

# Explore the Bible: Reach Out Your Hand

May 9, 2023

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 21 focuses on John 20:19-29.*

Coming to the end of John's Gospel, we see the reemergence of two important motifs: (1) seeing unto believing and (2) commissioning.

First, we read about Jesus' mysterious appearance to the disciples in a locked room, where he promises the Holy Spirit and sends them on mission in like fashion of the Father sending him (see John 20:19-23).

Next, he makes a special appearance to Thomas, whose doubts are relieved when he sees and is invited to touch the resurrected Jesus, followed by his profound announcement: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28; also see John 20:24-29). Moreover, we see the emergence of a new principle which transcends the seeing-unto-believing motif—believing *without* seeing.

All of these components moves the Gospel audience from the notion of being sent out to the effect of bearing witness to Jesus: others coming to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God resulting in eternal life (see John 20:31).

## They Saw The Lord (John 20:20)

The last time John made mention of the disciples' sight, it was regarding their confusion at the empty tomb (see John 20:3-9). They lacked understanding of Jesus' ultimate mission—though he was to die on the cross, he was also to overcome death through resurrection. They have heard the good news of the resurrection from the first witness and

evangelist Mary Magdalene, but now they have been graced with their own encounter of the resurrected Lord. Thus continues the seeing-unto-believing motif.

This motif comes to a head, however, when Jesus makes his visit to Thomas. For whatever reason, Thomas was not present at Jesus' first appearance to the other disciples in the locked room. Nonetheless, Jesus was merciful toward Thomas' doubt and paid a special visit to assure him of his resurrection.

The grace Jesus shows to Thomas is remarkable and a reminder to us today that doubt is not an unforgiveable stumbling block nor the unsurmountable hurdle to Jesus' love and desire for one to encounter his saving presence. This should affect us personally to know that Jesus is patient with us in our doubts, *and* he is willing to meet us in our doubts.

Similarly, like that of the disciples with Thomas, we are to be consistent in our presence to others as they doubt (see John 20:26; an entire week passes from the time that Thomas rejected the other disciples' witness of Jesus' resurrection, yet he remained welcome in their community).

Nonetheless, the time of seeing-unto-believing was coming to an end in the Gospel account, for Jesus was about to ascend to the Father. Thus, John's audience is presented with a personal invitation as those who would not have the same opportunity for seeing (and touching) the resurrected Jesus: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). While Thomas required more from Jesus in order to believe and was blessed by Jesus' presence, Jesus promises that those who require less in order to believe will receive blessing, also.

While not directly mentioned, John's audience is left with an implied question—without seeing the signs performed by Jesus, do you "believe

that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” resulting with “life in his name” (John 20:31)?

## **I am Sending You (John 20:21)**

Believing—whether by sight or not—is not the end of the story. Rather, it is the beginning of the journey of a believer. The gospel-story that Jesus brought, lived and modeled for his disciples is now continuing through their faithfulness to him. Jesus breathing on the disciples and saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” is what many scholars and theologians liken to a foretaste or partial pouring out of the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). Perhaps, Jesus’ act of breathing on them is symbolic of what is to come after he ascends. We are not quite yet to the scene of Pentecost when the Spirit comes and fills the disciples with power and ability to proclaim the gospel (see Acts 2). Regardless, it is vital to understanding the verse that comes after it: “If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:23).

This is a perplexing statement. Is Jesus declaring that the disciples will get to pick and choose whose sins are forgiven, despite their faith and despite God’s will? Countless other Scriptures, including much of John’s Gospel, run contrary to such notions.

The correlation to the Holy Spirit’s indwelling and the Greek origins of this text give clarity to the underlying context of Jesus’ statement. Jesus has promised the Spirit would come as an “Advocate,” and it is the Spirit who “will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned” (John 20:7-11).

Therefore, the Spirit is the one who assumes responsibility to bring about

conviction and guide others to the truth of the gospel. Those who receive the Spirit are merely participants in the Spirit's work of revealing the truth about forgiveness. It is also important to understand from the Greek, when Jesus says, "their sins are forgiven," and, "they are not forgiven," these are actions which have already been completed apart from the disciples—implying the forgiveness of sins is instituted by God, and the disciples are participants in God's divine will.

Of course, an authentic encounter with the resurrected Jesus resulting in one's faith to him is what brings full life-transformation. However, God desires our participation. The disciples are recipients of the gospel because Mary was sent. Thomas is the recipient of the gospel because the disciples were sent. Subsequently, this gospel message has spread throughout the world—and continues to spread today—because Jesus continues to send his followers out to bear witness of him.

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