

## John #56 – The First Lord's Day

*John - GIW*

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**Bible Text:** John 20:19-23  
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Verse 19 to 23, which I will read once again,

19 Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

As we continue our exposition of the gospel according to John, we come to this first Lord's Day in the history of the world and it's a noteworthy thing that every time Christ met with his disciples during the 40-day period after his resurrection until the glorious day of his ascension, it was on that day, and only on that day, the first day of the week that he came and met with his people. That is a fact of the highest significance and you can see here in our text that John is drawing attention to that fact. He says, "Then, the same day, at evening, being the first of the week, Jesus came," and he means the same day of the week on which he had risen from the dead, and upon which he had encountered Mary Magdalene and revealed himself to her.

Now, as I was meditating upon this text high over the earth in an airplane, this question occurred to me that I want to ask you: why doesn't it say in our text, "Then, on that first Easter day in the history of the world, Jesus came into the midst of his disciples"? If you consult commentators in the English language almost back to the time of John Calvin, you will find that this is a very frequent way of referring to this day. They will call this the first Easter day in the history of the world but, brothers and sisters, it is an amazing fact that the Bible itself knows absolutely nothing of a day called Easter. One of the medieval theologians, the venerable Bede, was honest enough to tell us where this really came from. It came from an ancient Teutonic goddess, not god, goddess, to whom people used to sacrifice in spring by the name of Eostre. It is hardly surprising, then, that when John Calvin came along to the church of Geneva, he, as well as his predecessor, William

Farel, did away entirely with the celebration of Easter, as well as the other commonly recognized special days on the Christian calendar. And to help you understand not only the fact, but the reason for it, I've decided tonight to quote from the old Church Order commentary of the Christian Reformed Church by Monsma and Van Dellen. The book is about 50 years old, and nobody pays any attention to it anymore, but it contains a lot of very valuable teaching. And I'm quoting from page 273.

"During the early days of the Reformation some Reformed localities observed only Sunday. All special days sanctioned and revered by Rome were set aside. Ulrich Zwingli and Calvin both encouraged the rejection of all ecclesiastical festive days. In Geneva all special days were discontinued as soon as the Reformation took a firm hold in that city. Already before the arrival of Calvin in Geneva this had been accomplished under the leadership of Farel and Viret. But Calvin agreed heartily. And Knox, the Reformer of Scotland, shared these same convictions, he being a disciple of Calvin in Geneva. Consequently the Scottish Churches also banned the Roman sacred days.

These eminent Reformers took this stand for the following reasons: The festival days are not ordained of God but are a human invention; they minimize Sunday, the God-ordained weekly day of rest; they lead to paganistic celebrations and promote licentiousness. In view of present day celebrations of days as Christmas and Easter by the general public and many believers it must be said that the contentions of the Reformers as to this last point were certainly correct. Present day celebration of these days is more pagan than Christian. Neither can it be denied that the observance of these days is but an invention of man, and that many people hold these festivals in higher esteem than Sunday.

Considering the position of the Reformers, we are not surprised that the Synod of Dort, 1574, held that the weekly Sabbath alone should be observed, and that the observance of all other days should be discouraged."

A little later on, the writer comments, and I quote, "It is a fact well known to church historians that as spiritual life begins to wane, formalistic and extraordinary observances begin to increase." Brothers and sisters, I ask you one question: is the Bible alone the rule of our faith and practice? That's our professed faith. Or does it need man to come along and add something to it? Well, I don't know what your answer is, but I know what our father's answer is. Let me read you a couple of them from the great creeds. Article 7 of the Belgic Confession tells us, and I quote, "not to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God." And Article 32 says, and I quote, "Therefore we reject all human inventions and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatsoever."

Now, I am well aware that I sound like I just arrived from the moon, and that I am green, and have pointed ears in saying something like that but that's why the whole Reformed Church in Scotland adopted the following in its directory for worship, and I quote, "There is no day commanded in Scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's Day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, commonly called Holy Days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued." Our fathers took this position because they meant it when they said the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith, and practice and because they were mindful of what they read in the New Testament, mindful of the fact that in the early church, if I can for a moment use the word Easter in a different contextual way, they understood clearly that in the apostolic church, every Sunday is Easter. And if it isn't, there's something wrong with the church. Every Sunday is the day that we meet together to acknowledge and remember the glorious resurrection of our great Savior. Then, the same day, being the first of the week, that's when they assembled together, and Jesus came into their midst.

Well, I think that's the first thing of great importance in this passage, the emphasis upon the divinely prescribed holy day of the New Covenant and it's prescribed not so much by words as by deeds. Every time Christ appeared to his disciples during that 40-day period, it was on the first day of the week. Period. Now, the second thing that we note in this passage is not only the time, but the manner in which Christ appeared for we read, "the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews," and while they were there, when the doors were shut, "Jesus came and stood in the midst." Now, I wonder how you have understood that because I can tell you, as a pastor of some 42 years' experience, I have run into some very bizarre ideas in God's people who have been faithfully attending church all their life. One of those bizarre ideas is the idea that the body of Jesus, the old body of bones and that sort of thing, was now gone and replaced by a spirit body. Well, congregation, if we pay close attention to the New Testament text, we know that this is a serious error. Isn't that what he said, "He showed them His hands and His side." And later on, he says to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, put it into My side." And in Luke's gospel, Jesus said, "Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."

Now, you can describe the body of Christ as spiritual if you understand that to mean that the body of Christ was raised in glory by the Holy Spirit, but that does not mean that it ceased to be a true, bona fide flesh and bones body. How could you feel it if it wasn't? How could it bear the scars if it wasn't? And how could Jesus say a spirit doesn't have flesh and bones as you see that I have? If you've ever studied Lutheran theology, you'll know that the Lutherans believe in the ubiquity of the body of Christ. They believe that somehow the physical body of Christ can be everywhere at once and therefore at the Lord's Supper, it can be in, with, and under the elements of the sacrament of Holy Communion. But surely an attentive reader of the New Testament knows that cannot possibly be true because the angel said, "He is not here. He is not here. He's risen." If He's not here, then he's somewhere else. He's not ubiquitous. He's not everywhere present at the same time. And indeed, the language of the text right here proves that, for it says Jesus came. Well, if you're already present everywhere, you can't come, you're already there. But Jesus came and stood in the midst.

Well, you say, "All right, but that's a tremendously difficult problem for me because it says the doors were shut. How could a real human body go into a room with all the doors shut?" Well, let me ask you this question: how could a real human body walk on water, and that was long before Christ died and rose again. How could he walk on water? And the answer is, I don't know, and the answer is, you don't know, and the answer is, nobody else knows. God has not been pleased to reveal to any of us how he does the great miracles that he does. It may be that he causes the door to dissolve so that the person of Christ can walk through it, and I'm not suggesting that that's my view. I don't know how but I do know that it was a miracle. How could Peter walk out of a prison with the gates locked and barred? I don't know, but the angel let him out. Miracle, folks, supernatural wonder of the living God that no man can explain.

But my basic point is that we must always be careful that we do not succumb to modernist theology which has evaporated the physical body of our Lord Jesus Christ for a kind of spiritual ongoing existence, and if you don't think this is a danger, I can tell you a true story that I will never forget that proves that it is. When we were laboring in New Zealand some years ago, there was a, I will call her a godly woman, I believe she was, who had been living in Australia and the conditions there in the Presbyterian Church were very, very bad and she'd heard about the Westminster Fellowship within the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. And so she came to New Zealand with her two children, this widow, to try to help them spiritually and because the local Presbyterian Church didn't have an evening service, she began to come to ours. And I became interested in this lady and her two children and I called on her and tried to encourage them in the way of faith. And one day when I was visiting, she announced that she was going to the hospital for open-heart surgery. So I showed my compassion and concern and prayed for her full recovery. Imagine then how surprised I was when she brushed off my concern with what I can only call a pious masquerade. It was her attempt to appear pious because she said something like this to me, "Well," she said, "even if it doesn't work out, it doesn't matter because I'm soon going to be through with this body forever." And I asked her a question or two, and it became very clear that her conception of the physical body of a Christian believer was that it's like a Coca-Cola can, after you've drunk the content, you throw it away. That's the end of it. You never see it again. And I was really speechless, and I said to her, "Don't you realize that one of the fundamental doctrines of the historic Christian faith is the resurrection of the body and the life ever lasting?" And she was stunned by my question. And I said, "I want to urge you to restudy this matter and to look, for example, into Calvin's 'Institutes' as he talks about the resurrection of Christ and of believers." And one of the wonderful things about that story is that she did that and came to just a state of shock about her own spiritual state. She had been in the liberal Presbyterian Church so long where the true doctrine of the physical, bodily, material, flesh and bones resurrection had not been taught that she herself had slowly fallen into that heretical frame of thinking. And she did come to gloriously affirm the physical and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and of her own expectation that one day her body will also be raised in the likeness of Christ.

So it's extremely important not to misread this miracle. It does not mean that Christ's body was not a true, human, physical, flesh and bone body. How he got in that room, I do not know, but I don't know how he walked on water either. I do know that he had a true human body. As our Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, it is the self-same body in which he was crucified. Gloriously transformed, but the same body. I am, in one sense, a different person than I was up until 1946 when I was converted but it's still me. The soul of this man was transformed and renewed by the power of God, but it's the same soul and it will be the same with the body.

Now the third thing we see in this passage is the purpose for his coming into the midst of his disciples. When they realized it really was him and that it was him in the flesh, Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you." And he said it twice and then spoke these words of commissioning and breathed upon them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Now one thing is absolutely certain, isn't it, our Lord never would have said "peace" to these men if they were unbelievers. Never. The peace of God belongs only to those who believe in Christ and the Scripture says no man can believe in Christ without the Spirit. You can't be a believer before you have the Spirit of God. "If any man have not the Spirit," says Paul the Apostle, "he is none of His." He is none of his. So we know these men were regenerate and we know therefore that the Spirit of God in that sense was already in them, so this breathing by Christ on these men was not to make them Christians, they already were Christians. If they were, he couldn't have said "peace be with you" before he breathed on them.

It is also quite certain, isn't it, that the breathing of Christ on these apostles didn't mean that they then and there received the full outpouring of the Spirit because if that is true, he wouldn't have said, "Now I want you to wait in Jerusalem until you are endowed with power from on high." And that's what he said to them when he left them, was ascending into heaven, "Don't depart from Jerusalem until you are empowered from on high." And then on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came with great power and miraculous wonders and that was several weeks later. And it came after Christ was ascended and sat at the right hand of the Father from whence he poured out the Spirit upon his church, and it therefore is quite clear that this breathing out of Christ who said "receive the Holy Spirit" was not equivalent to that full endowment either. I, therefore, conclude that the breathing out by our Lord was primarily symbolic in meaning.

Now that might sound a little strange at first but really, there's analogy to it. When Christ, before he was even crucified, took bread and broke it and said, "This is My body," he was saying it by way of anticipation. When he said, "This cup is the New Covenant in My blood," he was saying it by way of anticipation. He was saying something that was not true in the fullest sense until after he had shed his blood and actually died on the accursed tree.

Why then, you might say, did Jesus do this on this occasion and in this manner? Well, I offer this from the analogy of Scripture as a probable explanation. Back in the book of Genesis, we read that when God created Adam, he took the dust of the earth, formed this man, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. Man

became a living soul who bore the image of God. I believe that Jesus here in a symbolic way was telling his disciples that he is man's second Creator. This is the new creation, folks, and the same Jesus who was there at the creation of the world with the Father was here indicating that it was from him that the whole new creation of the human race proceeded. What was symbolized by His breathing out upon his disciples became a fact with the Pentecostal outpouring and because he knew this was true just as in the Lord's Supper before he even died, so here he knew he could pronounce peace upon these disciples.

Isn't that a wonderful thing? Don't forget, these men had scattered and fled. Every last one of them had deserted Jesus. Peter had even denied him. And Jesus is the one that prayed that Peter's faith would not fail, and then went and laid down his life for him. And then instead of meeting Peter and the other disciples with words of rebuke, which they well deserved, he pronounced upon them the words of peace, twice for reassurance. How right the Apostle Paul was when he said, "Where sin did abound, there grace did much more abound in righteousness through Jesus Christ our Lord," for greater far than even the great sins of the disciples of Christ is the merit of our Savior.

So you can see, brothers and sisters, why the early church left the seventh-day Sabbath, left the last day of the week, and began to meet from that day to this on the first day of the week. It's because that's when Christ met with them and gave them further instruction in order to help them understand the great work of salvation. And that's why the Bible says we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves together either, and that's why the Bible promises us that where even two or three are gathered together in the name of Christ, he will be there in the midst. He will be there because he will be with his church even to the end of the age, not in the same manner, that only lasted forty days. And his physical presence now is reserved until the glorious day of his appearing but he is present with his Spirit and word wherever his people assemble on the first day of the week.

We'll go on to look at this, but you know one of them was missing, that was Thomas. It would be interesting to know where he was, and it would be interesting to know why he wasn't there. He got his nickname from the fact that he wasn't there and how wonderful that our Lord took the special pastoral care that was needed to fully restore him. May we learn from this how important it is for us to meet together that we might meet with the Lord Jesus. May God grant it. Amen.

*Father in heaven, we thank You for the lessons of this encounter of the Lord Jesus on that first Lord's day in the history of the world. May we cherish that teaching and that truth and also the continuing promise of Jesus through the Spirit and word that He has sent to meet with His people. Lord Jesus, we thank You for this promise and pray that You will reveal yourself again and again in all of Your majesty and glory as we gather together in Your name. This we ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.*