

Text: John 20:19-31

Title: "Believe because Sundays have become Resurrection Day"

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Introduction: In his commentary on the Gospel of John, D. A. Carson makes a strong case that John's immediate purpose for his Gospel was the evangelization of Hellenized Jews. John wants this group especially to believe that Jesus is the Christ, or the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God, true deity, and believing have life in His name (v. 31). As for many in our postmodern paganized secular world, the world of the first-century unbelieving Jew contained barriers to this saving faith. John focuses on some of these barriers directly.

A comparison between John's Gospel and his First Epistle supports the view that John has an evangelistic purpose for his Gospel. Here he writes that his readers *may believe*. In 1 John his purpose is to give assurance of their eternal life to those who have this faith (1 John 5:13, "I write these things to *you who believe* in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life"). These already believe.

Concluding that the target of John's Gospel is Jewish unbelievers also rises from the way that many of John's allusions and quotations of the Old Testament assume his readers' familiarity with the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament.

Furthermore, Jews sought after a sign, and John organizes his Gospel around seven miracles that Jesus performed, which he uniquely calls *signs*: turning the water into wine (ch. 2); healing the nobleman's son (ch. 4); healing the lame man (ch. 5); feeding the 5000 (ch. 6); walking on water (ch. 6); healing the blind man (ch. 9); and raising Lazarus from the dead (ch. 11). Here, after the greatest sign of Christ's resurrection, John points to many other signs could have been included (20:30).

John's use of the "I am" claims of Christ were assertions of His deity, which Jewish readers would have understood more readily than others. They were familiar with Moses's call to Egypt from the God whose name was "I am that I am" in Exodus 3. Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life" (ch. 6), "I am the Light of the World" (ch. 8), "I am the Door of the Sheep" (ch. 10), "I am the Good Shepherd" (ch. 10), "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (ch. 11), "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (ch. 14), and "I am the True Vine" (ch. 15). To these seven could be added, "Before Abraham was, I am" (ch. 8).

A Jewish unbeliever reading the Gospel of John would have had great difficulty accepting that God's promised Messiah died on a Roman cross in disgrace. John uniquely explains the cross as a lifting up. He begins with John the Baptist's declaration, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). John emphasizes for his readers that Jesus's suffering was an hour that had been planned long ago, not a tragic mistake. Once the hour had come, John spends 9 of his 21 chapters describing the glory of Christ in the midst of that hour, culminating in the victory of Jesus's resurrection.

And now there is one more inhibition to saving faith in the Jewish mind and heart that John deals with in our passage – that Christian believers worship on Sunday rather than Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. John challenges his readers to believe because Sundays have become Resurrection Day, a day for worship before our risen Lord. John describes the very first two of such Sundays, where Jesus, risen from the dead, appears to His disciples to minister to their needs (vv. 19, 26). The Greek scholar Westcott says of the first phrase of verse 19, "The form of expression is singularly full and emphatic."

It is my desire that John's emphasis be ours this morning, that we would believe because Sundays have become Resurrection Day for Christians. It is known that early Christians would say, "Maranatha," meaning "Our Lord come," when they

gathered for worship, and some believe they did so because the Lord came into the midst of His disciples on these first two Sunday gatherings. He has promised to be with us this morning and in the same way to care for the needs we have. Jesus meets our needs as we gather in three ways.

I. We need peace and joy (vv. 19-21a).

Illustration: The American Psychological Association defines *trauma* this way: "Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place." Some of the worst trials we face in life can be traumatic experiences. After we experience trauma, peace and joy are especially difficult to renew.

Application: It would be hard to imagine a more traumatic experience than the one these eleven disciples had just been through. The doors of the place where they had gathered that Sunday afternoon were shut (KJV) or locked (ESV; the word comes from the Greek word for *key*). They were locked because they feared the Jews, Annas, Caiaphas, and the angry mob that had crucified their Lord (v. 19).

We know from verse 26 that Thomas was not among them on the first Sunday. Perhaps in his case, the sense of fear and helplessness had progressed to what the APA definition calls, "dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning." On the whole, the entire group was paralyzed by what they had experienced. For them, the crucifixion of Christ was traumatic.

But then Jesus suddenly stands among them and sends them peace. The locked doors that could keep the Jews out could not keep Him out. Like a noncorporeal entity, Jesus had left His graveclothes behind still clothed like any gardener would have been when seen by Mary Magdalene, and now He is able to appear in a room from outside of it without its doors being opened. The earthquake that had rolled the stone away from the tomb was not so that Jesus could get out, it was so that others could get in and see that He was no longer there.

And yet, He stood there corporally, in the body that had died on the cross. It was the body Mary Magdalene both saw and hugged earlier that day. It was the body that still bore the imprints of His nails and the scar on His side. It was not a mere vision or spirit, but the body that arose victorious over the trauma of the cross. The one who suffered physical trauma for their sins and ours could now tell them and us – “Peace be to you,” because the crucified body is risen. This is not make-believe. This is not positive thinking or time curing all ills. Resurrection is the reversal of the traumatic experience.

Only this powerful reversal could bring the disciples true peace and true joy. Because Christ is risen with the same body that was crucified, we can have this peace and joy too. We can see Him in our midst with eyes of faith in John’s record, and hear Him say to us, “Peace be to you.” This evil world bombards the followers of Christ with devastatingly traumatic loss, but the promised day is coming when every tear shall be wiped away from the face of His fellow risen-ones. As we meet on Sunday, Resurrection Day, we are invited to experience a taste of what that will be like someday. May we receive the peace and joy we need in worship together this morning.

II. We need purpose and mission (vv. 21b-23).

Illustration: I am at an age where I am often asked whether I am going to retire soon. My answer is always somewhere

between “No” and “I don’t know.” Thezenparent.com published “20 Downsides of Retirement No One Talks About.” Number seven on that list is “Lack of Purpose.” The article explained, “Finding a new ‘why’ after retirement can be a huge challenge, often resulting in a sense of aimlessness without clear goals. Such a loss of purpose and contribution can seriously affect your self-esteem.”

Application: All of the men gathered with the Lord behind locked doors in this chapter were likely a lot younger than me. You do not need to be at retirement age to struggle with a lack of purpose. We were all created to fulfill a purpose, and when the “why” of our existence no longer makes sense to us, we become exposed to the crosshairs of our enemy’s attack.

Jesus reminds these followers that He is their “why.” They had lost Jesus for a brief time, and with Him their reason for existence. But Jesus was risen, and the mission was once again very clear: “As my Father has sent Me, even so send I you.” The reason a Christian gets out of bed every morning is because Jesus has sent him, just like Jesus was sent by the Father. Have we grasped the importance of that purpose?

Verse 23 describes this importance. In John 9 the Father had sent Jesus to a blind man with the good news of salvation (vv. 35-38). The blind man believed, and his sins were forgiven. But Jesus’s message not only saved the blind man, but also it judged the Pharisees who thought they could see perfectly well (vv. 39-41). This is now the mission that Jesus accomplishes through us. When we give the gospel, encouraging an unbeliever to believe, their sins are forgiven if they respond to us in faith, and they are retained if they reject us in unbelief. This is the importance of our mission. Our mission has eternal consequence.

Given this consequence, this is a mission we cannot do on our own (v. 22). We must have the Holy Spirit’s power to be

witnesses. If we grieve the Holy Spirit or quench the Holy Spirit, we will not have the power we need to do the gospel ministry that Jesus has sent us to do today.

The verse tells us that Jesus breathed on the apostles and told them to receive the Holy Spirit. Some see a symbol of Pentecost here, but I think a better parallel is what John records about the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus, anointing Him as the Christ for His threefold earthly purpose and mission as prophet, priest, and king (John 1:32-34).

As we bare witness to unbelievers that Jesus is the Christ, we do so as Christians, or “little-christs,” anointed by the same Holy Spirit to be prophets, priests, and kings. 1 Peter 2:9 is clear: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” We need a purpose and a mission, and this is it. Christians, are we on mission as witnesses for Christ?

III. We need faith and blessing (vv. 24-31).

Illustration: The story is told of a man named Charles Blondin who was once known as the greatest tight-rope acrobat in the world.

“A plaque down the river from Niagara Falls memorializes his feat of crossing the gorge with his manager on his back. One morning he was performing in London; his wire was stretched between two tall buildings. It had been announced that he would cook breakfast on the wire.

“At the appointed time he appeared with a small wheelbarrow. Wheeling to the center of the wire, he suspended it, lighted a kerosene stove, fried an egg and made coffee. When he had finished, he put his dishes in the wheelbarrow and proceeded to the other building.

“It seemed as if all the boys in London were assembled to talk to him. Picking out their spokesman, Blondin asked if he had been afraid when the artist was out on the wire. The boy assured him that he had not been afraid. He never doubted the acrobat’s ability. Blondin pushed the conversation further by asking if the boy believed he could put a man in his wheelbarrow and take him to the other side. The boy replied that he believed that and would not be afraid to see it done. Then, Blondin challenged the small talker by saying, ‘Get in my wheel borrow and I will take you over.’ At that point the boy disappeared as though he evaporated” (John Ashbrook, *Bird’s Eye Tour of the Bible*, pp. 14-15).

Application: The boy believed what he had seen, that Blondin could have his breakfast on the wire, but he did not really believe what Blondin told him about the man in a wheelbarrow, for this he had not yet seen. He has only Blondin’s word to go on. It was fine for someone else to take Blondin’s word as true, but he would not risk having the faith himself.

Thomas was like that boy. He was ultimately blessed of the Lord as a believer, not an unbeliever, but his refusal to believe his fellow apostles had to be corrected by his sight of Jesus’s wounds. He was so well corrected that he uttered the loftiest confession of faith in the entire Gospel of John, “My Lord and My God.” He knew that the Resurrection of Christ not only meant that a man was alive again, but also that this man is far more than a man. As Paul puts it, Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4).

But Jesus also meets our need for faith when we cannot see. This is His greater blessing. As John finishes the chapter, he recognizes that his readers cannot see all the signs that Jesus did. All we can do is read about them in his Gospel. So John lets us know that Jesus said, “Blessed are the ones who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Conclusion: John wants that to be us, those who have not seen but have believed. Have you climbed into the Lord's wheelbarrow of salvation? Do you believe what you have not seen with your eyes? What do you believe about Jesus Christ?

As was true for the unbelieving Jews of John's day, today there are many reasons unbelievers find to not believe. The reasons John gives to believe, however, are far greater. We can believe because Sundays have become Resurrection Day, when Jesus meets with His people giving them peace and joy, purpose and mission, and faith and blessing.

For us who claim that we do believe, this passage challenges us with another question – "What do we believe about our gatherings on Sunday?" Do we believe the risen Christ is here each Sunday looking for us? Do we believe that we must come for peace and joy, for purpose and mission, and for faith and blessing from Him? John tells us about these first two Sundays to remind us of the importance of all of ours.

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching