

## REACH OUT YOUR HAND

John 20:19-29

Our faith in the fact of the Resurrection is important and should give us boldness and hope. If we ever wanted to see a picture of the opposite of hope, then we could not find one any clearer than the little band of followers of Jesus immediately after He was crucified. That hopelessness grew as the hours passed and they considered the last three years of their lives and the expectations that they had. It all seemed to have resulted in failure. He had taught them to not go the “way of the world” but to walk in the way He walked and that they would have victory. Yet, (at that moment) it seemed that the world had won.

It is not unusual to find ourselves in situations of hopelessness. A family member is diagnosed with cancer, a loved one is killed in a freak accident, our life savings are wiped out by someone who stole our identity, a person’s house is destroyed by a flood and there was no flood insurance. You get the idea! We see this kind of hopelessness in the life of our nation in which godless forces are taking us down a road away from the principles that made our nation great and we don’t have to have the gift of prophecy to see that it is not going to end well.

These various challenges and developments can and do produce a sense of hopelessness in our minds. We look around and wonder if the message in one of the verses in the Christmas carol written more than 150 years ago by Longfellow (“the wrong shall fail and the right prevail”) is still valid. We see little evidence to support this; however, we must walk by faith and not by sight. Our faith is strengthened by the hope evidenced in the Resurrection and we can know by faith that “God is not dead, nor doth He sleep.”

How can we make the transition or transformation from hopelessness to victorious living in the power of the resurrection? What can turn grief into great joy, or replace our fear with focused purpose, or change doubts into deeds of faith? Maybe we can learn from what the early followers of Jesus experienced after His death and resurrection.

Several people had seen the risen Lord prior to His appearing to a gathering of His disciples in the evening of the day of His resurrection. The first sighting that John mentioned was Mary Magdalene who experienced Him as she went about doing what needed to be done. She and some of the other women went to the tomb to complete the job of the embalming process which amounted to adding more sweet-smelling spices to the body in the tomb.

### Commissioned – 20:19-23

<sup>19</sup> So when 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.” <sup>20</sup> And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> So Jesus said to them again, “Peace *be* with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” <sup>22</sup> And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> “If you forgive the sins of any, *their* sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they have been retained.” John 20:19-23 (NASB95)

As we read the accounts of what happened that day, it seems obvious that news of the resurrection from those who had seen Him that day did not eliminate their fear. There were at least four Resurrection appearances of Jesus on that first day of the week prior to the one John mentioned here. We’ve already mentioned the appearing to Mary Magdalene. Matthew (28:9–10) mentions the “other women.” Both 1 Corinthians 15:5 and Luke 24:34 mentioned that Simon or Cephas saw Jesus and Luke related the account of the two Emmaus disciples who were probably in the room with the others when Jesus appeared the fifth time that day.

Let’s examine what they did know at that time. Jesus had died for their sins. He had

fulfilled a multitude of Scriptural prophecies. He was no longer in the grave. Though they knew all of this, they were still afraid!

Is that the condition of many practicing Christians today? We know the facts and we gather together with others who know the facts and confine ourselves to a “room” so that we do not “rock the boat” lest those “in power” do something to harm us. That is a fairly good picture of fear.

What has to happen to get us out of the condition of fear and focused on the purpose for which we were saved? In the example of the disciples, the first thing that happened was that Christ appeared in their midst and greeted them. In other words, not only was He there, He made His presence known. Many times we may find ourselves in a “gathering of believers” and we either think of (or someone will quote) the promise that “when two or three are gathered in My Name, I will be there in the midst of them.” I’m sure that happens a lot, but it may be difficult for us to point to specific instances where we could say that His presence was manifested in such a way that there was no doubt that Christ was there. In the incident that John related, Jesus spoke to them words meant to provide a sense of well-being and blessing. It is most likely that He said a one-word greeting that was common in Aramaic and Hebrew – Shalom. He then did something to verify that they were seeing the Resurrected Christ by showing them His nail pierced hands and the wound in His side.

The words and actions had their intended effect as evidenced by their reaction to “His being in their midst” was one of great joy which they had not experienced just from hearing about the resurrection from the testimony of Mary Magdalene and several others. Joy came from the personal encounter with Christ in which they heard and heeded His word of “peace” while being given the assurance or evidence that He was with them.

After the group in the room had regained their composure following the sudden appearance of Jesus, He repeated the word of blessing and well-being (Shalom) as an introduction to another topic which was to give them a commission of what they had been called to do. Specifically, they were to be Christ’s apostles or those who had been sent by Him in the same way and for the same purpose as Christ had been sent by the Father. That purpose was to make God known to mankind which would result in eternal life for those who would believe.

Following that statement of commission, Jesus “breathed on them and said ‘receive the Holy Spirit.’” In the same way that God empowered Jesus, Jesus empowers us. That is why He told them to receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not begin His powerful earthly ministry until the Spirit came upon Him in power. Then He went about to set people free from their sins and He sends us forth to do the same thing.

We recall that practically all the reports and accounts in John’s Gospel are tied in or related to Old Testament events. Warren Wiersbe noted that “John 20:22 reminds us of Genesis 2:7 when God breathed life into the first man. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for “breath” also means “spirit.” The breath of God in the first creation meant physical life, and the breath of Jesus Christ in the new creation meant spiritual life. Apart from the filling of the Spirit, they could not go forth to witness effectively. The Spirit had dwelt with them in the person of Christ, but now the Spirit would be in them.” Albert Barnes noted that His breathing on them was a certain sign or pledge that they would be endowed with the influences of the Holy Spirit that were manifested several weeks later at Pentecost.

This brings us to the somewhat difficult statement in verse 23 regarding forgiveness of sins and specifically the role of these apostles and the role of all believers with regard to forgiveness since that time. As you might imagine, many commentators disagree as to the

implications of this verse. Those in the Roman Catholic tradition use this verse as a proof text for priests and others in the church to grant absolution to those who have sinned. The statement can be translated so that the meaning is that “those who have the Holy Spirit should only affirm forgiveness for those who qualify for such forgiveness according to Scriptural precepts.” What does the Bible teach about qualifying for forgiveness? Repent, Believe, Trust, Obey. This is essentially what we see in 1 John 1:9-10. The other part of verse 23 would tell us that we should not continue to remember and hold the sins of their past against people if they have repented and believed, trusted and obeyed.

We could summarize what it takes to go from fear to focusing on the purpose for which we have been saved. In addition to hearing the message that the Lord is risen, we need to have a personal encounter with Him. We need to experience the new birth and be reminded of why we have been saved. We need to also change our criteria for interacting with other people from old prejudices and stereotypes to using the same criteria that God uses in receiving, accepting, and forgiving lost mankind.

#### Demands – 20:24-25

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “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.” John 20:24-25 (NASB95)

We sometimes make a “big deal” about the fact that Thomas doubted. If we look at his words, it was more than “doubt,” it was simply unbelief. In fact, unless certain conditions were met, he would not believe. Some have pointed out that doubt is an intellectual issue – a person wants to believe but there are too many problems, while unbelief says “I will not believe” unless my conditions are met. Admittedly, the other disciples had not blindly accepted the reports from the women who had visited the empty tomb earlier that morning, but they certainly seemed to be open to the possibility of the resurrection.

We are not told why Thomas was absent from the gathering in the upper room that evening, but it does point out there can be consequences of failing to be where we need to be. The disappointing part of this account is that while Thomas did miss the appearance of Jesus, he also dismissed the testimony of at least ten other people whom he knew and had been associated with for about three years. All of these (as was Thomas) were called out by Jesus to follow Him and that fact, in itself, should have been considered instead of simply dismissing their witness and refusing to believe.

Thomas was demanding (as a condition of belief) that he be given the same experience the other disciples claimed they had in seeing the nail prints and the wounded side. While that may seem reasonable, we need to understand that it is God Who chooses the conditions and situations in which He responds. We need to remain open to “however” God may choose to answer our prayers and requests. Thomas’ prayer would have been better to have asked the Lord to “help his unbelief.”

#### Believed – 20:26-29

<sup>26</sup> After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, “Peace *be* with you.” <sup>27</sup> Then He said to Thomas, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.” <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed *are* they who did not see, and *yet* believed.” John 20:26-29 (NASB95)

It was likely a very stressful week for Thomas since nothing of significance (reportedly)

happened during that time. It was after eight days when all the disciples were again gathered (apparently) in that same room and Jesus reappeared in the same way He did a week earlier.

Jesus began with the same greeting He gave earlier. Shalom was what a Jew would likely say to another Jew if they came together for a planned meeting or just happened to encounter someone they knew. However, the next thing Jesus said gave positive evidence that He knew what had transpired between Thomas and the other disciples. We also see positive evidence of the grace and graciousness of Jesus in providing Thomas an opportunity to do exactly what he said he needed to do before believing. Nevertheless, there was also a rebuke that came in an admonition that all of us need to hear and that is “choose belief rather than unbelief” when there are evidence and reliable testimony that align with the promises and the truth of God’s word.

It seems that when Jesus appeared and Thomas heard the words of his own demands coming back to him from Jesus that he had an “aha!” moment that changed his disbelief into genuine faith. It was as if the words and concepts he had heard during his time as a disciple of Jesus went from head knowledge to heart knowledge and his spiritual eyes were opened. There is no record that Thomas actually touched Jesus as he said he needed to do. That need simply disappeared when faith showed up. We could say that prior to this encounter, Thomas believed in the truth of the gospel but he lacked a spark of faith in the Christ revealed by the gospel. The evidence that something life-changing had happen at that moment to Thomas is found in his expression “My Lord and my God.”

While we can be glad that Thomas changed his position and believed after seeing Jesus, we need to realize the difficulty that many people have in believing the truth of the Good News of God’s salvation that is available to them. We can ease or add to that difficulty by the way we live our lives since the world is watching those who confess to be followers of Jesus.