



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“The Savior Lives to Save—and Rule!” John 20:19-31

Welcome to this first worship after our Resurrection Celebration. Last week was magnificent, wasn't it? God really showed up!

Now, wait a minute. It's one thing to be enthusiastic, but did you really see God? Well, no. Well, yes, sort-of. It's hard to answer that question with an answer that matches. And that is the nature, the mystery of faith. I want to open God's Word with you this morning, and examine this very thing, among Jesus' own followers.

The incident we might focus on—since we cannot do a full study of this in one message—is John's gospel, the first resurrection appearance of Jesus that John records. Open your Bibles with me to John, chapter 20. I'm going to start in verse 19, and read to the end, but we'll take it in three hunks. There is a lot here, but watch especially for “doubt” and “faith”.

John 20:19-23 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”²³ If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (NIV)

John, our narrator, describes the scene of this jaw-dropping experience with just a few strokes. This takes place on Easter Day or Resurrection Day, perhaps about 4 p.m. in the evening. The disciples are together in hiding, probably the same place they've gathered when they started getting together after Jesus was hoisted up upon the cross. [Remember, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (whom we met in chapter 3 in the famous nighttime conversation with Jesus) had taken Jesus' body down from the cross about this same time on Friday, and had put it in Joseph's family tomb, in the wealthy section of the cemetery. By Jewish reckoning, a new day started an hour later on our Friday (“day two”), and then with sunset last night, “day three” began. The morning of “the third day” is when the women went to the tomb.

The tomb itself was really a small cave carved in the rock, with one or more shelves inside--probably right across from the doorway--on which Jesus' body would be placed. The “door” itself was a low opening through which you stooped to enter.

The disciples had heard the women's report of their morning shock when they had gone to the tomb and found it empty. Peter and John corroborated it soon after. This was another blow; the disciples still think they are dealing with the crime of grave-robbing, which we know

was common then, especially among the tombs of the wealthy. Thieves would expect some of the deceased's personal effects would be buried with him, and would hope they could "make a killing" off the dead man or woman. So that's why a heavy stone was often set into a downhill trench and rolled into position in front of the door, where the trench incline and the stone's mass would prevent robbery. The bodies rotted there on those shelves, and then there was the second unpleasant task of taking the bones and storing them in a bone box—this was the practice of the wealthy, anyway—and then going through a purification ritual required of anyone who had touched a corpse before they could rejoin the community to worship God.

I think it was pretty quiet in that room among Jesus' followers that evening. They are paralyzed. If the body had been stolen, they could not report it without exposing where they were staying--and remember, they had fled into hiding because they thought they might be picked up as co-conspirators, and suffer what had just killed their Leader.

In the dimness, there seems to be a stirring of the dust motes in the light of the one small window. Some of the men look up, and cry out! It's Jesus! (*I think . . . it's Jesus.*) Now all in the room look, and they see Jesus there. No one asks "how"—they are overwhelmed by the surprise and terror of his presence. Is this a ghost? A group hallucination? "Shalom," Jesus smiles, "Shalom alechem." And he stretches out his wounded hands, and also shows them the wound in his side. Now they KNOW it's Jesus—he lives, he moves—it is the Lord!

It takes a moment for the quiet commotion to calm down, and for them to be able to listen to him again. "Shalom alechem," Jesus says again. "As the father has sent me, so I am sending you."

If Jesus had stopped there, I don't think anything more would have happened. Not only were they overwhelmed by the shock and awe of Jesus' presence, now he has given them his mantle, his commissioning. He is sending them—it's the same as Jesus saying, "Go and make disciples" in Matthew's account. But how can they do that? Sure, Jesus is obviously the Son of God sent from the Father; he has defeated death! Yes, JESUS can go and do what God wants. But . . . *US?* I think if Jesus had stopped with "I am sending you," they would have stayed in that room off and on for weeks, rehearsing the past.

This next part is what sets them in motion. Jesus breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is required for us to go and fruitfully do the kinds of things Jesus did, becoming something like "Jesus today". Without the Holy Spirit of God, there is no power. It's cranking the car's engine without power from the battery to make the spark. But Jesus DID give the Holy Spirit—this is the account in John's tradition which Luke has as Pentecost—and Jesus tells them that with the Spirit uniting them with the Father, they are now privy to the very counsel of God. They will KNOW if God has forgiven someone, and so they can declare that forgiveness; or, not. You see, it's not their own judgment about someone's sin; they have no independent say in the matter. They are simply announcing what GOD has decided.

How are you doing with this? Are you getting it?

Let's go to the second hunk, starting with verse 24. ²⁴Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (NIV)

Thomas missed Jesus’ first appearance, but everyone tells him about it when he shows up. Tom, however, is still locked in his grief; he thinks these friends have all gone nuts. *Don’t ask me to believe in him again*, Thomas says. “Look—if you can show me the nail marks in his hands so I can “smush” my fingers in there, and until I can put my hand in his guts through the spear wound in his side, fine. Otherwise, get away from me!” And that’s how it rests, for a week.

Next week, though, Jesus joins them again—despite the same locked doors. He greets them all: “Shalom!” But then he turns to Thomas. (Do you imagine Jesus is sad, or impatient, with Thomas?) Whatever, Jesus totally fulfills Thomas’ conditions for faith. “Hey, Tom--go ahead. Stick your finger here,” he says, pointing with one finger to the hole in his other hand. “Come on, guy. Stretch out your hand and push it up into my guts. Stop doubting, and believe.”

Jesus is “calling Thomas out”. . . and Thomas can no longer stand back. He collapses on the floor in worship: “My Lord and my God!” And I imagine Jesus touches him tenderly. Thomas now “gets it”, too.

Jesus says, “OK, you all have seen me, and you have believed. But especially good in God’s sight are the ones who believe without a demand I meet their standards of sensory experience.”

Jesus is talking about us, of course.

Let’s take the last part of chapter 20. ³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (NIV)

I love this. John the writer now peeks out from behind the curtain of his study and tells you what it was like to write this account. “I had to leave out a lot,” he says, “of the signs and miracles Jesus did before his disciples. But I chose these, at least, so that you—YOU—may believe and Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God—and that through that relationship with him, you may have God’s life in you, too.” . . .

It’s a sudden shift—like when a character in a play suddenly steps out and speaks directly to the audience. If we’ve been taken along by the plot and interactions on the stage, to have a

character speak to us, the audience, is a bit of a shock. But often that is an opportunity to put across something on another level than only the action between characters on the stage will allow. John addresses us. And the question comes to us as a two-parter:

“Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?”

“Do you have a relationship with him that brings God’s life into and through you?”

Today, these young people have said “yes” to these questions, and become new young sisters and brothers to us. They will still struggle with these questions, of course. As with any relationship, faith and following God not reducible to a single declaration, just as no marriage can be reduced to the marriage vows spoken on the wedding day. The declaration of loyalty and love in a wedding is just the start of the marriage; the man and woman have the whole rest of their lives to practice, practice, practice—and to decide again, and again, and again—that they are “in” this relationship till the end.

And that’s the way it is for all of us. As we go after our first self-conscious faith commitment, we will encounter ideas we hadn’t heard of before. We will have to wrestle those through. Some days we will “feel” distant from Jesus or God; we’ll forget to connect with God’s Holy Spirit. We can get really lost and confused. But nothing can take away this fact you have created today with our Elders—your public declaration to listen to God and to obey, because Jesus saved you from being lost to God forever, and because you have chosen to live the “with-God life”. The more you know God, the more “gold” you discover, the more “honey” sweetness you enjoy, the more adventure comes at you. Life will not be boring, if you grow to hear God’s voice, make the decision to obey, make the adjustments you need to make, and get on with it—with Him!

OK, but what about the church? Isn’t the church just a clunky institution with its own agenda, wanting to force us into being “good girls and boys”? (When I was a kid, that’s kinda what I thought.) No, if the church listens to God, decides to follow in faith, adjusts to this new direction, and runs to catch up with what God is doing, the church is our friend—our “mother”, if you will—raising us to know and love and serve God and God’s people.

Where but in the church will you find people telling what God has done in their lives? If you see someone’s story on TV or the Internet, that’s nice, but it’s remote. However, when someone like you-- someone you have known as a pretty ordinary person sitting in worship near you—reports *God showing up, God answering prayer, God performing healing*—that’s powerful. That’s why God wants us to grow up in community--knowing each other, confronting each other, confessing our selfishness, and holding each other accountable for working on our relationships with God and most of all encouraging each other. THAT’s what the church is, and without the growth community of the church, very few people grow beyond a childhood or teenage faith into an adult faith that has the power to reproduce faith in others, by God’s power working in them. It’s that disciple-making church that we seek to be at APC.

Welcome to a new family, a Church Family, led by the Head of the Church, the Risen Jesus, who lives to save and to rule those who follow him.

on April 19, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]