

Gospel Ministry

John 20:19-31 (ESV)

Last week, we hit the climax of Jesus' story: his resurrection from the dead. All the prophecies found their fulfillment in this one event. This event was not just for Jesus' benefit, but it's for the benefit of all mankind. Yet, just because it's the climax of the story, doesn't mean it's the end of the story. Today, we continue recounting Jesus' appearances to his disciples on the evening of Easter Sunday. We get the answer to the question: "Okay, so what's next?" The Lord in his appearances to his disciples explains how the world will hear about his crucifixion and resurrection. He will send them to proclaim the meaning and benefit of his life and death to all people. In the appearance to his disciples,

JESUS GIVES HIS DISCIPLES THE GOSPEL MINISTRY FOR THE WORLD.

We had heard on Easter Sunday how only a select few women received the opportunity to see the risen Lord at his tomb. When these select eye-witnesses then tried to report this news to the others of Jesus' disciples, they ran into some difficulties. Some were too afraid to say what they had seen; the others had their words disbelieved for they were too fanciful. So, since the disciples of Jesus still remained in confusion about what exactly had happened, Jesus finally appeared to them too. **"On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'**" Our Lord wants the disciples to know for certain that he has risen. He stands among them, even though they tried to keep everyone out. Now, Jesus had plenty of reason to come to them and chide them; they had deserted him; they hadn't believed his witnesses. Yet, our Lord doesn't do what is deserved. He does not rebuke them here. He opens with these words, "Peace be with you."

He offers his peace on account of their great fear. They had been afraid of the Jews, those who crucified Jesus. The body was now missing; and Jesus' opponents would come after Jesus' disciples, looking to accuse them of stealing the body. But, they had no clue where it was before they saw Jesus face-to-face. Jesus doesn't just give them his peace because his disciples are afraid of assault and persecution from the Jews. No, Jesus' peace is bigger than that. Is Jesus only stilling their fear for his disciples' rejection of him? Is he just saying, "Hey I know you left me, but we're all good now"? No, this peace is greater than that. And we can see that from what Jesus does after he gives them his peace. **"When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side."** Our Lord connects his wounds from the cross with the peace he is delivering.

It is as if Jesus was saying, “Look at what I did for you on the cross. I have won for you peace. And this is not just peace with men, with your opponents. This is not just peace with me, for your abandonment. This is your peace with the Father. God is no longer your enemy. I give you his peace because I have won it for you.”

Well, was this peace meant only for the disciples? Was this peace only for them to enjoy? Of course not; because of what Jesus does next. **“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’”** The Lord takes the peace which he has given the disciples and says, “Go, spread this peace.” This is a foundational moment after the resurrection of our Lord. All of the Gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) testify to this: after Jesus rose from the dead, he gave his apostles the authority to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world. We see this with the words, **“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”** Our Lord places his seal and mark on these men. They are his special, called men who will have a special task. What is this task? It is to go out and forgive sins. Jesus promises them that these men have the authority to retain or remit sins, to withhold forgiveness or to give forgiveness. They have the authority to spread the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. And they do this all the while proclaiming Jesus. For, wherever they speak of God’s forgiveness, they will speak of the wounds and marks which the crucified and risen Savior bore in order to win that forgiveness.

These words of Jesus “As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you...If you forgive anyone his sins...” are foundational to the establishment of his church; to the very reality in which you stand. This is because these words of Jesus were not true only for the apostles standing in that locked room on the evening of Easter Sunday. No, they are true for all the men who are called by God to be pastors. Jesus, when he calls and gathers his faithful people through giving them forgiveness, does this through the special job and calling of pastor. Jesus has established both: you who hear the Word and those who preach the Word. If you want to know what a pastor does, in the most basic sense, you turn to this passage, John 20:21-23, and you see that Jesus commands his pastors to go as he has gone and proclaim Jesus’ forgiveness. Notice how this passage shows up all over the place when describing pastors. In the Small Catechism, this passage occurs when we talk about the Office of the Keys, the very means for the church to forgive sinners and withhold forgiveness from the openly unrepentant. If you ever go and witness the ordination of a pastor, this passage will most certainly be one of the passages read to instruct everyone on what the pastor is supposed to do. If you want to understand what a pastor is supposed to do (or even making sure you hold him accountable), listen to these words of Jesus.

Well, what happens after this special moment? After our Lord had finished giving his disciples the authority and power of the Gospel? The first person to hear the disciples' words rejects it! **"Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.'"** The eleven other apostles of Jesus, confident from their eye-witness and responsibility received from the Lord, fail to convince their fellow apostle Thomas. Out of all the people, you would think at least this one might listen. It wasn't like they were speaking to the Pharisees or one of the elders of Jerusalem who had killed Jesus. Yet, Thomas doesn't believe their words. He says, "I've got to see the proof for myself."

On the one hand, Thomas had a really good point. The marks of the crucifixion were the exact thing which Jesus had shown all the other apostles! These were the marks which proved God's love for the world. Thomas is certainly not wrong in his judgment that he should get to see this great mystery and sign. On the other hand, Thomas is wrong for disbelieving his fellow apostles' words. These apostles carried the authority from Jesus to speak on his behalf. By rejecting his fellow apostles' words, that they had seen the Lord Jesus, Thomas was in fact rejecting words coming from Jesus' mouth. Yet, our Lord is even merciful to one such as this.

Jesus could have left Thomas to be convinced by his friends. That would have been a fine choice. Yet, he does not leave Thomas disbelieving. Jesus appeared in the same spot, at the same time, for Thomas' faith. **"Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'"** You know, the funny thing is, the Scripture never says that Thomas actually did what Jesus asked, and what he had demanded earlier. Thomas had said, "Unless I see his marked hands and touch the wounds..." Yet, when presented with the Lord Jesus right in front of him, he immediately reacts with "My Lord and my God!" He repents of his foolishness and accepts his fellow disciples' words. The Lord has appeared; he is risen! But we are left with a kind of question after this whole Thomas episode: does everyone have to see the physical marks of the crucifixion for them to become believing? Will anyone listen and receive the apostles' words? Their testimony of the resurrection and forgiveness in Jesus' name?

Well, the Lord Jesus answers this question with his response to Thomas. **“Jesus said to him, ‘You have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”** Jesus affirms the special blessing he has given to Thomas and to all the eye-witnesses of the resurrection. They receive sensory confirmation and can build upon this with their faith. They can believe because they saw Jesus with their own two eyes and heard his voice with their own two ears. Yet, these are not the only ones who will be blessed. Jesus’ again confirms what he had earlier spoken when he commissioned the disciples to go as he has sent them. He says, **“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.”** These too shall be blessed, just as the apostles were blessed. They are blessed because they receive the power and testimony of Jesus’ word proclaimed by the apostles. You and I are blessed, all those who have followed the eye-witnesses, are blessed. Jesus himself has blessed you because you receive the very same thing that Thomas received, though you receive it in a different way.

You receive it in two ways: one, you receive it by the apostles’ testimony, by the eye-witness accounts; two, you receive it by hearing Jesus speak through his pastors. The evangelist John ends the Gospel reading by affirming the first point. He says, **“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”** He confirms that the whole reason why he wrote the book is that you may believe just as they had believed, just as Thomas has confessed. All these stories of Jesus’ signs and teachings have the same goal: that you may say the same words, “My Lord and my God!” Yet, you also receive Jesus’ blessing by the words which your preacher speaks. Before Jesus ever commanded his apostles to put pen to paper, to write the books which we call the New Testament, he had sent them to preach a living word to his people. And Jesus continues this action of sending his pastors to this day. So, you have received Jesus’ blessing (“blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”) in both ways; by reading the Bible and by listening diligently to your pastor’s sermons and instruction.

Jesus with his appearances on Easter Sunday evening and the following Sunday reaffirmed the commitment these apostles had received from the very beginning. They were to spread the Lord’s forgiveness of sins to the whole world. They were to do this, not in fear from hostilities, but in confidence from God’s peace. Jesus promised that he would be speaking through them, just as the Father spoke through him. Even though some will not accept their words, some might doubt unless they see the physical proofs, Jesus confirmed his blessing upon all who receive the apostles’ testimony: **“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”** This commissioning of Jesus is not only true for the apostles in that locked room but also for all of the pastors Jesus has placed in his church. So, you too have the confirmation that Jesus continues to spread his peace to all his disciples and to give you the ability to proclaim “My Lord and my God!” Amen.