



# Notes for Preaching - Doug Beacham

## 4th Sunday of Easter (May 3, 2020)

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### Introduction

Keep in mind that May has five Sundays, culminating with Pentecost Sunday on May 31st. For the next three weeks, we will focus on three post-resurrection appearances of Jesus as recorded in John 20, 21. On the fourth Sunday of May we will focus on the Ascension from Matthew 28:16-20 and Acts 1:4-11.

*A note about sources:* Most of my observations are from Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1970). Rather than extensive footnotes, I will note any quote or direct point as Brown, page number in parenthesis.

### New Testament Texts

#### John 20:1-18 Context

1. The setting is the Sunday evening following Jesus' resurrection on Sunday morning. The discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene is described in 20:1, 2. It's interesting that Mary knows where Peter and John are staying and immediately goes to them. Her view is that "they," perhaps the Jewish authorities, or the Romans, or possibly a reburial by Joseph of Arimathea, "have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him" (20:2).
  2. John 20:3-10: Peter and John "ran together" to the tomb and discovered that the body was gone, but the burial clothes were neatly and orderly arranged. Though they had heard Jesus prophesy of His resurrection, the reality of a bodily resurrection was beyond the scope of their knowledge, especially after His death by Roman crucifixion. The text conveys
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the mixture of response to an event that is utterly beyond human comprehension: John “saw and believed,” but they still did not know the Scriptural truth of His resurrection. There are expressions of belief that are not fully developed. They are embryotic in the mind and spirit. But the capacity to immediately comprehend the comprehensible is profoundly limited.

3. After John and Peter return to their homes (20:10; same location where Mary found them?), Mary is left alone weeping. This time she looks into the tomb and sees the two angels dressed in white, sitting where the head and feet of the body would have been (20:11, 12). They converse in a normal way related to her weeping. She speaks to them in a normal way. The point is that they are not angels with wings, supernatural looking beings; but rather messengers of God who are able to engage humans on an understandable plain of meaning.

4. After the exchange with the messengers in the tomb, Mary turns and is met by Jesus, though she does not first recognize Him. She assumes He is the gardener (20:15). Only when He calls her by name does Mary recognize Him. She calls Him, “Rabboni,” that is, “Teacher” (20:16).

5. Jesus instructs her to “not cling” to Him, because He has not yet ascended to His Father (20:17). That’s a bit odd, as once He does ascend (40 days later), how could she then touch Him? We know from the remainder of John 20, and from Luke 24, that Jesus could be touched and even invited people to touch where His wounds were. There is a difference between an invitation from Jesus to touch His wounds, and the human desire to cling to someone. Notice that in His words to Mary, He uses relationship language that is common in His teachings in the Gospel of John as to His relationship to His heavenly Father, “I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God” (20:17).

6. This first section of John 20 concludes with Mary as the first witness to others that “she has seen the Lord,” and He “had spoken things to her” (John 20:18).

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### John 20:19-23 – Key Points

1. The verses for our primary interest fall into three sections: 20:19-23; 24-29; 30, 31.
2. John 20:19-23 occurred on the evening of the first day of the resurrection, called the first day of the week. The number of disciples present in a room where the door is locked is not determined. We know that Judas is gone, and that Thomas is absent. So there could be a maximum of ten disciples in a locked room “for fear of the Jews.”
3. “Fear” is a common theme in the resurrection appearances: Matthew 28:4, 5, 8, 10; Mark 16:8; Luke 24:5; John 20:19. The “fear, afraid” motif is related to the unexpected and uncertainty. It may be a good theme in relation to what has occurred with the COVID-19 virus and even with the uncertainty of the future.
4. Notice that when Jesus appears in the midst of our fears, His words to us are “Shalom,” “Peace to you.” In 20:19, 20 His reassuring words of peace are connected to His self-revelation as the suffering servant who has prevailed in spite of the deadly wounds of the Empire. Brown (p. 1021) makes a connection to Judges 6:23 and the appearance of The Angel of the Lord (a theophany of Jesus?) to Gideon. There the word of Shalom is directly connected to fear and the threat of death. The word of Shalom is so powerful that Gideon built an altar at that location and named it “The Lord is peace” (Judges 6:23). The disciples turn from fear to gladness “when they saw the Lord.” The issue of “seeing” the Lord will return later in our study (20:29).
5. John 20:21-23 begins with a repetition of Shalom from Jesus, but this time His peace is connected to the commission He has for the disciples, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” Regarding this first commission which occurred on the evening of the resurrection, Brown noted that Jesus was “entrusting a salvific mission to those to whom He appeared. The special Johannine contribution to the theology of this mission is that the Father’s sending of the Son serves both as the model and the ground for the Son’s sending of the disciples. Their mission is to continue the Son’s mission; and this requires that the Son must be present to them during this mission, just as the Father had to be present to the Son during His mission” (p. 1036).

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6. Following the commissioning orders, and the intimate relationship indicated between those sent and the Sender, along with the heavenly pattern of the Father/Son relationship during Jesus' ministry, Jesus "breathed on them" (20:22). Though the words for "breathe" are different, there is an interesting connection with the "last breath" of Jesus in Luke 23:46 and His breathing upon the disciples in John 20.

a. Luke 23:46, "And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, he said, 'Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit.' Having said this, He breathed His last."

b. John 20:22, "And when He had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

c. His last recorded breath was one of surrender to the will of His heavenly Father. His first recorded "breath" in His resurrected state was upon His disciples, committing them to the mission and hands of the Father.

7. Notice that this reception of the Holy Spirit is not the same as that in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost. We should not think of John 20:23 as a Johannine Pentecost as if John was not aware of Acts 2. We know that John was present in the Acts 2 Upper Room so he is not confused about what was occurring when Jesus breathed upon the smaller group of them (see Acts 3:1 where immediately after the day of Pentecost, Peter and John together operate in the "pair" that Jesus instructed them during His earthly ministry).

8. The Greek translated "breathe" in John 20:23 is the same word used in the LXX of Genesis 2:7 – *emphusao*. It's the breath of life that God put into humankind at creation. The Gospel writer used this word to describe the beginning of the disciples' experience in the New Creation brought about through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

9. It is important to note that it requires the presence of the Holy Spirit to have the power, anointing, the authority, to "forgive or retain sins." To forgive sins means to release someone from the power of condemnation, guilt, and remorse. To retain sins means the power to "hold" those sins as active components of condemnation and guilt in someone's life. One should interpret this passage in light of Isaiah 22:20-23 and the references to the "key of house of David, so he [Eliakim in the passage] shall open, and no one shall shut; and he shall shut, and no one shall open." (See this same theme in the letter to the Philadelphia

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church in Revelation 3:7). Also remember it in light of Matthew 16:19 and Jesus' words to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." This in turn reminds one of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:10, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

10. Forgiving and retaining sins is not at the whim of us as persons. Rather, it is a spiritual reality that connects heaven and earth and becomes the avenue for the life-giving flow of grace that the Holy Spirit offers. On the basis of this connection to the authority to exercise the grace of forgiveness, I do not think that there is any confusion between John 20 and Acts 2 and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

### **John 20:24-29 - Key Points**

1. The second major portion relates to the story of "doubting Thomas." He is actually called Thomas Didymus, the Twin, in John 11:16. Brown rejects the notion that the twin reference is about Thomas being double-minded (p. 1024).
2. Notice in 20:25 the common refrain from disciples who have met the resurrected Christ, "We have seen the Lord." They have not experienced a novel idea or a mirage. They have experienced the living presence of the One who died and rose again.
3. I have tended to feel sympathy for Thomas. I suspect, at least living in the rationalistic world view of modernity and even post-modernity, that I would question anyone who told me they had seen someone who I knew was dead, having seen the kind of death they died. I too would want absolute proof, actually, the same proof provided for the other disciples (20:25).
4. Eight days later the disciples are again inside the room and Jesus appears to them (20:26). This makes you wonder where was Jesus during those other days? Was in Galilee with others (Jn 21:1ff)? We know from 1 Corinthians 15:6 that Jesus was seen by more than five hundred people at one gathering, though the location is not given. One might think of the fact that we don't always "feel, sense, or see" the presence of the Lord, but He is still risen and with us.

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5. When Jesus appeared, His standard greeting was that of Peace. Jesus then addressed Thomas directly (20:27) with the challenge that Thomas gave 8 days earlier (v. 25). There is a mild rebuke in the last clause, "Do not be unbelieving, but believing" (v. 27). The English of the NKJV makes it appear that "believing" is a verb, when both expressions are adjectives. It's more the sense of, "Do not be like one who is not a believer, but be a believer."

6. The response of Thomas is a classic Christian confession of Who Jesus is, "My Lord, and My God!" (20:28). This is a clear reflection of Johannine theology that Jesus is God Himself with us. Jesus is the second person of the eternal Godhead, and is fully God and fully man. Notice that Thomas did not say that he believes; instead, Thomas publicly acknowledges and confesses who Jesus really is.

7. This portion of the text concluded with a promise for future generations, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." That is a promise that has included every Christian generation since the Apostle Paul saw Jesus. It's an appeal to the authority and power of the apostolic confession of those who saw Jesus. We know two others by name from Acts 1:21-26, "Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias" (1:23). These two were considered to take the place of Judas on the basis that they had been with the other disciples since Jesus' baptism to the time of His ascension. They were physically witnesses to His resurrection presence.

### **John 20:30, 31 – Key Points**

1. I've separated these two verses because they stand alone in the flow of the narrative. They constitute an early ending to John's account. I take the view that originally John completed his account with 20:30, 31, and later added what we call John 21 somewhat later. We must remember that John did not have a modern word processing machine where he could copy and paste at will. He wrote on a scroll, like parchment, where each mark was carefully made. You can read various commentaries for more perspectives on these issues.

2. John 20:30 refers to the "signs" that Jesus did, and mentions there were "many other signs." The Greek for signs is *semeion*. It is a key word in the Gospel of John as there are seven "signs" specifically mentioned. It has even been conjectured that there was in the oral

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traditions of Jesus a collection, or book of signs, remembered by the early church. In John the signs are found in:

- a. Water into wine in Cana – 2:1-11
- b. Healing in Capernaum – 4:46-54
- c. Healing at Pool of Bethesda – 5:1-18
- d. Feeding of the 5,000 – 6:5-14
- e. Walking on the Sea of Galilee – 6:16-21
- f. Healing blind man in Jerusalem - 9:1-7
- g. Raising Lazarus from the dead – 11:1-45

3. It is important to note that the seven signs (besides the many others) were done in the presence of the disciples. That means that Jesus was not a secret miracle worker, but operated in public and with His disciples, among others, as witnesses.

4. John makes reference to “this book,” that is, his record of the life of Jesus. The clear indication is that there are other books and accounts of Jesus’ life that are consistent with the teachings, miracles, and life of Jesus.

5. Finally, in 20:31 John gives His reason for writing his account of Jesus: “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

a. That belief – conviction of the truth that transforms life -will occur in that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel (the meaning of Christ, the anointed one). This is a clear connection to the promises of God in the Old Testament.

b. That Jesus is the Son of God. This theme is connected in John 1 to the revelation of the Logos, the eternal Word that became flesh.

c. Finally, belief in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God is the key that opens the door to life in the name of Jesus. I hold that John also wrote three additional letters, known to us as 1, 2, 3 John. The issue of Jesus as the Son of God is so important to John that he makes the following affirmations in 1 John:

- i. “The blood of Jesus Christ His (God’s) Son cleanses us from sin (1:7)

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- ii. The spirit of antichrist “denies the Father and the Son” (2:22)
  - iii. Denial of the Son separates one from the Father (2:23)
  - iv. The Son of God was manifested to destroy the works of the devil (3:8)
  - v. The Son is the propitiation for our sins (4:10)
  - vi. The Father sent the Son as the Savior of the world (4:14)
  - vii. The confession that Jesus is the Son of God affirms that God abides in that person (4:15)
  - viii. We overcome the world by believing that Jesus is the Son of God (5:5)
  - ix. To fail to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, is to make God a liar (5:10)
  - x. If one does not have the Son, he does not have life (5:12)

### **Preaching Thoughts**

1. To be honest, trying to preach some of these passages to an online audience may be difficult. For instance, you really don't want to try and spend your sermon showing the difference between Pentecost and “receiving the Spirit” in John. But, you can focus on how when Jesus enters rooms of fear and rooms of doubt, where we have shut the doors of our lives, that Jesus enters with the message of Peace.
2. Related to the message of Peace, you can easily tie in the mission of being sent. Today, people are being sent via digital data bits. You are likely already discovering that your ministry is being sent to people you never dreamed would hear you.
3. I would tie in Thomas and his doubts to the point about peace. People are asking questions these days. People have doubts about the future, and spiritually about where is God in this. So Thomas can become an example that everyone can relate to. This point can be concluded with the affirmation that Jesus commends our contemporary faith in Him more than He commended Thomas. We do not see, yet we believe because of faithful witnesses.



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4. Another important preaching point relates to the confession that Jesus is the Son of God. You need to carefully prepare and can tie this to the birth of Jesus, His obedience to the cross, His resurrection (Romans 1:4), and the numerous spiritual benefits described in the section above from 1 John. Remember, many of the people listening to you online know little to nothing of the Bible story. Think simple, use stories, don't assume people know the Biblical background. This kind of simple preaching requires a lot of prayerful work, but it's worth it.