

Christ and His Church

John 20:19-23

It has been a long week. For Jesus' disciples. You may not realize it, but we have been studying the events of that last week of Jesus' life for nine months now, since last April. That week began when they entered Jerusalem with Jesus, as Jesus was praised and worshipped as king. That was in John chapter 12.

Things had come to a head on Thursday evening. After the passover meal with his disciples, and his departing to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, he was betrayed by Judas and arrested by the Roman soldiers. He was then brought to the high priest, then to Pilate. And condemned to die. On Friday that week, at the third hour, noon our time, he was hung upon the cross. From the 6th to the 9th hour darkness hung upon the land as he endured the condemnation of our sins. Then he died. In preparation for the Sabbath day, Saturday, his body was removed and placed into the tomb. But none of his disciples were around. They had scattered. They had forsaken him, and with Peter's outspoken example, they denied him.

And then on the day after the Jewish Sabbath, early in the morning on Sunday, the women went to the tomb to complete the process of proper anointing for burial, but the tomb was empty. Jesus' body was gone. He had been raised from the dead. And he appeared to Mary first, as we studied last week. Matthew's gospel tells us he also appeared to several women together. We also know he appeared to Simon Peter, and also to the two men on the road to Emmaus.

But he hadn't yet appeared to the disciples, and actually, they hadn't believed the first reports of his resurrection. But late that Sunday, they had gathered themselves together, perhaps at the

same place where they had enjoyed the passover meal just three days earlier.

They were anything but triumphant. Actually, they were scared to death. They had seen their master brutally executed, and they, together, were in great fear for their own lives and safety.

The doors were shut. Locked shut is probably an accurate understanding. They were together, in fear of the Jews. And now, in his fifth post-resurrection appearance, Jesus appears to his disciples as a group. Ten of them were there, for Judas, of course, was gone. And we're told that Thomas was absent.

There was a very specific purpose for this appearance.

I. JESUS RESTORES HIS DISCIPLES.

v.19

That restoration had two parts, both his personal presence and the words he spoke. Now, as I said last week, there was no necessity in the nature of God for this interval between the resurrection and ascension. There was no divine requirement for Jesus to appear to anyone. But it was necessary for us. It was necessary for his disciples. Having abandoned Jesus, they needed to be restored by,

A. A personal appearance.

And they were. "Jesus came and stood in the midst [of them.]" There is some difficulty in understanding all of this, and lots and lots of things have been written about it. Let me try to explain it without going beyond Scripture. Clearly, Jesus' resurrected body was real. It was physical. It could be touched and seen, and he even ate some fish with the disciples, as Luke's

account of this event describes,

Luke 24:41 But while they still did not believe for joy, and marveled, He said to them, "Have you any food here?" 42 So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. 43 And He took it and ate in their presence.

It was a real human body, not just the appearance of a body. At this time, it still had the identifiable wounds in his hands and side suffered upon the cross. It was not a phantom, or what we might call a ghost or a spirit. And thus, it was a body that could not be in more than one place at one time.

And yet it was a glorified body, raised from the grave. And with that same body he would ascend into heaven. It was a body that could obviously move at will from one place to another, one that would be capable of being visible or invisible, in a way that we simply cannot explain scientifically. And with obvious miraculous power, it was a body that could appear in the midst of a locked room. With miraculous power.

With no other information here, that's as much as I'm going to say about "HOW" he appeared. More importantly, the issue is "WHY." And the answer there is simple, and clearly revealed to us. He appeared to them to prove to them he was alive. To prove to them that he had been raised from the dead. And in doing so, to restore them in relationship to him.

It was easy for him to prove who he was, for God had raised him from the dead with the marks of the crucifixion still upon him.
v.20

Now, that, too is somewhat hard to explain, how a glorified body would retain marks of mortal injury. Calvin even suggests that the wound marks were temporary, simply to be evident until

the apostles were fully persuaded that He was risen from the dead. I can't prove that his view is correct, but neither can I entirely disprove it, for it does make some sense to me. Regardless of that, though, it is a good idea to emphasize Jesus' purpose in appearing to his disciples. It was not for his benefit, but for theirs!

And so, in this wonderfully encouraging and joyful appearance, Jesus speaks to them,

B. A declaration of peace.

v.19b "Peace be with you."

That is repeated for emphasis in,
v.21a

Remember how frequently Jesus had spoken his peace previously. For example,

John 14:27 "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

And, John 16:33 "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Peace is the restoration of a relationship that has been offended or broken. Peace is the removal of alienation, the cessation of conflict. It is the very definition of reconciliation. With that peace reestablished, Jesus explains one more time what the Scripture had taught about him.

Luke 24:44 Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets

and the Psalms concerning Me.” 45 And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. 46 Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 And you are witnesses of these things.”

Before I move, let me linger just a moment and ask the question of you, have you received this blessing of peace given by Jesus Christ? In other words, have you, like those disciples, been restored? Have you been reconciled? Indeed, it is my job, my responsibility to declare to you that message. It is, what the Apostle Paul calls, the ministry of reconciliation.

2 Cor. 5:19 “...that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 20 Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. 21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Be reconciled to God. And there is only one way for you to do so. By faith. And so, to the church at Rome, Paul wrote,

Rom. 5:1 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

Therefore I declare these words of truth to you,

Rom. 5:8 “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. 10 For if when we were enemies we were

reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.”

You will be reconciled to God only through believing in the death of his son, believing that he died as the atoning sacrifice for your sins, and resting upon him alone for salvation. Not in your own works or efforts.

Let’s go back to the disciples. They are restored. And then something more.

II. JESUS COMMISSIONS HIS DISCIPLES.

In other words, he restores them to a reconciled relationship and then he gives them a job to do. A very important job. In giving them that job, Jesus is,

A. Sending them.

He is sending them into the world.

v. 21

Do you remember what Jesus had prayed for his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane?

John 17:17 “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. 18 “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.”

The way of cloistered separation or isolation from the world is not God’s purpose for his people. And lest you simply criticize the Roman Catholic church for their reliance upon monasteries and convents, think also of the tendencies of the evangelical church to isolate themselves from the world. We are to live in the world! We are not removed from the world, but ought to interact with the world, with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are to be the salt and light of the world.

Mat. 5:14 “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 “Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 16 “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

As much as those things apply to us individually, that should also be our purpose for the existence of the church. We ought to work hard to let our light shine before men. We ought to be intentionally visible, that we may be seen. We ought to pray, with Paul, “that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ.”

As God’s people today, we, too, are sent. Individually, and corporately. We have a commission, a reason for existence in this world. It is to make disciples. Therefore, we read of Jesus speaking to his disciples just before his ascension, saying,

Mat. 28:18 “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.”

But he doesn’t leave us alone, in our own strength, to fulfill such a task. And he didn’t leave the disciples alone. Jesus is very clearly,

B. Equipping them.

v.22

He breathed on them. The breath of life. Just as God the father blew the breath of life into the nostrils of the man he had made from the dust of the earth, so also Jesus blows into his disciples the breath of new life.

And breath is, of course, the common image or illustration of the Holy Spirit. He gave them the Holy Spirit, as an obvious precursor to that fulness of the pouring out of the Spirit at pentecost.

It was here, no doubt, the spirit of knowledge and understanding. “He opened their understanding,” as I read from Luke 24.

And when Pentecost came, that outpouring was complete. All the nations were able to hear. And understand.

But I also believe that there is a particular sense in which this “breathing” upon the disciples was a picture of the way in which God would set apart those who would lead and rule in the visible church. I must emphasize the uniqueness of the apostolic ministry, what Paul describes as the foundation of the church, the holy temple of the Lord. But as that building grows upon its apostolic foundation, and as the apostles die and the apostolic office ceases, still there is a form of government and rule. There continues to be a specific form of commissioning, or ordaining, those who lead. And rather than breathing upon them the breath of the Holy Spirit, men, today, are set apart and commission by the laying on of hands by the presbytery, which is the body of elders.

2 Tim. 1:6 “Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.’

And in,

1 Tim. 4:13 “Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. 14 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership.”

And so, as we come to the consequences of this commissioning of the disciples, we see that commissioning results in the right to bear authority. And verse 23 is a verse that does speak about the exercise of authority in the church.

In a broad sense, it speaks about the authority of the church as a whole, for the visible church is to reflect what we often call the invisible church. The very purpose for the existence of the visible church is to be the outward assembly and congregation of the saints, those who have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, together with their children. The church IS the outward manifestation of the kingdom of Christ. It is the house and family of God, as it exists in this age on this earth.

And within that church, there is to be the exercise of authority. Therefore,

III. JESUS AUTHORIZES HIS DISCIPLES.

Notice how strongly the words are written.

v.23

Now, let me spend a moment telling you what doesn't mean. Though I don't want to limit myself to that, fearing the danger of emptying these words of what they do mean. But it is necessary to say, first and foremost, this verse does not give any man the authority to forgive sins. It belongs to God, and to God alone, to forgive sins. It is not the right of a man to claim the office of priest and believe that he, individually, gains the right to declare absolutions, most especially upon the basis of specific acts of penance that he also defines. I am, of course, rejecting the Roman Catholic understandings of priesthood.

I, as a minister of the gospel, and as an ordained elder in the church of Jesus Christ, do not have the right to say to you, upon

my own authority, you are forgiven. Similarly, I do not have the right, upon my own authority, to deny you that forgiveness.

But what right do I have? What authority do I have? That really is the question. What is the nature of the authority to which this verse refer? Let me answer that question with one word, and then try to explain it. The word is declarative. It is the,

A. Authority to declare what God has done.

Let me stay away from the subject of the formal exercise of church discipline or church membership for a moment, and explain how this works in our more customary experiences. Actually, every time I preach, to some degree I am exercising this authority. Let me exercise it right now, and declare to you this truth, that eternal life is found in Christ and "there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Let me declare to you that,

1 John 5:11 "...this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

Similarly,

John 3:3 "...I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

I say to you with the authority of God himself,

Heb. 10:26 "For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 Of how much worse punishment, do you

suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The LORD will judge His people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

And so, when the visible church, through her elders, makes such declarations, we declare what God has done. And as a preacher duly ordained in the church, I do not simply share with you my own thoughts and ideas, but I declare to you boldly, authoritatively, out of God’s word, who they are whose sins are forgiven, and who they are whose sins are retained. If and when I preach the gospel faithfully, that gospel itself will make that distinction very clearly.

And the church must declare such distinctions. In a positive sense, we make that distinction whenever a person is admitted to the communicant membership of the church. We declare a person to be a member of God’s household, declaring with the authority described in verse 23, that their sins are forgiven. That they are saved. We administer the sacrament of baptism. And we invite them to the Lord’s Table.

Ultimately, this is the,

B. Authority to declare who belongs to the visible church.

And what is the basis of that declaration? The evidence of faith. The testimony of faith. The outward manifestation of the inward work of God. And so as the church in Acts added to their number, so do we.

In a negative sense, when there is the presence of one in the church who demonstrates that he does not belong to the Lord in salvation, by open and unconfessed sin that denies the very

profession of faith, then according to Scriptural commands, we “put away from yourselves the evil person,” as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5.

He specifically distinguishes between those who are outside and those who are inside.

1 Cor. 5:11 “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner--not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.”

Now, that is a sober and burdensome responsibility, in most cases neglected and ignored by the visible church. And in other cases abused. But the neglect or misuse of the authority doesn’t cancel the biblical reality. There is to be authority exercised within the church.

Earlier in his ministry Jesus called that exercise of authority the “keys to the kingdom of heaven.”

Mat. 16:18 “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And 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.”

And what are those keys? Primarily, the proclamation of the word! It is the word of God proclaimed that brings life. And it is the word of God proclaimed that brings death and condemnation upon the unbelieving. And it rests with the ordained elders of the church to administer the discipline necessary to judge those who are inside! It is the authority to bind and loose, to declare as

ministers of the gospel that which God has declared in heaven.

Again, I must admit that there are abuses, for men are sinful creatures, but even so, we must never think that we would be better off without this authority being granted by Jesus, for without discipline, there is chaos. To use an illustration from the civil government, where there are certainly many abuses of power and authority, we are still far better to live and exist underneath the authority of law even with its abuses than to have to no law at all. Imperfect administration of justice is far better than anarchy.

But what is the purpose for this exercise of authority? Read with me the job description Paul gives to those who are given and called to be pastor/teachers,

Eph. 4:11 “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ-- 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

In that room on Sunday night, as the day of Jesus' resurrection was about to end, the church was begun. The church was planted, as we would say today. It was the visible church of Jesus Christ, a church that would be called his body, the household of God, a holy temple in the Lord, and a dwelling

place of God in the Spirit. And this morning, sitting here in this building assembled under the authority of ordained elders, we are a continuation of that church. Therefore, with proper authority, let me declare to you this key which opens and shuts the kingdom of heaven.

1 John 5:12 “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”