

The First Mission of the Risen Lord (John 20:19–31)

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (11/27/2022)

Introduction

The risen Lord appeared first to Mary Magdalene while she remained grieving at the tomb, determined to locate and retrieve the body of her beloved rabbi. She had previously reported the empty tomb to Peter and John, who confirmed her observation. They also noted something quite unusual—the linen grave clothes remained in place, but the head cloth was folded, lying in another place. This added another dimension to the problem of what had happened to His body. As yet, they did not yet understand the Scriptures. So, puzzled, they returned to their homes, leaving Mary to grieve alone.

Although Jesus had stated on a number of occasions (for example, John 2:13–22) that He would rise from the dead, those listening did not or *could not* comprehend that truth. Only after His resurrection did the disciples believe the Scriptures, and that only after He appeared to them. It is this gracious work that John now covers in these last chapters of His Gospel.

I. An Evening Encounter with the Prince of Peace (vv. 19–23)

1. Jesus' post-resurrection appearances are four in number: three in John 20 and one in John 21. The three in chapter 20 are called "*signs*" given to generate faith in Jesus Christ (v. 30). John presents a scene of confusion in this second resurrection appearance of the Lord. Fear of the Jews forced the disciples to shelter behind locked doors. Then Mary's report of seeing the risen Lord caused more questions and mounting confusion.
2. Jesus suddenly came into that closed room, stood among them, and greeted them, "*Peace be with you*" (v. 19). *Peace* is a very important word of greeting (the Hebrew, *Shalom*, denoting a desire for "wholeness," or "completeness" to the ones greeted). It expresses a desire for their wellbeing, harmony, and security. Jesus did not rebuke them or scold them for their unbelief nor the foolish behavior that accompanied their unbelief. What Jesus accomplished in His cross work was *peace* for them: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. ... Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid*" (John 14:27).

Peace is not quietness of heart but of enmity settled with God. Peace allows grace to work in the saints through the *power* of the resurrection by the Holy Spirit. "*It is finished*," now plays out in the application of redemptive benefits—*peace*—purchased on the cross. Do you know His peace that passes all understanding?

3. The response of the disciples was remarkable *gladness of heart* or, better, great *joy*. Jesus again pronounced *peace* on them and then commissioned them (v. 21). The synoptic Gospels have explicit versions of the Great Commission, such as Matthew 28:18–20.
4. While an actual reporting of post-resurrection events, could this account also be regarded as a *symbolic* disclosure of New-Covenant benefits? For example, Jesus' breathing on the disciples symbolizes the *new birth*, a scene strikingly reminiscent of God's breathing life into Adam at creation. Jesus brought the new creation to reality with its permanent blessing of the Spirit as He pronounced, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" The new birth or regeneration is a work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:6; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 18).

This is complemented by the declaration, "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld*" (v. 23). The same promise to the disciples was recorded by Matthew before the resurrection (16:19; and 18:18). Jesus granted this spiritual authority only to the *church*, not to individual believers, and in the context of the Great Commission. These pronouncements must be understood of the promised *church* to be inaugurated at Pentecost, when the Spirit was given. Note Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 5:4, 5.

II. A Compassionate Restoration of a Skeptic (vv. 24–29)

1. Thomas was not among the disciples when the risen Jesus first appeared to them (vv. 19–23). Thus, John turns his attention to this skeptic. It is not entirely fair to characterize Thomas as "the doubter." Although his response to the disciples' report to having seen the risen Lord was skeptical—it actually bordered on obstinacy—his life was characterized by devoted loyalty to Jesus (John 11:16; 14:5). His dealings with Thomas show the patience of understanding without rebuke or displeasure.

Two interesting facts emerge in John's account. (1) Thomas is the only source for the fact that *nails* were used to secure the Savior to the cross (v. 25). (2) Upon observing the wounds, Thomas's confession is tremendous, "*My Lord and my God!*" (v. 28,). "The most unyielding skeptic has bequeathed to us the most profound confession" (D. A. Carson).

2. Thomas's absence from the assembly on the first appearance is not explained. Had he isolated himself in hopeless despair at the crucifixion of his Lord? Times of discouragement make the assembling of believers all the more important (Hebrews 10:19-25). Did his sorrow breed a willful disbelief? What would remedy his reluctance? The report of the disciples was insufficient to awaken hope in Him.

Unbelief is a terribly besetting sin. Thomas had utterly refused to consider the credible testimony of ten competent witnesses because he put the condition of his faith on human experience (he rejected what they *saw*), not on the solid foundation of the truth of God's Word (Romans 10:17).

3. Jesus suddenly appeared exactly one week later, as the believers were gathered again (v. 26). It was another sudden appearance in the room, the doors barred from within. Again, the Lord greeted them, "*Peace be to you.*" He then extended an invitation for Thomas to touch His wounds (v. 27). He was on a gracious mission to restore Thomas to faith, calling Him to return to the first principles on which peace rests, His own sacrifice. He admonished him to stop being unbelieving but show yourself a true believer (v. 27). Thomas responded, falling to his knees, he worshipped. His confession was personal (*my*), submissive (*Lord*), and insightful (*God*)—a powerful Spirit-prompted testimony to the person of Jesus (1 Corinthians 12:3). The doubter gave the strongest and most conclusive testimony to the absolute deity of the Savior from human lips.

III. Thomas and John's Purpose for the Gospel (vv. 30–31)

1. The language of verses 30 and 31 points to their being *parenthetic*, linking them to the previous passage. The message is: "Those who have not seen the risen Christ and yet have believed are blessed; therefore, this book has been composed to this end, that you may believe."
2. It is also a short summary of John's purpose: "On one hand there are many more signs that could be cited, but on the other hand, these are sufficient and given in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Do you believe?

Lessons

1. The Lord is wonderfully patient and kind to His own in their willful and obstinate sin but note carefully: He will not let us persist in it. He will come to correct us and restore us to obedient faith in Him.
2. It is a serious fault when we refuse to believe unless we experience some tangible and visible manifestation of God's presence and purpose for us. The beatitude that Jesus gave to Thomas must govern our spiritual walk.
3. God's plan to reach the ends of the earth with the truth is that we simply declare what has been written about Christ in the Word of God. It is the work of the Spirit to open hearts and eyes to that truth and save those who see it.