

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for March 27: Celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ**32105**

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Celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ

John 20:19-29

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In the resurrection narratives of John, the reader is connected to numerous themes that have been present throughout the entire book of John. Particular attention to these themes may open new avenues for discussion in considering these somewhat familiar texts.

The first encounter with the disciples (vv. 19-23)

Verses 19-23 of chapter 20 provide the first resurrection appearance to the larger group of disciples. It should be noted in these verses that the general term for disciples (*mathetai*) is used here by John—they are never identified

as the Eleven (the Twelve minus Judas). In the synoptic Gospels, the term “the Twelve” appears frequently, but in John, the more general term for disciples is preferred throughout.



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Thus, while those present at “evening on that first day” probably represented a core of the disciples, there is no indication by John that it is limited to just the Eleven. The absence of any mention of the Eleven proves significant. By employing the more general term for disciples, the events of verses 19-23 are not limited to only a few disciples but in fact become binding upon all disciples who choose to believe (vv. 30-31).

Verses 19-23 can be divided into two main events: (1) the appearance of the risen Jesus; (2) the commissioning of the disciples by the risen Jesus. The passage begins by reminding the reader that it was “evening of that first day.” Yet the events earlier that morning involving Mary, Peter and the beloved disciple have not fully registered with those behind locked doors—they remained in fear of the Jewish authorities.

When Jesus appears in their midst, a number of events occur that remind the reader of Jesus' promises to his disciples earlier in his ministry. In verse 19, Jesus announces to them, “Peace be with you.” While such a statement

was no doubt a conventional greeting in the first century, there is an added dimension to its use. Earlier, in John 14:27, Jesus announced to his disciples, “Peace I leave with you … do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

The appearance of Jesus among his frightened disciples in chapter 20 and the remedying of such fear by offering his peace to them becomes significant for the Gospel writer. John intends to remind his audience—and all subsequent disciples—that in the face of persecution, the disciples of the resurrected Christ will experience this peace. It is a peace promised by Christ, and experienced by the first disciples in that locked room—and found reliable for the disciples that will follow.

Following Jesus' presentation of his hands and side, we are told the “disciples were overjoyed when they saw Jesus.” Earlier in John, in the final portion of Jesus' farewell discourse (John 16:4-33), Jesus explains to the disciples: “I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy” (v. 19). John wants to make it abundantly clear to his readers: The signs of the crucifixion (the hands and side) have become now signs of resurrection joy. The grief caused by the crucifixion has given way to overwhelming joy—just as Jesus had promised.

Jesus then commissions his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And then John explains that Jesus breathed on them the Holy Spirit. The verb “to breathe” (*emphysao*) occurs only here in the New Testament, but the intent is quite clear.

John invokes the creation imagery of Genesis 2 in an effort to highlight the magnitude of this moment. Thus, the breathing of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples was in fact a new, second creation. The promises made by Jesus earlier in the farewell discourse concerning the coming of an advocate, or the Holy Spirit, are brought to new light in John 20.

In John 15:26, Jesus says not only will the Advocate come from the Father because Jesus has sent him, but that this advocate will testify on Jesus' behalf. And then Jesus explains, "you are also to testify." In John 20, as a result of this divine breath of God blowing upon those gathered in that room-as a result of this new creation-the disciples realize most fully the presence of the advocate, and equally so, their own divine commission.

The encounter with Thomas (vv. 24-29)

The scene found in verses 24-29 is often referred to as the story of Doubting Thomas, but in fact, neither is really a true assessment of this account. The scene is not really about Thomas-it is about the resurrected Christ who still appears to the community of disciples and helps them come to belief (v. 31). To place the focus on Thomas is to miss the willful actions of Jesus on behalf of Thomas and to fail to appreciate the powerful statement on the lips of Thomas concerning the identity of Jesus.

Second, this scene is really not about the doubt of Thomas. Both the NIV and the NRSV inaccurately translate verse 27. The NIV reads, "Stop doubting and believe"; while the NRSV reads, "Do not doubt, but believe." But in the Greek, it literally reads, "Do not be unbelieving (*apistos*), but believing (*pistos*)."¹ In other words, the story of Thomas is not one of actively doubting, or skepticism, that follows with belief. Rather, the story of Thomas is the story of one who struggles to believe, yet in the end is able to believe.

Perhaps this why the story of Thomas resonates with so many who read the Gospel accounts-we are somewhere between unbelieving and believing, and we are in need of the work of Christ to help our unbelief. Thus, the showing of the hands and the side to Thomas is not an act of sarcasm or belittling by Jesus. Rather it a gracious act of Jesus-it is Jesus not sparing any cost to ensure his disciples move from unbelief to belief.

Earlier, in verses 19-23, Jesus alluded to several statements made previously in his teachings as a way to ensure his disciples he had indeed fulfilled his word. Yet with Thomas, proof is found not in the spoken, but in the visible and the tangible. Jesus challenges him to move to belief, and in verse 28 Thomas announces, "My Lord and my God." Thomas not only sees Jesus as the resurrected Christ, but Thomas recognizes God fully revealed in Jesus. And the reader cannot help but remember the way the Gospel began: "The Word was with God and the Word was God." The gracious act of Jesus awakens a new awareness in Thomas—one that has permeated the entire Gospel.

The story of Thomas stands as a vivid reminder to later generations that they too must "not be unbelieving but believing." Yet the story also invokes hope—hope that the resurrected Christ will come to us, and in a gracious act of self-giving, he will move us from unbelief to belief.

Discussion questions

- ◆ How is the resurrection of Christ relevant to your discipleship?
- ◆ How can Christians keep the hope of the resurrection as a focus year round?

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