5-1-22

John 20

During this Easter season, we’ve considered the crucifixion and death of Jesus. We’ve looked into His burial and the time He spent in the place of the dead. And, of course, His glorious resurrection from the dead; having a restored eternal body that will never again experience death. We know that tied in with all of this is His ascension into heaven. Heaven is where He is now, continually interceding for us, and, very importantly, continuing His ministry by the Holy Spirit and through us.

Between the resurrection and the ascension there was a time lapse of forty days. Luke tells us about this in the book of Acts chapter 1 verse 3. *To [the apostles] [Jesus] also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God*. In 1 Corinthians 15:6, Paul lets us know that Jesus appeared to more than five hundred of the brethren at one time. This far exceeds the two or three witnesses required by the Law of Moses. The resurrection of Christ and the forty-day time period before His ascension are fact.

The Bible doesn’t tell us a lot about what went on during these forty days; but there are several important things that took place. The Gospels and Acts tell us of things that were important for their own audience and from their perspective. For John, belief was a main theme throughout His account of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

All the Gospels include Mary Magdalene as being among the first to find Jesus’ tomb empty, and then meet the risen Lord. John focuses solely on her of the women. Her love and dedication are a lesson for each of us. Upon discovering that Jesus was gone, she ran to get help from the disciples. As usual, the disciples weren’t much help, but they still played an important role.

Peter and John ran to the tomb. This does show their concern for Jesus; it normally takes a lot for a grown man to run just to get somewhere in a hurry. They found the grave clothes still there; Jesus would never need them again. This also demonstrates that this was not a grave robber’s work. The grave clothes were made of linen and were therefore valuable. A robber would not have left them.

John makes his first point in this chapter about belief. He tells us that what he saw in the tomb caused him to believe. John makes sure we understand that this was a very rudimentary belief. He knew Jesus wasn’t there but wasn’t sure why. He probably thought God had something to do with it but didn’t realize the full implication that Jesus had come back to life. He admits his own ignorance in verse 9, “*For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead*.”

Not knowing what else to do, the disciples left. But Mary had come back to the tomb and now stood there weeping. Again, we see how much she loved the Lord; she was in terrible distress. Not only had her Lord been undeservingly crucified but now His body had suffered the further indignity of being removed from its resting place.

After being gently interrogated by angels, and then by Jesus Himself, Mary remains focused on making sure that the body of Jesus is treated with proper respect. Wherever the body may be, she is personally willing to retrieve it. As followers of Jesus, we too must be willing to be personally involved with Him. The love and service Jesus calls us to doesn’t allow us to keep Him or others at arm’s length.

When Jesus gently said her name, she was able to fully focus on the living Christ instead of searching for one who was no longer among the dead. At that moment, Mary believed. She knew that Jesus was alive. Like John, she didn’t fully understand what was going on; but, where John believed that Jesus was no longer confined to the grave, Mary believed that Jesus was alive.

Upon knowing that it was Him, Mary took hold of Jesus. The first thing that comes to our minds in our current culture is an embrace or hug. It is very unlikely that this took place. Women didn’t go around hugging men in that culture; it was not accepted. We read in Matthew 28:9 that the group of women who went to the tomb met Jesus and took hold of His feet. This is most likely what Mary did here. It was a sign of tenderness, humility, and worship.

Jesus told her to stop clinging to Him; He had not yet ascended to the Father. He was not saying this to her because he was in some mysterious state of being where He couldn’t be touched until His ascension. A little later, He invited Thomas to touch Him. Jesus had work for Mary to do, so she had to let go of Him in order to go do it. Also, He wasn’t going to disappear, so she would be able to see Him more. And importantly, in a few weeks He would be leaving and she had to let Him go; so that He could send the promised Holy Spirit. There is every reason to believe that Mary was present for, and part of, Pentecost.

Jesus sent Mary on a mission. She had a message to take to Jesus’ disciples. And this is exactly what she did. Some other Gospel accounts tell us that the disciples didn’t believer her; but she did what Jesus told her to. That is important for us. We are to do what Jesus commands us. It doesn’t matter if people don’t believe us or if we don’t see any results. It is for us to be obedient to Jesus. He works things out in accordance with His plan.

In verse 19, John is careful to let us know that it is Sunday; the same Sunday that Jesus arose from the dead. Remember that John wrote this a number of years after all this took place. He needed to let people know why the Christians would have celebrated on Sunday instead of the Jewish Sabbath. This would have been for the Jews especially.

The apostles, except for Thomas, are together in one room, very afraid of the Jewish leaders. They had killed Jesus; it wouldn’t be hard for them to kill His disciples also if they had chosen. You can imagine that the apostles were still trying to figure out what to do. Their whole world and hopes had been ruined; their last three years had come to nothing. We don’t need to think that they were continually staying in this room, Peter and John had gone out and Thomas was currently out doing something. This was just a “safe place” where they could gather.

Of course, we know they were greatly surprised when they realized that Jesus was standing there among them. They had to be alarmed that someone could even get in without them knowing. John made sure his readers understood that Jesus’ entrance was miraculous. This gives us a tantalizing hint that the resurrection body is able to do things that our regular body can’t.

As they stood there in shock, Jesus spoke His first post-resurrection words to His apostles, “*Peace be with you*.” What beautiful and kind words to speak to these frazzled men. You can bet that peace was the furthest thing from their minds; it was also what they desperately needed. But there is more to it. That greeting “Shalom” was a common greeting; but He said it again two verses later; and then again when He returned while Thomas was present.

Looking back later, the apostles would have remembered some of Jesus’ promises. During the Last Supper, John records a long discourse in which Jesus had said to them, “*Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful*.” At the end of that discourse, just before Jesus prayed His High Priestly prayer, He said to them, “*These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world*.”

Jesus had overcome the world; He had also overcome satan and death. Although all these things would still plague mankind, they could not master any who are in Christ Jesus. The world offers a false peace; but it is unsustainable because the prince of this world is a liar and a murderer. When these words describe the prince, there is no way the subjects can have any true peace. But if you are a subject of Christ’s Kingdom, you can have an inner peace that is not dependent on this world.

There is a more important aspect: Our sin and guilt made us enemies of God. Jesus’ death on the cross removed the sin and guilt of those who will be His people. When we accept Jesus, then, and only then, can we have peace with God. When Jesus was on the cross and said, “*It is finished*”; He had secured for us peace with Almighty God. What a wonderful proclamation Jesus was able to make; that He had won true peace for us.

In order to prove to them that it was really Him, Jesus showed them His hands and His side. He maintained, in His resurrected body, the scars of the nails and the spear, so that His followers would know it was really Him. The Bible says that the disciples rejoiced. After three days, hiding and confused, absolutely distraught over the loss of their beloved Teacher who had been killed, here He was standing in their midst. I imagine them jumping up and down, letting out whoops, laughing, and they were probably hugging Him. The important point is, they believed.

Jesus again proclaims peace, then lets them know He had work for them. He tells them, “*as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.*” We recognize this as what Jesus told them according to Matthew 28:19; the great commission. We need to understand that they are not being sent out as Jesus’ replacement. The work is still His; He will just be doing it by the Holy Spirit through His disciples, as He is doing still today.

In verse 22 it says, “*He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit*.” The best way to understand this is that Jesus is saying this in the present tense, but it will actually take place later. John writes like this in several places. It is also pretty obvious that the disciples didn’t receive the Holy Spirit at that time because they continued to behave in the same way as they had the whole time they had been with Jesus: thinking that Jesus was going to overthrow the Romans, worrying about what the others were doing, and generally not understanding what Jesus was talking about. We know from Acts 2 the huge change in them once they received the Holy Spirit.

Verse 23 can be a little difficult: “*If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained*.” This is not saying that the apostles or anyone else has the power to forgive or to withhold forgiveness. The Bible lets us know that only God can forgive sins. The wording is awkward, but it comes down to the commission of spreading the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. If a person receives the Gospel and accepts Jesus Christ as Saviour, then their sins are forgiven. If a person rejects the offer of the Gospel, then they remain in their sin.

We are all familiar with the next section of chapter 20 which covers the account of Thomas, who had not been present when Jesus came to visit them on the day of His resurrection. Because of this occurrence, we have the phrase “doubting Thomas”. This is an unfortunate way to remember this man. He appears twice before in this Gospel. In 11:16, *Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, so that we may die with Him*. And in 14:5, *Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?*”

Thomas was a loyal follower, but he didn’t understand any better than the rest of them. Thomas was not going to be taken in by some trick and it would have been an act of God’s providence that Thomas was the one absent at Jesus’ first appearance. He is the one who would say, “*Unless I 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.*”

Jesus appeared again the next Sunday and proclaimed “peace”. He turned directly to Thomas and invited him to believe. Jesus wants people to believe, He does not desire that any should perish. And Thomas responds with a most powerful confession of belief: “*My Lord and my God*!” In this we see that Jesus is not only King, but that He is part of the triune God. Notice that throughout the Bible, Jesus will accept worship, and worship is for God alone.

It is only a mild rebuke that Thomas had to see to believe. The other ten apostles had to see, Mary Magdalene had to see, hundreds of other disciples had to see. In fact, it was necessary for those first ones to see in order to be witnesses. Now we who receive their witness and believe are blessed.

Prayer

We give You praise and honor Lord, for the salvation You earned for us. And that You provide the ability for us to believe You. In Your word, You have provided ample witness and testimony that You are the Christ of God and that You are the way to the Father. You also bless us with the Holy Spirit who enables our minds to understand the Gospel offer, that we might say “yes” and receive eternal life.

Thank You, Jesus, that even after all Your work on the cross, You were still willing to remain here for forty days, to teach Your disciples and provide more evidence of Your victory over death and satan.

You have commissioned us; You have given us work to do. We ask for Your constant help and strength to live and speak Your Gospel, that You may be glorified and Your Kingdom may be increased.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen