensation? Perhaps Jesus' command to believe in verse 27 supports this. He was called **Didymus**, from the Hebrew, which means twin. In fact, Didymus is a translation of the Hebrew Thomas. Thomas had a twin. He was capable of devotion and sacrifice as we notice in 11:16.

However, Thomas wants some physical proof. He not only wants to see the wounds but actually feel them. He remains unconvinced by the vivid descriptions of the disciples. Maybe he is thinking that the explanation for their claims to have seen the Lord arise from a need to believe. However, he should have realized that only a mighty event of God would change despairing and grief-stricken people into joyous witnesses. That he was a member of the inner twelve yet appears here as a full-blown skeptic reinforces the impression that we are dealing with an authentic report. All the weaknesses of early Christian leaders are exposed in the gospels, indicating that they made no attempt to embellish or sanitize the details of the gospels.

The accounts that we have are raw descriptions and summaries of the ministry and resurrection appearances of Jesus. **We have seen the Lord**, sounds as fresh today as when the words were first uttered, full of amazement, wonder and excitement. It is true, we do not need material sight; all we need do is hear the word.

Verses 26-29

After eight days his disciples were inside again and Thomas was with them. The doors had been locked and Jesus came, stood in their midst and said, "Peace to you." Then he said to Thomas, "Bring your finger here and see my hands and bring your hand and put it into my side. Stop being unfaithful and believe." Thomas responded and said to him, "My Lord and my God." Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen me you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen yet have believed."

Jesus miraculously appears in a locked house revealing that in his glorified state he is both spirit and flesh. Clearly, he had heard everything Thomas had said eight days earlier. How easily we forget what we do and say yet there is one recording all things done by us. However, Jesus comes to restore Thomas's faith, not condemn him. God gives to us many chances to believe and when we forsake him, he does not abandon us without attempting to offer us the life-line of faith in him.

Eight days later is an interesting phrase and includes the Sunday of the week before when Christ first appeared, which was. Our system of weeks is owed to the Hebrews who celebrated the seven days of creation, the seventh being a Saturday, the last day of the week and the day of rest. Romans changed to the Jewish seven-day division of the year, though a five day or six day system fits better. Seven heavenly bodies became the names of the week under the Romans, the sun and the moon and the five close planets visible as wandering (perhaps having a special life force or god associated with them) stars in the heavens. With Constantine's conversion, the Christian calendar was adopted and the first day of the week became Sunday. In Russia, it is known as Resurrection Day. A tradition arose that this eighth day was the day of the consummation. Of course, it is simply counting the previous Sunday as day one and the following Sunday as day eight.

Jesus gave to Thomas all that he needed to believe. Though the eyewitness account should be sufficient and above all the Spirit empowered word of the gospel, Jesus will always support the

flickering wick (Isaiah 42:30). The man struggling to believe and desperate that his son be healed (of epilepsy?) of his convulsions cried out for support against his doubts (Mark 9:24). Jesus promised Peter that though Satan wished to sift him, he would be praying for him, that he would come to repentance and restored faith (Luke 22:31). Those who hear the message of Christ are without excuse. The Holy Spirit has done all that is necessary for faith to exist. Indeed, the act of rejecting Christ is already a testimony to a momentary faith that was granted to a person (Matthew 13:19). A person has to recognize what he or she rejects and so something must have been in the heart in the first place.

The issue of evidence is mentioned by Christ himself and has to be commented on. Evidence in itself does not create faith in Christ. Christ brings this out in two ways. First, he says to Thomas, **stop doubting** (literally, be not unbelieving but believing) **and believe** μη γίνου απιστος αλλα πιστός. He has given Thomas what he required and now he calls him to faith. It is possible that Thomas could have still resisted and in his pride refused to acknowledge the risen Lord. It could also mean that Jesus was confronting his excuse-making and calling for his commitment of faith. Spiritual cowardice is a common problem. So, even in Thomas's situation, seeing is not automatically believing.

Next, Jesus indicates that belief comes through hearing the word. Those who do not see yet believe because the Holy Spirit blesses them with faith through the power of the gospel. It is the latter group who are truly blessed: **Blessed μακάριοι are those who have not seen yet have believed.** John does not record the beatitudes because he wants to reserve **the blessed** status for those who believe in Christ, especially, those who believe the testimony without having to see to the visible Christ (1P1:8). As Paul said, faith may not come through seeing but it comes through hearing (Rom 10:14).

Finally, Thomas does believe and he confesses Christ as God in an act of worship: **My Lord and my God.** All founders of religions are dead, but not Christ. All founders are sinners e.g. Buddha and Mohammed but not Christ. All founders were human, but Christ was God. None could pay the price required to free all people from their lives of sin, only Christ could do this. Christ therefore has an ultimate claim on our lives as Lord and God.

A penultimate conclusion is given to John's testimony.

Verses 30,31

Therefore, many and various signs were performed by Jesus before the disciples that are not recorded in this book but these things have been written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life in his name.

This is a very full and theologically pregnant sentence. John admits that he has summarized Jesus' ministry, for he gives seven signs just as he recorded seven I am sayings. In 12:37, despite the many signs John notes the determined unbelief of many.

The **book** βιβλίω written by John was in fact a scroll, probably of rolled up skin. The book as we know it is referred to as a codex, and this form of pages bound at the back, came into being in the second century AD. The word for book gives us the term Bible.

Once again, believing is attached not to miracles but signs and not to visual proofs but to testimony. Believing is based on evidence recorded in the gospel, and now available for us in the Scriptures, especially the greatest sign, that of the resurrection (2:18). Christians do not put their trust in the gospel or in Christ without information, knowledge and factual detail. But the signs need the full testimony of the gospel so that they can be understood and believed.

The purpose of believing is certainly to honour Christ by acknowledging him as the truth. However, Jesus sees his true glory coming from those who receive life from him: **that believing you might have life in his name.** This takes the reader back to 1:12,13. Eternal life as God's children only comes through the name confessed and believed, as Thomas did (28).