



Sermon Preparatory Notes

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Commentary 1 by Arland Hultgran, Workingpreacher.org

This reading is one of four post-resurrection stories in the Gospel of John. The first is the Easter morning narrative, in which Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds the stone removed. She notifies Peter and the Beloved Disciple, who then come but leave for their homes (20:1-10). The second story in John's Gospel relates the appearance of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene (20:11-18).

The next two stories make up the reading for the Second Sunday of Easter. The first takes place on the evening of Easter Day, an appearance of Jesus to his disciples, when Thomas is absent (20:19-25). The second narrates an appearance of Jesus to his disciples a week later when

Thomas is present (20:26-31). These two scenes can be treated separately and then together.

The first of the two scenes (20:19-25) opens with the disciples gathered at a house in the evening of Easter Day in or near Jerusalem. The reason for the disciples to meet behind locked doors is fear, but the effect upon us as we hear the story is that we anticipate a miracle. We are not disappointed. The resurrected Jesus appears miraculously.

No explanation is given for the gathering of the disciples. But in the previous verse (20:18) the evangelist says that Mary Magdalene had reported the news of Jesus' resurrection to the disciples. Both Peter and the Beloved Disciple had come to the tomb in the morning, but it was only the Beloved Disciple who had actually come to believe in Jesus' resurrection (20:8). Peter had not yet come to believe, nor had the other disciples. But in the sequel (20:11-18) the risen Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. She recognizes who he is, and she tells the disciples that she had seen the risen Lord.

The scene unfolds in 20:19b-23 with a series of four events.

(1) Jesus appears in the midst of the disciples and gives them the common Jewish greeting: "Peace" ("Shalom"). He identifies himself by showing his hands and side. The reaction of the disciples is one of rejoicing.

(2) A commissioning follows (20:21). Jesus says that he had been sent by the Father. That is a common affirmation

in the Gospel of John (41 times). Jesus was sent into the world to reveal the Father, teach, and gather disciples. Furthermore, he declared that after his return to the Father, he would send his disciples to continue his ministry (17:18). Now that is being fulfilled.

(3) The "Johannine Pentecost" follows in 20:22. According to the Fourth Evangelist, the gift of the Spirit was bestowed on the evening of Easter Day itself, not on Pentecost some seven weeks later, as Luke has it. The disciples are immediately commissioned and given the Spirit as a power that will enable them to witness to Christ.

(4) The authorization to forgive sins completes the series of events on Easter Day (20:23). The passage is similar to those in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18.

Important as the foregoing scene is, the interest of the preacher and the congregation will probably focus more on the second of the two scenes in our reading.

That scene (20:26-29) opens with the disciples gathered again in the house on the following Sunday, but this time Thomas is present. Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds and to believe. We do not know whether Thomas actually does that or not, but he confesses his faith: "My Lord and my God!" In making that confession, it is not likely that he is expressing a full-blown ontological Christology, as presented in the creeds and christological formulas of the fourth and fifth centuries. What he says, in effect, is that he has encountered the presence of God in the risen Jesus.

The final verse of the scene (20:29), a punch-line, is a bit tricky. One could take it as a rebuke of Thomas, whose faith is dependent upon seeing Jesus, in contrast to those who believe without seeing him. But that reading is not the only possibility. His coming to faith through seeing is not discredited. After all, in that regard he is no different from the others, for they too believe only on the basis of the appearance of Christ to them. It is better to discern another contrast. That is a contrast between two ways of coming to faith. The one is through seeing; the other is through a means apart from seeing. And that is through hearing and believing the gospel proclaimed by Jesus' witnesses.

Jesus' beatitude ("Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe") puts Christians of all times and places on the same plane before God as that of the original disciples. The latter, to whom the risen Jesus appeared, were bound by time and place in first century Jerusalem. But others have come to believe far and wide without that originating experience. The beatitude is addressed to the reader or hearer of the Gospel of John. We who have come to faith are declared blessed as we hear the gospel being read.

The most obvious reason for assigning this reading for the Second Sunday of Easter is that the Thomas story falls chronologically on the Sunday after Easter. But there is another reason for using it as a basis for preaching, and that is to emphasize its two ways of coming to faith.

First, what did it take for persons to become believers in ancient times? We might assume that faith came easily to the disciples of Jesus. But our story shows that it did not. It took an appearance of the risen Jesus to them. Thomas, like the other disciples, insists on more than hearsay. He is thoughtful and discerning, and in that way he is a good model for us.

Second, what does it take for persons to become believers in our time? It is impossible to establish the facticity of the resurrection to everyone's satisfaction. As with the affirmation that God created the world, so too the affirmation that God raised Jesus from death to life goes beyond the usual rules of evidence. But what is clear is that the twin claims are consistent with one another (both speak of creation out of nothing), and they are consistent with the kind of God who is revealed in the Scriptures.

Faith is not a certainty based on physical perception, but is trust grounded in insight into the reality of God, what God is capable of doing, and how Jesus fits into the larger drama. One should not believe all religious claims that come to us, but the story of Jesus continues to engage us and calls us to belief in him as risen Lord. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Commentary 2 by Matt Skinner, WorkingPreacher.org

Liturgical observances of Pentecost are informed almost entirely by the familiar story in Acts 2, with images of fire, prayers offered in multiple languages, and attention to the church's prophetic vocation. "The

Johannine Pentecost," as this passage is sometimes called, gets much less attention.

That makes sense, since in John's Gospel Jesus does not impart the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (the Jewish Feast of Weeks, or Shavuot, which falls on the fiftieth day after Passover). Here, the Spirit comes on Easter, during Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance to a collection of his followers. (Earlier in the day, outside the tomb, he spoke to and commissioned only Mary Magdalene.) Also, in this passage we encounter the Spirit with less of a universal tone (in comparison to Acts); the focus here is more particular, focused on the identity and sending of a community.

The Spirit, at Last

In John, this is an incredibly weighty and long-anticipated scene. The Baptizer introduced Jesus in John 1:33 as "the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." Jesus himself has said that his ability to give the Holy Spirit "without measure" would offer proof that he is from God and speaks the words of God (3:34). He promised that "rivers of living water"--a metaphor for the Spirit--would flow from his innermost being (7:38-39; see the CEB and NET translations of these verses, which are superior to those in the NIV and NRSV). And of course Jesus has had much to say about the coming "Advocate":

- It is "the Spirit of truth," who dwells with believers forever yet cannot be received by "the world" (14:16-17).

- It is the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, who will teach Jesus' followers everything and remind them of all he told them (14:26; cf. 16:13).
- It is the Spirit, whom Jesus sends "from the Father," and who testifies about Jesus and equips people to offer testimony about him (15:26-27). This Spirit glorifies Jesus (16:14).
- It is He who can "prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment" (16:8-11).

The close connections John draws among Jesus' promises about the Spirit, his glorification and ascension, his intimacy with the Father, and his commissions to his followers caution us not to skip over "the Johannine Pentecost" too casually, as if it serves merely as a final "Good bye, and good luck" from Jesus to his friends.

With this culminating scene, the christological climax of John's Gospel (Jesus' departure as the exalted Christ) is part and parcel of the Gospel's apostolic impulse (the equipping and sending of the men and women who believe in him). That is, in the Holy Spirit, Jesus' followers receive nothing less than the fullness of the glorified Son. Their lives (ours, too) can therefore accomplish ends similar to his life's, insofar as they reveal God.

Important Details

Fear colors the scene, as Jesus' followers have secured themselves from the authorities (that is the referent of the problematic expression "the Jews" in 20:19). Note, then, the importance of the language that introduces Jesus' commission: "Peace to you." Jesus gives peace not "as

the world gives" (14:27); he gives peace that provides solace in the face of persecution, a promise of new possibilities, and confidence in his ability to overcome "the world" (16:33). (In this Gospel, "the world" usually indicates a hostile and ignorant response to the truth that Jesus embodies.)

Recalling the moment when God breathed life into the original earth person in Genesis 2:7 (cf. Ezekiel 37:9), Jesus breathes the Spirit of life into (not merely "on") his followers in John 20:22. A new creation is afoot. This creation does not replace "the world." It engages it.

"Forgiving" and "Retaining" Sins

The final verse requires some attention in a sermon, because many people experience "the Johannine Pentecost" like this:

- Jesus bestows peace upon his worried followers. *Great!*
- Jesus fills them with the Holy Spirit. *Great!*
- Jesus tells them they can forgive or retain other people's sins. *Huh?*

The things mentioned in verse 23 ("If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained") sound at first hearing like responsibilities that few of us would choose for ourselves. Maybe fewer of us would trust an institutionalized church to wield them. What is Jesus talking about?

It is imperative that we make sense of this verse in light of all that has come before it. Too many mistakes have been

made in the past by those who have read John 20:23 in isolation or with a sloppy connection to the unrelated words of Matthew 16:19. We must attend to how the Johannine Jesus has already characterized the problem of "sin," the role of the Holy Spirit, and the nature of his ministry. If not, we risk perpetuating a legacy of misuse and polemic that has muddied this verse across the history of its interpretation.

Jesus is not appointing the church as his moral watchdog; nor does he commission it to arbitrate people's assets and liabilities on a heavenly balance sheet.

In John's Gospel, Jesus talks about sin as unbelief, the unwillingness or incapacity to grasp the truth of God manifested in him. To have sin abide, therefore, is to remain estranged from God. The consequence of such a condition is ongoing resistance. Sin in John is not about moral failings; primarily it is an inability or refusal to recognize God's revelation when confronted by it, in Jesus. (Note what Jesus, says, concerning the world, in John 15:22: "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin." Cf. John 9:39-41).

Consequently, the resurrected Christ tells his followers (*all* his followers) that, through the Spirit that enables them to bear witness, they can set people free ("set free" or "release" is a better translation than "forgive" in 20:23) from that state of affairs. They can be a part of seeing others come to believe in Jesus and what he discloses.

Failure to bear witness, Jesus warns, will result in the opposite: a world full of people left unable to grasp the knowledge of God. That is what it means to "retain" sins ("retain" is the opposite of "set free"). Jesus is not--at least, not in this verse--granting the church a unique spiritual authority. He is simply reporting that a church that does not bear witness to Christ is a church that leaves itself unable to play a role in delivering people from all that keeps them from experiencing the fullness that Jesus offers.

Jesus Lives

Receiving the Spirit, the church receives Jesus. And so the church receives Jesus' own capacity to make God manifest, bringing light to the world. The Trinitarian intimacy inferred from John's presentation of these ideas is striking, but even more so is the intimacy expressed between the Divine and humanity.

Such intimacy between God and us is but one consequence of the rich Easter confession about what happens when God raises a corpse to new life. Jesus lives, yes--not apart from us, but in and through us.

We Christians tend to be cautious folk. Too many churches have locked their doors to a vibrant understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in their midst. We don't know how best to bear witness to Christ in a world populated by multiple religions and plagued by ecclesial hypocrisy. Maybe it would inspire us to bold and creative witness if we saw the risen Jesus miraculously pass through our barricaded doors. But probably all it takes is a

preacher who can help us see that this same Jesus is already present, dwelling within us and eager to enlist us to carry on his work of setting people free.

ESV Study Notes:

John 20:19 Some interpreters understand **the doors being locked** to imply that Jesus miraculously passed through the door or the walls of the room, though the text does not explicitly say this. Since Jesus clearly had a real physical body with flesh and bones after he rose from the dead (see note on v. 6 and verses mentioned there), one possibility is that the door was miraculously opened so that the physical body of Jesus could enter, which is consistent with the passage about Peter going through a locked door some time later (see [Acts 12:10](#)).

John 20:21–22 These verses contain the Johannine “Great Commission,” which serves as the culmination of the entire Gospel’s presentation of Jesus as the one sent from the Father (see note on 3:17). The Sent One (Jesus) has now become the Sender, commissioning his followers to serve as his messengers and representatives (cf. [17:18](#)). All three persons of the Godhead are involved in this commissioning: as the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends his disciples ([20:21](#)), equipping them with the Holy Spirit ([v. 22](#)). When Jesus **breathed on them** and said, “**Receive the Holy Spirit,**” it is best understood as a foretaste of what would happen when the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost (see [Acts 2](#)). This does not mean that the Holy Spirit had no presence in the disciples’ lives prior to this point (see notes on John 7:39; 14:16–17).

John 20:23 The expressions **they are forgiven** and **it is withheld** both represent perfect-tense verbs in Greek and could also be translated, “they have been forgiven” and “it has been withheld,” since the perfect gives the sense of completed past action with continuing results in the present. The idea is not that individual Christians or churches have authority on their own to forgive or not forgive people, but rather that as the church proclaims the gospel message of forgiveness of sins in the power of the Holy Spirit (see [v. 22](#)), it proclaims that those who believe in Jesus have their sins forgiven, and that those who do not believe in him do not have their sins forgiven—which simply reflects what God in heaven has already done (cf. note on Matt. 16:19).

John 20:24 Thomas. Cf. [11:16](#). See also note on 1:38.

John 20:25 Apparently, Thomas thinks the disciples may have seen a ghost (cf. [Matt. 14:26](#)). Yet John is careful to affirm that Jesus is the incarnate Word ([John 1:14](#); cf. [1 John 4:2–3](#); [2 John 7](#)), which entails that his resurrection body is not a phantom or spirit apparition but a real (albeit glorified) body.

John 20:26 Eight days later refers to the following Sunday, one week after Easter (cf. [v. 19](#)), because the starting day was also included in counting the number of days. Now that the festival of Unleavened Bread was over, the disciples would soon be returning to Galilee. **the doors were locked.** See note on v. 19.

John 20:28 Thomas's confession of Jesus as his **Lord** (Gk. *Kyrios*) and **God** (Gk. *Theos*) provides a literary link with the references to Jesus as God in the prologue ([1:1](#), [18](#)). This is one of the strongest texts in the NT on the deity of Christ (see [1:1](#)). Some cults try to explain away this clear affirmation of Jesus' deity by arguing that Thomas's statement was merely an exclamation of astonishment that, in effect, took God's name in vain. Such an explanation is unthinkable, however, given the strong Jewish moral convictions of the day and because it is not consistent with the text, which explicitly says that Thomas said these words to **him**, that is, to Jesus. **Thomas's statement is in fact a clear confession of his newly found faith in Jesus as his Lord and God. John's entire purpose in writing this book is that all readers come to confess Jesus as their Lord and God in the same way that Thomas did.**

John 20:29 The readers of John's Gospel are at no disadvantage as compared to Jesus' first followers. Note the possible echo of this text in [1 Pet. 1:8](#); cf. [2 Cor. 5:7](#).

John 20:30–31 Purpose Statement: Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. John's purpose statement and conclusion of the Gospel proper rehearse the major themes of the Gospel: Jesus' identity as **the Christ** and **Son of God** (see [1:41](#), [34](#)), his selected messianic "signs" (see notes on 1:19–12:50; 2:11), the importance of believing in Jesus, and the gift of eternal **life** (see [1:12](#); [3:16](#); [17:3](#)). On Jesus' unique status as "Son of God," see note on 1:14.