

Wednesday, February 19, 2025 | Deep Dive: The Gospel According to John | John 20:19-23

Vs. 19-20 – John does not tell us if Mary’s report was well-received. This is likely because his audience, being familiar with the Synoptics, already knew that no one believed her (cf. Mar. 16:11; Lu. 24:11). And given how much convincing it took for Mary to come to grips with this revelation, their unbelief isn’t surprising.

The Beloved Apostle jumps from Easter morning to “the same day at evening.” Our narrator reiterates that “being the first day of the week,” the day is still Sunday. And he tells us that “the disciples were assembled.” Arguably, it’s good that these people hadn’t abandoned one another. As we say today, seeing the band back together is comforting. However, this reunion was motivated by *survival*, not *solidarity*. John says he and his companions had sealed “the doors...shut” because they *feared* “the Jews.” Now that the Sanhedrin had killed Jesus, it stands to reason they’d go after his followers next. Thus, the apostles had gone underground, worried the authorities might hunt them down. They were afraid that the same fate that befell Jesus would fall on them. But much to their surprise, rather than enemy soldiers breaking down the door, the Lord suddenly appeared, standing “in the midst” of them.

Jesus first says to them, “Peace be unto you.” The disciples must’ve been startled when a man they thought dead materialized out of thin air. They’d need some reassurance. Not only that, the last time this group was seen together, they had abandoned Jesus (cf. Mar. 14:50). It’s reasonable to assume that Peter wasn’t the only apostle dealing with guilt and regret over the past seventy-two hours. As such, Jesus’ sudden appearance might’ve been misinterpreted; perhaps, some of his followers thought he came with ill intent. But the Lord wasn’t like some vengeful apparition; he did not come to exact revenge but to give them peace (cf. Jn. 14:27).

The Lord did not only speak to the disciples; he also “shewed unto them his hands and his side.” Though most who were crucified would’ve bore scars on hands and feet, only the Son of God had a wound in “his side” where he was pierced by a Roman spear (cf. 19:34). Thus, there was no mistaking this appearance; bearing all the proper marking, this was indeed the crucified Lord. And, as Thomas will soon learn (cf. vs. 24-29), this was no immaterial spectral projection but the actual physical manifestation of Jesus Christ.

However, these scars do more than simply identify Jesus Christ; they also allow broken humanity to identify with its wounded God. To illustrate this point, Carson cites a poem by Edward Shillito called, ‘Jesus of the Scars,’ which was first published in the wake of the First World War:¹

¹ Carson (1991), p. 647.

*If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.*

*The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe, we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.*

*If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know to-day what wounds are, have we fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.*

*The other gods were strong, but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds, only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.*

The world is a brutal place where pain and misery abound. But the God of this universe did not keep himself aloof from harm and agony; instead, he entered the fray and *bears the marks* of that conflict to this day. The scars of Jesus Christ relate to our own. We need not wonder if the Lord understands our hurt; he knows them all too well (cf. Psa. 56:8; Heb. 4:15).

Once the apostles realized it was Jesus and he did not come to haunt them, John says, "Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord." The Greek verb translated as "glad" is **χαίρω** (*chairō*), and, like its cognate **χαρά** (*chara*), it refers to a state of happiness and well-being.² These are the exact two words used by Jesus during the Farewell Discourse when he said in 16:20, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice [*chairō*]: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy [*chara*]," and again in 16:22, "And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice [*chairō*], and your joy [*chara*] no man taketh from you." The apostles were confused when Jesus said he'd disappear and reappear after "a little while" (cf. 16:16-18). But now they understood what Jesus was talking about. And as the Lord had predicted, the disciples' sorrow was overcome by joy. It is one thing to die and come back to life; that alone is cause for celebration. But it is orders of magnitude greater to die and come back to life *after predicting*

² BDAG, p. 1074.

that such a thing would occur! This would not only be a cause for joy, but it would also be the cause of *great* joy.

Vs. 21 – Reiterating that he means them no harm, Jesus says unto the apostles once again, “Peace be unto you” (cf. vs. 19). He then adds, “As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” These words echo 17:18, in which the Lord prayed, “As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world.” This is John’s version of the Great Commission (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; Lu. 24:46-49). With Jesus’ mission complete, he commissions his followers to proclaim the good news of his victory over the grave. As they were once sent into the hill country of Israel “to preach the kingdom of God” (Lu. 9:2; 10:1-12), so they’re now sent into lands near and far with the gospel.

Furthermore, Jesus’ words demonstrate that the apostles and anyone who believes their word (cf. 15:20c) are the inheritors of *his* ministry. The line of succession is a long-held tradition in the OT.³ Joshua succeeded Moses (cf. Deut. 31:1-8), Elisha replaced Elijah (cf. 2 Ki. 2:1-14), and, of course, Jesus followed John the Baptist (cf. 1:23). But all followers of God since Jesus are, ultimately, followers of Christ. Christian succession is a one-to-one connection. And while church history is replete with great men and women, every believer should be first and foremost known by their attachment to and affiliation with Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10-14). Thus, just as the Son of God came to earth per the Father’s will, all Christians of every age have gone into all the world in obedience to the Lord’s word.

Make no mistake, evangelism is a *fundamental* characteristic of Christianity. Excuses abound when it comes to a Christian’s negligence in this area. But generally speaking, two reasons keep believers from sharing their faith: laziness and fearfulness. First, *committed* followers of Jesus Christ ought not be content living sedentary lives but, sadly, many are. On that last day, there will be believers who will have to give an account not just for their immorality but for their apathy. Christians ought to be “salt” and “light” to the world (cf. Mat. 5:13-16), which means they’re supposed to serve both a *preservative* and a *revelatory* function.⁴ Biblical evangelism is actively opposing sinful rot wherever it is found, be it at the personal, social, or political level, while pointing everyone to Jesus. It is to live in contradiction for a Christ-follower to be without purpose or drive, twiddling away while gospel opportunity after gospel opportunity passes them by.

Second, given the prevalence of political correctness in our culture, genuine believers ought to be repulsed by a Christianity that preaches a non-confrontational gospel. Jesus Christ had no

³ Köstenberger (2008), p. 574.

⁴ Carson (1991), p. 648.

qualms about correcting his own family (7:6-7; cf. Lu. 8:19-21), the religious leaders (cf. Matt. 23:1-36), or even his own apostles (cf. Lu. 22:24-27). Nor did he hesitate to call sinners of every stripe and color to repentance (cf. Lu. 5:31-32). Biblical Christianity *contends* for the faith (cf. Jude 3) like a boxer training for a big match (cf. 1 Cor. 9:26-27), like a competitor running a long-distance race (cf. Heb. 12:1-3), and like a wrestler trying to pin dark forces to the mat (cf. Eph. 6:12). Though a Christian should *attempt* to live peaceably with all (cf. Rom. 12:18), they nevertheless ought not withdrawal from confrontation when gospel truths are on the line.

Vs. 22 – John tells us that after Jesus commissioned the disciples for gospel ministry, "he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." The word "breathed" is the Greek term **ἐμφυσάω** (*emphusaō*), which, as is evident, means to breathe, exhale, puff, or blow out.⁵ And while there is very little to be gleaned by knowing *what* this word means, knowing *where* it is used in Scripture is illuminating. Interestingly, 20:22 is the only occurrence of *emphusaō* in the NT, but in the LXX, it appears in two key passages. In Genesis 2:7, we read, "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed [*emphusaō*] into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul." Then, Ezekiel 27:9 says, "Then said he unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe [*emphusaō*] upon these slain, that they may live."

In the Genesis passage, the description is that of mankind's *creation*, while in the Ezekiel passage, the focus is on mankind's *recreation*. The Prophet Ezekiel saw a bizarre vision where God took the skeletal remains of a vast "army" and clothed them in ligaments, muscle, and flesh (cf. Ezek. 37:8). Once put back together, the Lord then puts his "Spirit" into those corpses, reanimating them in the process (cf. Ezek. 37:10-14). Jesus exhaling before apostles and telling them, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost," refers to Ezekiel's prophetic vision and man's origin. As Ezekiel saw, the era of old creation would end, and an era of new creation would take its place. Jesus Christ ushered in that new era of creation with his death, burial, and resurrection. As God made man and woman living souls by breathing into them the breath of life, so Jesus remakes believers by breathing into them the Spirit of Life (cf. 6:63; Rom. 8:2), aka "the Holy Ghost." The time of the old Adam has begun to set, and the age of the new Adam has already started to rise. And in this new age, those in that new Adam have the hope of the resurrection. This is what Paul means when he says 1 Corinthians 15:20-23,

⁵ BDAG, p. 326, quotes the flood account in Greek mythology: " Zeus ordered Prometheus and Athena to shape images out of clay, and then summoned the winds to breathe [*emphusaō*] on all of them and so make them live."

“But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”

Once, humanity was a lifeless lump of clay, and God taught us how to breathe. Likewise, believers were once dead in their trespasses and sins, but the Lord taught us how to live. And this new life promises eternal life, a hope that sustains us now and carries us to the grave and beyond. To be *born again* by the Spirit ensures we'll *live again* in the afterlife (cf. 3:3-8).

Admittedly, Jesus' words here seem to indicate that the apostles received the Holy Spirit *before* Pentecost, and if so, John's account is in contradiction with Luke's in Acts 2. However, if Jesus makes more of a *symbolic* gesture than actually bestowing God the Spirit, there's no incongruity.⁶ Two key observations support this interpretation. First, Jesus himself made it abundantly clear that only *after* his ascension will he send the "Comforter," aka the Holy Spirit (cf. 16:7). At present, the Lord has yet to ascend, so he cannot be bestowing the Spirit; instead, he's foreshadowing the act.⁷ Second, and most compelling, not only are the disciples still in hiding over a week later (vs. 26), but Peter, John, and five other apostles eventually return to their former lives as fishermen (cf. 21:1-3). In contrast to what we see in Acts 2, a bunch of men, frightened and backslidden, are hardly the traits of those who've been in-dwelt by the Holy Spirit! Eventually, the apostles would be Spirit-filled, courageously preaching in the streets of Jerusalem, but that day was not this day.

Vs. 23 – “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” The words “remit” and “retain” are, respectively, the Greek words **ἀφίημι** (*aphiēmi*) and **κρατέω** (*kratéō*). And translated literally, they mean to "leave" (cf. 4:3, 28) and "hold" (cf. Mat. 14:3; Mar. 14:51). But since these terms are used about "sins," it best to understand them as referring to the ability to *exonerate* someone of their sinfulness or *condemn* for their sinfulness.

At face value, it looks as if the Lord is giving the apostles, minus Thomas, the power to offer or withhold forgiveness. But the ability to grant or deny access to God's kingdom is exclusive to

⁶ For a complete discussion of the symbolic approach, see Carson (1991), p. 649-655, and Klink (2016), p. 861-865.

⁷ Carson (1991), p. 655, “Jesus’ ‘exhalation’ and command *Receive the Holy Spirit* are best understood as a kind of acted parable pointing forward to the full enduement still to come (though in the past for John’s readers). A suitable Johannine analogy might be the washing of the disciples’ feet: ‘Unless I was you, you have no part with me’ (13:8). That can be read at a simplistic level as exhausted in the footwashing. Readers with more insight understand that the footwashing itself points forward to the spiritual washing achieved by the Lamb of God whose death takes away the sin of the world.”

God's Son (cf. 5:22; Mat. 9:1-8; 1 Pet. 22:22-25). And indeed, such is the implied message here. The phrases "they are remitted" and "they are retained" are divine passives (cf. Mat. 7:1; 20:18; Ac. 2:4; 2 Cor. 12:4; Heb. 10:10, 14); this is to say that it is *God* who is actually doing the remitting or retaining.⁸

So, if the ten disciples aren't the ones forgiving or withholding forgiveness, how can we make sense that Jesus said they could "remit" or "retain" sins? Given that this verse is said in a context where these men are sent into the world (vs. 21) and empowered by the Holy Spirit (vs. 22), the focus of vs. 23 is *evangelism*. And, if so, the applicability is to the church as a whole and not specific individuals (cf. Eph. 2:19-22).⁹ Should anyone believe the disciples' message, *or ours for that matter*, they are believing Jesus' word and not the word of another (cf. 15:20c). When Jesus said that the apostles could either "remit" or "retain" sins, he was telling them that by preaching the gospel, they play a pivotal role in evangelizing the world. When the gospel is accepted, sins are remitted, just as when it is rejected, sins are retained. The apostles and all who follow in their footsteps are messengers.

Of course, this is not to say the role of gospel ambassador isn't important. Paul highlights the importance of such a calling in Rom. 10:4-15:

"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

We may not be the savior, but we bear the message of salvation. Bringing such good news to a lost and dying world is a sacred duty. Jesus alone is the Messiah, and we are his missionaries.

⁸ Carson (1991), p. 655.

⁹ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 381.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 96 | John 20:19-23

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

In today's passage, the resurrected Lord appears before the apostles, minus Thomas. In this fantastic scene, the Lord does several amazing things. But at its core, this section is about evangelism. The God of the Bible is *missional*, and that principle is best illustrated in the New Testament when Jesus commissions his followers for evangelistic work.

As we'll see, the Messiah has sent the Christian into the world with the gospel. Through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, the sins of many will be either "remitted" or "retained," depending on a person's reception of the good news. So, while there are no guarantees regarding evangelism, all believers are called to be missionaries.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here:

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