
2025 Fairview Winter Bible Studies

Don't Miss God's Blessing by Being Absent

"The Empty Tomb and the Risen Savior - John 20"

Scripture Text: John 20:19-31

Introduction

John 20, in summary, is about scared, disillusioned, and confused followers of Christ Jesus being graciously shown evidence of Christ's resurrection and the testimonies they gave in light of seeing it. It is about evidence that leads to belief. In the first section (vs 3-10) Peter and the "other disciple" which we know to be John himself, upon the confused story of Mary Magdalene, come and see the evidence of the empty tomb and the folded burial clothes. John tells us that "he saw, and believed." Yet it immediately thereafter says that both Peter and John "knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead." It would seem that at least to John there was a level of belief and yet they hadn't put all the pieces together yet. In the second section (vs 11-18), a confused Mary Magdalene, full of fear and crying in the garden, encounters two angels, followed thereafter with Jesus appearing in person to her. She doesn't immediately recognize him until He calls her by name. Then she says to him, Master! Her testimony, having seen the evidence of the resurrected Jesus, is recorded in vs 18 when she tells the disciples [I have] "seen the Lord." In Section 3 (vs 19-23), the disciples are closed up in a room, confused and fearful for their lives when Jesus appears in their midst. He speaks to them and shows them His wounds. In verse 25 we have their testimony in response to having seen the evidence of the resurrected Jesus as they share with the absent Thomas in vs 25 "We have seen the Lord." In the final section (vs 24-29) It is now 1 week later, we have Thomas the unyielding skeptic refusing to believe the testimony of his friends, and demanding to examine the evidence for himself. Jesus appears to him speaking to him and showing him his wounds, and having seen the evidence, he testifies, "My Lord and my God." John closes the section, stating not only his purpose of the chapter but for his entire gospel when he says, "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." John is a book of evidence, given to us by our gracious God, who knows that we are but dust, showing that real faith is not blind, but rooted in the historical realities of the witnessed and recorded life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, though the evidence may break down intellectual barriers, belief in the fullest and truest Biblical sense goes far beyond an orthodox view of Jesus that even the devil has, but by God's grace we can turn from sin and trust our lives and eternities into the hands of our risen and enthroned Lord and "have life through his name."

Easter Sunday Night

What is made clear in the gospel record is that the disciples of Jesus were going through an existential crisis, a period of inner conflict during which a person is distraught over questions about identity, meaning, and purpose (britannica.com). Jesus was their embodiment of hope, joy, and purpose. They had given their lives to Him, had experienced His love, healing, friendship, teaching, and power and were anticipating the establishment of His coming Kingdom. In the previous days they had witnessed what they thought was their whole world collapsing before their eyes. One of their own had betrayed Jesus, they had witnessed the flogging, mocking, and torture of their king. They had left him, they had denied him, they had forsaken him, as he was nailed to a cross and died between two thieves on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

Now try to wrap your mind around their state of mind that first Easter Sunday evening. The setting of the gathering of Jesus' disciples was a shut and presumably locked room full of fearful disciples. A lot had taken place throughout the day to this point. The tomb had been found empty by the women and subsequently investigated by Peter and John. Jesus had made appearances to the women yet their testimonies had been written off as idle tales. Jesus spoke with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who according to Luke's account were sharing their experience as they gathered that evening. With news of the empty tomb, confusion about what had happened to the body of Jesus, and some saying they had seen Jesus, I can only imagine that there was an emotionally charged atmosphere filled with confusion, buds of hope, skepticism, disillusionment, and a continued fear that their lives were next.

A Surprise Visitor

Into the tense atmosphere, as the group tried to come to grips with all that had taken place, *"Jesus came and stood among them."* It was so sudden and unexpected that the apostles thought they saw a spirit (Lk 24:37). They were frightened and startled. Jesus says, *"Peace be with you."* This was the customary Jewish greeting. It was ordinary, but I don't think it's a stretch to say that this most ordinary of greetings spoken in this most extraordinary of circumstances had a deeper and more profound impact on these fearful disciples. 'Peace to you,' is an assurance that there is no cause to fear, and that all is well, and in this encounter Jesus repeats this customary greeting twice, speaking into their agitation, calming their fears, and assuring them that it was truly their Saviour and Friend. He goes on to show them the wounds in his hands from the nails that fastened him to the cross and in his side where the soldiers seeing he was already dead, did not break his legs as the other two hanging beside him, but thrust a spear into his side causing an outpouring of blood and water to flow forth. It was then that scripture records *"Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord."* Christ had given them infallible proof of his identity and the reality of his resurrection. By the savior's merciful intervention He conferred

peace into their fearfulness, conviction into their confusion, and purpose into their emptiness. They knew in this moment that death was not the end and all that Jesus had said was true, and they were filled with joy!

He then commissions them, sending them into a lost world with the message of Jesus and with what feels like a down payment to what would occur at Pentecost, He breathes his Spirit upon them. The empowering and life giving power of Jesus to complete the task in which he was calling them to. The encounter ends with Jesus saying, *“Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.”* I believe that Jesus is not giving the church or apostles the power to forgive or not forgive sins. For I believe it is clear that only God can forgive sins, but simply that the commissioned people of God, his church, have the right or authority to say with scriptural authority that God forgives the heart that repents and trusts in Jesus and to warn those who are unrepentant that they are forfeiting the mercy and forgiveness of God. Thus, we preach, if you come to Jesus Christ with a repentant and believing heart your sins will be forgiven! If you choose to remain in your sins, and go your own way, then your sins will be retained and you will not be forgiven. We would not have the right to declare that without Christ’s authority to do so. I am certainly still grappling with this verse however.

What a Sunday evening service! What a blessing bestowed! They had come sad, fearful, confused, and aimless. They left glad, faithful, commissioned, and empowered. Having been in the presence of their risen Savior and friend. Surely the words Jesus had spoken to them before his crucifixion came back to their minds;

John 16:16-20 *A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father. 17 Then said some of his disciples among themselves, What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me: and, Because I go to the Father? 18 They said therefore, What is this that he saith, A little while? we cannot tell what he saith. 19 Now Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask him, and said unto them, Do ye enquire among yourselves of that I said, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me? 20 Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.*

An Absent Disciple

Directly after the description of Jesus’ appearance with the disciples that Sunday night we are told that there was a notable absence. “...Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.” We aren’t given a reason for his absence and I think it would be presumptuous to stand firm on one. What we can say for sure, and what is implied in the title given to me for this lesson is that Thomas missed the blessing bestowed upon the other disciples that night. It would be a week later before he would come to the same conclusions and

convictions as the others. It would be a surely excruciating week of continued inner conflict, doubt, and disillusionment. A week of forfeited joy absent the comforting knowledge of Christ's resurrection. The application is surely clear to us, and most likely confirmed through personal experience. How often have we forfeited the blessing and joy that Christ gives to the assembly of His people because we choose by our own volition to forsake assembling with the Lord's people. People respond to crises in different ways, and many of us choose isolation. Whether it's because we have painful memories that will surely be surfaced in the presence of others, or we have harbored bitterness towards our brothers or sisters, or a sense of personal failure that seems easier to ignore than to address, or maybe disillusionment from having had the foundations of our life shaken by circumstances outside our control, many of us, often remove ourselves to our private corners and avoid the very imperfect yet redeemed people that God has put in our lives for our benefit and for His glory. Living stones, being built up as a spiritual house, an assembly God chooses to dwell amongst.

Thomas the Man

Known almost universally as doubting Thomas, which is true, but not unique to him, as all of the disciples struggled with doubt in the aftermath of the crucifixion. His doubt is highlighted, due to his absence from Jesus' first appearance to the collective, and his refusal to believe their faithful testimony thereafter. Thomas is only recorded speaking in two other accounts given to us in John's gospel. They give us a brief snapshot into his personality and mindset.

John 10:39 - 11:16

Word came to Jesus that his friend Lazarus had died in Bethany. When Jesus told his disciples they were going to go to Bethany they argued against it. **John 11:8** *"His disciples say unto him, Master, the Jews of late sought to stone thee; and goest thou thither again?"* Reminding Jesus that when they were just in Jerusalem (2 miles from Bethany) the Jews had tried to kill him accusing him of blasphemy. The situation was heated and the attitude of hate towards Jesus amongst the Jews was at an all time high. The disciples thought it best not to go. Jesus explains to them why he must, and the need to raise Lazarus, their friend. Then we have our first introduction to Thomas when he says in vs 16 *"Let us also go, that we may die with Him."* While we cannot read too far into the statement, we see that they collectively followed Jesus into Bethany following Thomas' lead. I believe it speaks to his loyalty and devotion to Jesus. He was a committed follower of Christ. Some suggest a heroic pessimism in his comment, assuming death as opposed to going believing it would all work out, but nonetheless, a level of devotion.

John 14:1-6

The second time Thomas shows up is in John 14 in the upper room discourse as Jesus taught the disciples the night before his crucifixion. Jesus tells them of his imminent departure and comforts them with the promise that he is going to prepare a place for them and that he

would come again to receive them, that they could be with him. Upon Jesus concluding his statement he says, *“you know the way to where I am going.”* Cue Thomas, straightforward and honest, asking the question that I have no doubt was on the minds of others as well. *“Lord we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way?”* It is this question that elicits the glorious and beautiful response of Jesus, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* The thought of dying with Jesus as they went to Lazerus was more palatable to Thomas than the idea of being separated from Him. He loved Jesus. Talk of his departure, and the thought of not seeing him created fear and confusion in his mind.

John 20:24-29

The last time we read of Thomas speaking is in our text this evening. A man committed at one point to die with Jesus, A man confused at the thought of Jesus’ departure, and now a man crushed under the weight of His master’s seeming demise. Isolated from his friends and other disciples the night Jesus appears to them, he refuses to believe their testimony and remains unconvinced, demanding to see the evidence for himself. He then establishes conditions for belief, his pride becoming a barrier to belief. He “demands not only a palpable sign but the most personal and concrete evidence that the person whom he knew had been killed in a specific fashion had indeed been raised from the dead” (Carson).

Jesus Condescends

One week later as they gathered again in the house, Thomas was with them. (This is the first time we see a pattern being established amongst the early church of assembling on the 1st day of the week, and the sanctioning presence of the Lord meeting with them. This pattern continues in the new testament (**Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10**). Every Sunday we meet for worship is an Easter celebration of an empty tomb and our risen Savior and a foreshadowing of the sabbath rest that still awaits the people of God (**Heb 4:9**.) Jesus comes in like fashion, appearing amongst them in the shuttered room. Again, greeting them, *“Peace be unto you.”* It is at this point you might think that Jesus would rebuke Thomas, call him out for his stubborn and defiant heart. Thomas has no right to make demands of Jesus and Jesus has no mandate to comply. Jesus owes him nothing. Yet, Jesus, is wonderfully gracious, and with gentleness and mercy, condescends to his demands. That’s what this is all about! The King of kings and Lord of lords, the eternal Son of God, who owes our stubborn rebellious hearts nothing but judgment and rebuke and yet wonderfully chooses to condescend to fallen men and women that we might believe. “He won’t pander to our intellectual arrogance but he will cater to our intellectual honesty” (Begg). In spite of us, Christ chooses to come to the disillusioned, the confused, the self-isolated. He knows our foolish lists and selfish demands and still comes to us. I imagine that Thomas was shaken at this point not only at the sight of Jesus but in that he already knew his demands before Thomas had said a word. There is no record of whether Thomas actually put his finger in the wounds of his hands or put his hand in his side, but it would seem that he didn’t.

Between Jesus' visual appearance, his knowledge of Thomas' demands that Jesus had not been physically present to hear, and the invitation of Jesus to do what he had demanded, he had removed all grounds for disbelief. Thomas, overcome with awe, professes, "*My Lord and my God.*" A glorious testimony to the deity and Lordship of Jesus having been validated to Thomas in the resurrection, and with the use of the pronoun *my*, a deeply personal confession of faith.

John's Beatitude

Jesus responds following Thomas' profession. "*Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed:*" Some argue that the first half of his statement is a rebuke of Thomas, I tend to believe it was simply a statement of fact. Thomas' faith was real, it was simply predicated on sight, just like the rest of the disciples. It was paving the way for the second half of the statement, "*blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.*" It is here Jesus foresees what is ahead. He will soon ascend to the father, and all that will come to believe will not have the same opportunity to see or touch the resurrected Jesus. (Carson) They will have the testimonies of these early disciples:

John 17:20 *Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word;*

1Jn 1:1-4 *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; 2 (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) 3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.*

Here in this moment with Thomas and the disciples, Jesus pronounces a blessing upon those who though they will not have the same opportunity afforded to the disciples, will believe.

1Pe 1:8-9 *8 Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: 9 Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.*

John 20:30-31 *And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: 31 But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.*