

Behind Closed Doors

John 20:19-29

Introduction

In 1916, Georgia Tech played a football game against Cumberland University, a tiny law school. The Tech team was a mighty football powerhouse and rolled over Cumberland by a score of 222 to 0. Tech beat the Cumberland players to a pulp, too. The Cumberland players were tired, bruised, discouraged, afraid, no longer unified, and defeated – and the game was not even over.

The crowning action of their despair occurred toward the end of the game. The Cumberland quarterback, Ed Edwards, fumbled a snap from center. As the Tech linemen charged into his backfield, Edwards yelled to his fullback, “Pick it up! Pick it up!”

Edward’s fullback, seeing the monsters rush in, who had battered him all day, yelled back, “No, you dropped it, you pick it up.”

That fullback was tired of being pulverized. No more!

Well, if the score could be kept between the disciples and their world, it would be: the world – 222; the disciples – 0. The disciples were discouraged, confused, and afraid. They are hiding behind closed doors – locked for fear of the Jewish leaders. The story was already circulating that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus. Perhaps the authorities would apprehend and punish them. Perhaps Rome would execute them, as well, for breaking the tomb’s seal. They did not know – but the air was filled with a mixture of confusion and fear.

They were aware that the tomb was empty, since two disciples, among them, had recently arrived with

the news that Jesus had appeared to them on the road to Emmaus. It was too much to hope for – like Cumberland getting their hopes up that they could somehow score 222 points in the last few seconds – that would take a miracle.

I want to invite your attention to a miracle. It is found in John, chapter 20. It is a miraculous appearance that will enable the disciples to pick up the ball and run again – without stopping and without fear.

Christ’s Special Word

The Lord’s declaration

Look at verse 19.

When therefore, it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

I love those first words, “Peace be with you.”

Can you imagine what the Lord could have said?! This is His first appearance to the disciples, after they had denied Him, abandoned Him, and refused to own Him, so much so, that none of them took part in His burial. The women had shown the only display of courage among them, apart from the apostle John.

He could have really let them have it. Like a parent who really gives his children a tongue lashing – like I do with my children at times. For example, when they leave their bikes and coats outside overnight in the rain. Or, when they fail in their

responsibilities, and they do not have many, like forgetting to feed their parakeet for three days, causing her to nearly die – which would be an answer to my prayers. Or, the time when one of my third graders announced that a project was due the next day and he had forgotten all about it – my wife stayed up late into the night finishing it for him, only to discover, the next day, that the project was not even due – I will not repeat portions of that tongue lashing! Just like a Father, Jesus Christ could have let the disciples have it, “I poured three years of my life into you fellows and I can’t believe your disloyalty, your unfaithfulness, your downright ingratitude!”

It would not surprise us if the latter part of John, chapter 20, was a record of a tongue lashing the disciples would never forget. But, look again at Christ’s first word to them, “Peace . . .”.

Somehow Jesus had slipped through those locked doors – His glorified body was capable of transcending all physical barriers. His body was capable of eating and drinking and bearing scars. Yet, it was different – able to appear and disappear; to be somewhere one moment and another the next.

The disciples are meeting in terror – listening for every step on the stairs and for every knock at the door – expecting arrest, and perhaps death. They are afraid, and they lock the doors!

What wonderful news – in our greatest fears, we cannot lock Him out! And He says to their fears, and ours, “Peace be with you.”

This word, “Peace,” was an incredible expression. It was more than “Hello,” or “God bless you.”

The battle of Marathon, several hundred years before the resurrection of Christ, was the decisive battle in which Greece crushed the power of Persia. Pheidippides, the champion runner, threw down his shield, and ran like the wind to tell the good news to victorious Athens. He burst into the Acropolis with the cry, “caireth,” meaning, “we have conquered”. From that time on, the Greeks made this word their regular form of salutation, which translated, literally means, “Rejoice,” and its context was victory in battle.

So, the very first word Jesus delivered to His band of disciples was this word, from “cairw,” “Rejoice, I am victorious over the grave, death and hell!”

What wonderful news!

The living display

Now notice His display, in verse 20a.

And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. . . .

“Just in case there is any doubt as to who I am,” Jesus implies, “let Me show you!”

It is fascinating to me that, in the mind of God, Christ’s resurrected body would be perfectly whole, yet, it was His decision for His Son to retain five scars (Luke tells us, in chapter 24, verses 39 and 40, that Jesus showed the disciples His feet as well). Five scars that forever remind us that He was the Lamb – sacrificed.

The word in verse 20 for “show” is literally, “display”. This means that Jesus perhaps, somehow slipped one of His arms out of His sleeve, and pulling the loose fitting garment down, He showed them His pierced side, His pierced hands, His pierced feet. It was not a show-and-tell, punctuated by the Savior saying, “Look what you made Me go through; look what I had to endure for you.”

No, this was more like a soldier who had been decorated for his bravery, showing his children the bullet wounds, with joy, “This was for your freedom, children.”

So also, Jesus shows to them, “This is a reminder of redemption paid for in full; these are wounds for your healing, your freedom!”

Now, notice the disciples reaction, in verse 20b.

The disciples therefore rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

“It really is You, Lord!”

I imagine the air was punctuated by shouts for joy. Surely there was hugging, and not a few tears of relief.

The life-long direction

Now, continue to verse 21.

Jesus therefore said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”

The resurrection of Christ produced a responsibility for Christians. In other words, we are not to remain behind closed doors!

The apostle Paul calls us the “body of Christ”. We are His hands, His feet, His mouth – and if there

ever was a time when the simple, clear message of Christ is needed; if there ever was a time when confusion abounded, it is now.

People are hungering for truth – like thirsty men. But, they are drinking from empty wells of experience, pleasure, possessions. We have the water of life and we are not to keep it locked in a safe. As Jesus said, in verse 21b,

. . . as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.

Use your imagination for a moment and imagine that I am digging in my back yard. Suddenly, a stream of water sprouts upward. I immediately notice that the dry autumn leaves, that are touched by the water, instantly come alive and turn to spring colors. The dry brown grass turns to a lush green. I let some of it trickle through my fingers, and my skin turns soft and young looking. I take a sip and immediately, I feel energetic. I run inside, look in the mirror, and my face is more handsome than ever. I said, use your imagination! As I lean closer to look into the mirror, I notice that I have to push brown hair away from my eyes to see – something I have not had to do for several months. Keep imagining!

What do you think I would do next? Who do you think I would tell? My wife! No question! Just last month, Marsha went to the eye doctor and, after testing, was told what she did not want to hear – she needed glasses. She was downhearted. I told her, "Honey, now listen, we're growing old together."

What a stupid thing to say. You can only imagine how grateful she was.

Suppose I had discovered the fountain of youth. What about the rest of my family? Would I let my children drink from it? That depends – if they promised to never ask for money, to do their homework, *and* not to get interested in dating until after they have graduated from college, okay!

The gospel, this fountain of everlasting life, is not ours to keep to ourselves, or to sell with strings attached – it is free! Jesus Christ says, "I'm sending you to a thirsty world – give them a drink of what you've discovered."

Christ's Special Ministry

A gift

But, as you know, we cannot do this in our own strength – thus the significance of verse 22.

And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Now, other passages make it clear that the Holy Spirit would come in fullness, after Christ ascended to the Father. That will not happen until some fifty days from this point. Turn to Acts, chapter 1, verse 8.

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses . . .

Notice this verse says, ". . . shall receive . . .". That is future tense. The Lord ascending and the Spirit descending was yet a future event.

Like many expositors, I believe that this passage in John is an experience whereby Jesus provides them with a preliminary provision; a foretaste of the strength to come. In the meantime, this breath of the Holy Spirit would be a sweet gift that would enable them to wait nearly two months for the fulfillment of Christ's promise and the creation of the New Testament church.

And, if you have ever had to wait two months for a life-changing answer, you know how important God's presence and grace is during that time.

A message

Then notice, in John, chapter 20, verse 23, Christ said,

If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.

Now, this verse is used by the Roman Catholic church as the biblical basis for the priest's authority to forgive sins. The special privileges vested in the Roman priesthood are taken from a verse.

Actually, the Bible clearly teaches the wonderful doctrine of the individual priesthood of every believer. That means that every Christian has direct access to God; every Christian can go directly to God for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of fellowship.

The High Priest, Jesus Christ, did away with any further need of human mediators. Hebrews declares, in chapter 10, verse 19, that on the basis of His blood sacrifice, we can come with boldness before the throne of grace. And later, Peter will write these amazing words, referring to all believers, in I Peter, chapter 2, verse 9,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood . . .

The cross destroyed the clerical pedestal, so every Christian stands before God on equal ground. While our gifts determine our function within the church, and certain functions create special authority, no one is given special intimacy; no one has been granted special access; no one has special power.

So, what about this verse 23? It looks clear enough.

Theological thoughts on the forgiveness of sins

First, let us think theologically for a moment. We know there is no one who can forgive sins but God. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that when Jesus healed the paralytic, He said, “. . . your sins are forgiven.”

The Scribes objected and said, “. . . who can forgive sins but God alone?”

They were right – they just did not understand that Christ was God.

Theologically, we have got some problems if we can forgive each other’s sins, or I, as the under-shepherd, could forgive your sins. And I will tell you right now, I cannot and I will not even try.

Fellows, if you had an argument with your wife this morning – you barked at each other all the way to church, until you pulled into the church parking lot, and then, the smiles appear, “Hi! Good to see you. God bless you.”

So far, how many of you do not like this illustration?! Well, if you came up to me after the service and said, “Pastor, I just want you to know that I argued with my wife all the way to church. She started it – and I finished it. Well, I was wrong and I’d like you to forgive me.”

You are talking to the wrong person. The New Testament is clear that there are only two people involved in your confession – the person you have sinned against and, since all sin is ultimately against God, also God, whom you go directly to and ask for forgiveness.

Historical thoughts on the forgiveness of sins

Secondly, let us think historically. There is not one instance, in any of the New Testament books, of

any apostle taking on to himself the authority to pardon sins.

Furthermore, in this upper room where Jesus appeared, there were not only apostles, but there were several others, who were not apostles, who were given this challenge, as well. Luke informs us, in chapter 24, that Cleopas and another unnamed disciple from the Emmaus road experience were also in the upper room. So this statement was not applied in the early church for apostles only.

Grammatical thoughts on the forgiveness of sins

Now, let us think grammatically. You might notice a footnote in your Bible for verse 23a.

If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; . . .

My footnote translates the tense to literally read, “. . . their sins have previously been forgiven them . . .”.

Then, verse 23b says,

. . . if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.

The two verbs in verse 23, “have been forgiven” and “have been retained” are in the perfect tense. Now you do not have to remember this for the test, but what that tense refers to is something that has already happened – past action with existing results.

So, what are the men in the upper room given? A special message. They, and we, are all given the power and privilege of giving the assurance of the forgiveness of sins by God and announcing the terms of forgiveness.

Luke, chapter 24, verse 47a, says that we are to preach the repentance and remission of sins!

Do you realize the authority you display every time you share the gospel? Do you realize that you are giving a person the conditions whereby sins will be forgiven by God? I have done that many times.

I have said, “Dear sir, will you right now bow your head and ask Jesus Christ to forgive your sin and come into your life?”

“You will?! Great!”

And, I have watched men and women pray prayers of repentance and salvation. Then, do you know what I say? I look them in the eye and say, “God heard your prayer, and your sins, past, present, and future are forgiven.”

What incredible authority. Imagine speaking for God; declaring to human beings on earth what has been done in heaven!

Christ's Special Visitation

Now, all this excitement happened, but notice verse 24.

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

Now, Thomas has been dubbed the “doubter”. This twin – that is what Didymus means – has been saddled for centuries with the characterization of being the doubting disciple. We do not refer to Peter as “Denying” Peter – I think it is unfortunate to know only of Thomas’ failure.

Let us backup for a moment. I want you to see something. Turn back to John, chapter 11.

Lazarus has died and Jesus has announced His desire to return to Judea. Notice verse 8.

The disciple said to Him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?”

Skip to verses 14 through 16.

Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.” Thomas therefore, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.”

Lazarus’ body was in Bethany, two miles east of Jerusalem. Humanly speaking, it was suicide for Jesus to return. Thomas’ response shows us two things about this twin man:

- his courage – the greatest courage is not the courage of the optimist, because the optimist is convinced everything will turn out all right anyway; the greatest courage is the courage of a pessimist, because he expects the worst and is still willing to follow through – Thomas showed great courage!
- that he was a pessimist – he was sure of the worst – when Jesus did not say anything at all about dying, Thomas says, “All right, let’s go with Jesus and help dig even more graves – the worst is bound to happen.”

Thomas viewed life in the negative. He is best characterized by the well-known cartoon character Charlie Brown. One day, Charlie Brown announced to all his friends, “I have a new philosophy for life, from now on I’m only going to dread one day at a time.”

For a guy like Thomas, Murphy’s law rules – “If it can get any worse, it won’t until the worst possible moment!”

Now turn ahead a few chapters to John, chapter 14. Jesus is telling His disciples about heaven. Look at verses 3 through 5.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going. Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?”

This is classic! “Lord, we do not know where you are going, and we do not know the way. Lord, don’t leave us, we’ll never find the place!”

So, in John, chapter 19, Jesus is crucified – and when he died, Thomas is shattered. You can almost hear him say, “I knew it! All my fears have come true. He’s gone and I don’t know where; He died and I didn’t die with Him. I’ll never see Him again.”

Orwell’s book, *1984*, ends pessimistically as evil conquers. Some have suggested that this pessimism came because Orwell was dying as he wrote. Listen to what he wrote – I can see Thomas in these words.

Since about 1930, the world has given no reason for optimism whatever. Nothing is in sight except a welter of lies, hatred, cruelty, and ignorance, and beyond our present troubles loom vaster ones which are only now entering into the European consciousness. It is quite possible that man’s major problems will “never” be solved . . . The real problem now is how to accept death as final.

For Thomas, the Lord was dead! His pessimism has proof! It is a cross standing on a windy hill; it is a tomb with a stone for a door, a fresh seal, and Roman guards standing outside. *It’s over!*

Peter Ustinov wrote, “An optimist is a person who knows how sad a place the world can be. A pessimist is one who is forever finding out.”

And look what Thomas missed, according to chapter 20, verse 24.

But Thomas, . . . was not with them when Jesus came.

He was isolated in the cold chill of sorrow, while others were warmed and filled with the presence of Jesus Christ.

Ladies and gentlemen, when sorrow comes and sadness envelops you, there is a tendency to shut yourself up and refuse to meet with believers in worship and fellowship. That is the very time when we need it the most – for it is there that we are most likely to meet Him afresh.

Thomas' mistake was seeking loneliness instead of togetherness.

In the dark days of persecution, Pliny wrote to Trajan, the Roman Emperor, and said this about the Christians, "They are given to meet together on a stated day before dawn and sing among themselves a hymn to Christ as God."

The other disciples urged Thomas to join them, in verse 25.

The other disciples therefore were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Thomas, like every one of us, often carries his faith in his fingertips. We will believe only what we can see and touch.

The patience of grace

Continue to verse 26.

And after eight days again His disciples were inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst, and said, "Peace be with you."

Imagine that! I would have said, "Where's Thomas? Thomas come here – won't you ever believe?"

Oh no! Christ is still declaring victory – victory over death and *doubt*!!

One of the most precious verses that overflows with grace is verse 27.

Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here your finger, and see My hands; and reach here

your hand, and put it into My side; and be not unbelieving, but believing."

Thomas was not kicked out of the flock for doubting; for pessimism. Instead, the Great Shepherd reached down to where this frightened sheep was and gave him an unforgettable gift of grace.

Jesus Christ is committed to turning failure into faithfulness.

The commendation of faith

Jesus Christ is dedicated to turning doubt into declaration.

Look at verse 28.

Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

Did you know that this is the first time in the gospel accounts that the Lord Jesus is addressed in this way. It represents a great insight of faith, even greater than Peter in his declaration that Christ was the Son of God.

Thomas said, "My Lord and my God!"

This is the great Christological announcement that defies and silences all the cults, and the "isms," and the spasms who say Christ is not God.

Thomas was never corrected. His worship was received!

Now, for every reader of John's gospel, in the first century and in this century, look at verse 29.

Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

You can write your name in verse 29. "Blessed is Stephen who did not see, and yet believed."

"Blessed is Mike and Cindy and Mark and Jan . . . who did not see, and yet believed."

The truth is, we also have problems with what we do not know and cannot comprehend and cannot see or touch or taste. Verse 29 is a special commendation and encouragement for you and for me.

Joe Schmitt of St. Paul, Minnesota, told the story of a father who was awakened by the smoke detector in his basement. He woke his wife and they quickly went to their children's bedroom. They woke them and, through smoke that was getting quite heavy, started heading for the door. The father was carrying

his one and a half year old daughter in one arm and held the hand of his four year old son with the other.

The son, being scared and unsure of what was happening, pulled his hand from his father's clasp and ran to what he thought was a place of safety – upstairs to his bedroom. The father got outside and called to his son. Through billowing smoke, the son appeared at the bedroom window, crying and calling for help. The father called to him and told him to jump. The boy replied, screaming, "But I can't see you!"

The father called back, "That's all right – jump – I can see you!"

Perhaps today, you are discouraged and are doubting. You would love to put your hands into His and see the scars and see His face. Remember, while you cannot see Him, He can see you and His heart commends yours for believing the written Word, knowing that you will, one day, see the Living Word.

We don't know much about Thomas after the ascension of Christ. There is an apocryphal book called, *The Acts of Thomas*, which supposes to give his ministry. More than likely, a kernel of truth is woven into legend. It records that, after Christ ascended, Thomas went to India to preach the gospel. It is, by the way, interesting that the church of South India traces its origin to Thomas' missionary work.

Well, King Gundaphorus entrusted a great deal of his wealth to Thomas to build a palace for him. Thomas was however, so overwhelmed with the poverty of the poor that he slowly gave the King's money away. The King eventually sent for Thomas and asked him, "Have you built the palace for me, Thomas?"

Thomas answered, "Yes."

"When can I see it?"

Thomas answered, "You can't see it now, but, when you die, you can see its fruit in heaven."

At first the King was incensed, but Thomas, in the end, won the King to Christ.

Let us ask Thomas a few questions.

"Thomas, are you investing in a kingdom?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"In heaven."

"Have you ever seen it?"

"No."

"Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"Where exactly is it?"

"I don't know."

"Then where is your proof?"

"I have none, other than this – within my heart lives the King, and according to His promise, one day, He will come and take me to live with Him in His wonderful kingdom."

Like the dear blind hymn writer put it,

*Face to face I shall behold Him, far beyond
the starry sky;*

*Face to face in all His beauty, I shall see Him
by and by.*

For now, at times, it might seem as if the score is 222 to nothing. The message to you is, "Pick the ball up and run with it."

You might get knocked about and bruised by this game of life, but, in the end, there will be a miracle – our team wins!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/19/1995 by Stephen Davey.

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