

John 20:19-29

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[0 : 0 0] Chapter 20, verses 19 through 29. That's chapter 20, verses 19 through 29.

Please stand for the reading of his word. And it reads as such.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, Peace be with you.

When he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.

[1 : 0 7] If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld. Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord.

But he said to them, Unless I see his hand, the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors was locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here, and see my hands, and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.

Thomas answered him, My Lord and my God. Jesus said to him, Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

[2 : 0 9] This is the word of God. Amen. Well, good morning.

It is great to have you here today. And a special welcome to those of you who are new to the neighborhood or visiting this fall. Probably a variety of churches in hopes of settling in somewhere.

I know there are many of you on Zoom this morning, and we look forward to having you again next week. It will be the 9-15 service that will be Zoomed to those who would like to see it from home.

But we're glad that you're here. I just want to give an opening word of expectations for those of you who are new to our neighborhood.

What should you expect week by week in this setting, and in particular through the preaching of God's Word? I guess I just would say a couple of things.

[3 : 1 3] First, I hope you'll expect some encouragement. We certainly live in a discouraging time. There are any series of events that are transpiring week by week that cause anxiety.

This last week and this coming week are no different in that realm. And so when you come to church or you come to Christ Church Chicago and you hear the word read and preached, I think you should have some expectation of encouragement, comfort.

But that's not alone. I think you should also expect to be challenged. Just as we need encouragement week by week from the Word of God, we need to be challenged through a forceful encounter with the living Word who is Jesus Christ.

Preaching is very different than merely hearing your pastor on the issues of the day. It should be a proclamation of God's voice through His Word for us who are called to live together today.

And so this encouragement and this exhortation, this word of comfort, this word that would confront us and challenge us to live our lives differently, I hope you hold me to those in the coming year.

[4 : 42] And I hope as you walk in, your expectations will be fulfilled. The watchword on encouragement comes in the first part of our text today.

The watchword on our challenge or confrontation comes in the second part. You'll notice there were two paragraphs read from the latter part of John's Gospel.

The watchword on encouragement is the word fear. There was fear among the followers and it was overcome by encouragement from Christ.

Do you see the word fear there? On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews.

It was anxiety. Interestingly, it says on the evening of that day. This is Easter Sunday. And so you're actually seeing the first implications of the first Easter or put differently, the early returns on a resurrection.

[5 : 54] Surprise, early return on the resurrection. Fear among followers that will be overcome by a word of encouragement.

The watchword on the second half, that which is rather challenging, is this word disbelief or, to get the same assonance of the first half, a lack of faith.

If their fear among the followers was overcome by encouragement, it was Thomas' lack of faith, his disbelief, that was overcome, in one sense, by that forceful encounter.

Don't you love his words? They're there pretty firmly in verse 26. We're now eight days later. We've moved from Easter to the first Lord's Day.

Interesting to see that on the first Lord's Day gathering, there were both believers and non-believers present. And there's a forceful encounter for this one Thomas, who was disbelieving.

[7 : 00] Notice what he said. I will never believe, verse 25, unless I can see it with my own eyes. Or the way Jesus will put it differently at the end of verse 27, in that forceful encounter, do not disbelieve.

Ah, pistis. The same word for faith. This lack of faith is challenged in this forceful encounter.

I don't know if you need comfort today or confrontation, an encouragement or a forceful encounter, but this text ought to do both.

Fear among his followers, overcome by an encouragement from Christ. A lack of faith among one. Exchange through this forceful encounter with Christ.

Let's just look at them together. That first unit, verses 19 to 23. Fear is overcome by encouragement. You'll notice the writer wants you to see that there's anxiety.

[8 : 11] The doors are locked from the inside. And they're fearful that what happened to Jesus through political and religious leadership may indeed happen to them, who are his followers.

And then suddenly, as it were, it says, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, peace be with you.

I loved the prayer this morning, I love the prayer this morning, obviously pulled from this phrase. Peace be with you. Fear is overcome by an encouragement from Christ, and the opening encouragement is peace has been secured.

This ought to encourage anybody, when one thinks about what Jesus claims to have been on about. Certainly, the term might just simply be, he's mitigating their anxiety or their shock.

You and I would certainly be shocked to find Jesus suddenly in our midst, in a room that we had locked the doors to keep others out of. Peace be with you.

[9 : 16] Could simply mean mitigating their fear. But John's already been speaking in his gospel about a peace that he would leave with them, unlike that of the world.

And that peace wasn't just this mitigation of fear, this peace really was a preparation for the arrival of the Spirit. Perhaps this is what's meant here.

Indeed, the Spirit is going to be received by them in the same text. So, peace, settle their hearts, peace signals the arrival of the Spirit.

Peace could be full-orbed, and I love the ambiguity of it here, it's not really given to us, is it? Peace could be full-orbed, for this is what Jesus claims to have been doing in his coming.

Bringing an end to the enmity that existed between heaven and earth. A cessation of the hostilities between a rebellious world and a holy God.

[10 : 27] Indeed, in John, he's been calling our attention, week by week, week to these psalms of the Old Testament and the book of Isaiah in particular, and bundling them under a contextual understanding that God was going to bring salvation and peace to a world gone wrong.

This is the word of encouragement. Peace. Peace. The peace of Christ be with you.

That's what the gospel holds out. The end of your hostility towards your Creator through the work of Christ. The preparation to live in the power of the Spirit through the word of Christ.

A freedom from your anxieties on what it would be to begin to follow, all from the word of Christ. But notice, the encouragement goes on. It's not merely that peace has been secured, but it's that the mission of Christ has been transferred.

It's interesting to me, when you see what he says here, after peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. There's a transference in play.

[11 : 45] Well, why did the Father send the Son? Well, according to earlier moments in John, it was to convey truth that needed to come from heaven, which was inaccessible to us, outside of this incarnational encounter.

Or, Jesus actually says, I have come to bear witness to the truth. And, he actually, in his prayer, says that this sending of himself was going to be transferred to them, and now it is happening.

If you look back at John 17, and verses 24, I'm sorry, 17, verses 17, through 21, you'll see this rescinding language appearing, with the intention bracketed around the proclamation of that which is true.

And so, Jesus is saying to his fearful followers, not only do you have peace with God, be encouraged, but the mission that I had is now in your hands, give yourself to proclamation.

This is the mission of the church. The proclamation of truth. In a world that is stumbling in the darkness.

[13 : 02] Of course, that proclamation would need empowerment, wouldn't it? And notice, that's what comes next. When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit.

I tell you what, early in the week, this thing was the most perplexing little phrase for me. I just sat in my study and pondered it. What is going on here?

And he breathed on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. Well, we could spend a long time on it, but what I've come to believe, that there is an action completed here, that anticipates a later event, that will be available to all.

Let me swing through that again. An action, on display, accessible only to a few, but which signals an event that will later be available to all.

If you're not familiar with reading the Scriptures, it's wonderful to move from these Gospel accounts to Acts. And the Spirit, which is the age of being able to have an enlightened understanding about what we're to be doing and how we're to be living, comes out at Pentecost upon a host.

[14 : 29] And it's almost this democratic, universal availability of the Holy Spirit. But this breathing is accessible only to a few, but it signals that event that will be available to all.

John's been doing this kind of thing in his Gospel for some time. When you think about it, he turned water into wine. Only a few were there, but it was the first manifestation of his glory, where the age of the Spirit was going to arrive for everyone.

He did it in the feeding of the 5,000, an action accessible only to a few to signal a later event in his own flesh that would be available to all. He's done it in the washing of the feet.

Something that he did here, only for these few, but already in John was signaling an internal cleansing that would be available to all. And so that's what's happening here. Peace is secured, he says.

The mission of proclamation is in your hands, he says. The empowerment of the Spirit, you stand on the verge of it, he says. And then finally, he encourages them by letting them know that the results of their ministry are already settled.

[15 : 51] Verse 23, If you forgive the sins of any, they're forgiven. If you withhold the forgiveness from any, it is withheld. What you're really reading here are the implications of the first three movements.

As the church is given peace, as it's given a task of proclamation, as it's empowered by the Spirit, there are natural implications of that ministry.

Forgiveness is going to run, and rejection will continue to play its way out. This was their comfort.

Well, let me apply it. I find it interesting that that which comforted the people in the text actually ought to challenge or confront those of us who come much later from those initial individuals from the text.

I mean, you and I, these are words of comfort, but think about it. Why so fear?

[16 : 57] Why is the church so fearful today? Certainly, we've seen the outwork of their own proclamation ministry. Let me put it differently.

When's the last time you picked up on the transference of mission and actually verbalized to someone that forgiveness of sins can be had through Christ?

Or, when's the last time we failed to do it as a church because of fear? It's time to unlock the door. It's time to go outside.

It's time to recognize that you have peace with God, a word to proclaim, a spirit that will empower you, and results that will lead to the forgiveness of sins of those who hear you.

This is it for me. This is it for Christ Church Chicago. We are to be sent out in the power of the Spirit to proclaim the gospel, namely the forgiveness of sins that is the mission of the church, any church that's in actual possession of the peace of Christ.

[18 : 11] Let me just slow it down. If we possess the peace of Christ, then we are sent with His word in the power of the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins.

And if we forfeit that mission, we have not understood the early implications of Easter. I long for Christ Church Chicago to be a community that speaks words of forgiveness for the community in Christ.

I long that we would be confident, clear, people of conviction, rather than a fearful few hiding, wondering how the world might respond.

There will be no forgiveness if the church fails to bear witness. These words encourage them.

These words challenge us. But let's take a look at the second part here. I tried to say that encouragement and challenge come, and just as their fear was overcome by an encouraging word for Christ, so too Thomas' lack of faith will be overcome by a forceful encounter with Christ.

[19 : 55] I won't be as long on this half, but the second unit is really interesting to me. Thomas, in verses 24 and 25, was impervious to having a blind faith in Christ.

His words are very clear. Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.

Now, I know that often he is ridiculed as being doubting Thomas and as though he shouldn't have been like this, but let's get one thing clear. Doubt is a virtue.

Imagine if you didn't doubt anything. Nothing would ever be challenged concerning what you were told. Nothing would ever be learned. No creativity would ever push us beyond what people think through conventional wisdom.

So, doubt is not necessarily an inappropriate attribute. It's actually a virtue. And I think that Thomas here is signaling the need that we all feel to settle on things which are true.

[21 : 16] For Thomas, it had to be a real resurrection. I'm so glad we're in the 21st century and out of the 20th century. The 20th century, within large Protestant Christian swaths, we began to think about Christianity in terms of a myth that it didn't really matter if it was true or not.

As long as it mattered to you, then that was a good deal. And as a result, we moved further away from things which were factual into things which were just sentimentally to be held.

Christianity really, in the middle part of the 20th century, almost became like a Charlie Brown cartoon. You know, Hope Springs Eternal. I'll just keep thinking that it's going to work out right. There was a novel written by Martin Gardner that actually is set in our own neighborhood.

I read it, I don't know, a couple decades ago called The Flight of Peter Fromm, a student who supposedly arrives at the University of Chicago Divinity School as a convinced Christian and he leaves an unbeliever and it's the journey of this movement away from faith.

But when he's in the midst of it, he's actually talking to his future father-in-law, interestingly called Mr. Middleton, you know, the middle of the way. In fact, Peter Fromm himself, his last name in German, piety.

[22 : 41] So you have this pious one talking to the man who's going to navigate the middle road and he's curious about the resurrection and Peter says, I'm curious to know what you think actually happened.

Did the body of Jesus really rise from the dead? Middleton leaned forward to carve his cigar's ash into the ashtray on a small table near him. I don't think this is the time, Peter.

Why not? You must have some opinion. Of course I have an opinion, but the question isn't a simple one. But the question is simple, Peter persisted.

There's nothing complicated about it. Either Jesus rose bodily from the dead or he didn't. Do you think he actually appeared in the flesh to Simon Peter and Thomas and all the others?

In a spiritual sense, yes, Christ was revealed to their hearts. Peter uncorked. Do you mean that the disciples had a vision of Jesus while the body was somewhere else?

[23 : 44] Did they see him with their eyes? Was there an image of Jesus on their retinas? Middleton stood up and walked heavily to the fireplace.

I can't see that it matters, he said. And I got to be honest with you, we lived for the better part of 60 years under that within the church. But you and I know that it does matter for thinking people, a truth of this magnitude clearly matters.

Updike understood as much when he wrote, make no mistake, if he rose at all, it was as his body. If the cell's disillusioned did not reverse, the molecules re-knit, the amino acids rekindle, the church will fall.

And so Thomas gets it. He's not doubting Thomas, fortunately. He's disbelieving Thomas. And that's what's so interesting about what Jesus does here.

This imperviousness to blind faith in Thomas, which we can admire, is confronted by a personal encounter with Christ.

[24 : 58] Suddenly he was there. And not only was he there, Thomas' impervious bravado is almost repeated back to him through the words of Christ.

Okay, Thomas, put your finger here. See my hands. Put out your hand. Place it in my side. And then with this command, really, this present imperative, don't be disbelieving, but believe.

And then you get in verse 28, Thomas' affirmation of faith. My Lord and my God. Which to me is a striking little phrase as we've been reading along.

Mary Magdalene says, I have seen the Lord. Verse 19. Verse 25 later, the disciples say, we have seen the Lord. But you move from, I have seen the Lord, we have seen the Lord, to my Lord and my God.

You move from this experiential statement of facts to this actual confession of faith. You move from these things which they believe to be true to the interpretation of the event.

[26 : 15] If they are true, then you are my Lord and my God. You are God who has come to save me from my sins. You are the one to whom I will follow. You are the one to all my allegiance will now be given.

Wow. From what faith, from clarity on the facts to what faith confesses. That is what makes you a Christian. Christian. What's interesting to me again, and I'm about done, I'll take my seat.

But have you noticed the surprise in this text? The first half, they were words of encouragement to the people in the text, but they're words that really ought to challenge the church from that text.

Whereas this one, these are words really of comfort to Thomas who was in the text. I mean, they're words of confrontation, but they're really words that ought to comfort you.

If you are a non-Christian today, I pray that there will be many who are hearing me. If you do not yet believe, what's fascinating about the way this closes, and really the whole book shuts itself down before its ultimate purpose statement, is that there is a word of approval that Jesus would place on you.

[27 : 37] There is an anticipation that belief could be expected of you. And then there is an invitation from the author that you can have faith.

Look at it. Last verse. Jesus said, Have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. He's speaking to us now.

We finally arrived in the text. There's a word of approval on those who are reading the text as they come to faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins, never having seen him with their own eyes.

And then there's an invitation to you. John will say it and we'll pick it up next week, but he'll indicate that all these things were written so that you would believe. In other words, what was required by some to have sight can be trusted by us who read of their account.

That's the way it is in life, isn't it? I mean, imagine just all the data studies going on in the world today. All the experimentation taking place.

[28 : 55] Imagine if every scientist had to bring their lab into your living room and re-verify their results in order for you to actually believe what it was they were seeing. It'd be ridiculous.

No. Experimentation is tested, re-tested, and then hopefully published in journals that have a reputable sense and those of us who never see it can actually believe it.

Same thing here. Don't expect Jesus to show up in your living room tonight at 2 a.m. so that you have your own apparition and belief. John says, just read it.

Somebody saw it. Certainly the world changed because of it. Maybe they can be trusted with it. I love what an old dead preacher said when he put it this way.

I reckon that many of you in business are quite content to get written orders for goods. And when you don't, that is when somebody doesn't put it in writing, you don't require a purchaser to ask you in person.

[30 : 05] You would just assume he should not. In fact, you commonly say you'd rather have it in black and white. Is it not so? Well then, you have your wish.

Here is the call in black and white. Isn't that great? Isn't that great? Read. Believe.

It's not deficient from those who saw it and proclaimed it to be true. I hope there are some listening today who will move through this forceful encounter to the comfort that's in Christ.

I read a book. I'm done now. I read a book a long time ago called A Cambridge Movement. It talked about student work in Cambridge, England. And there was a scientist who was an undergraduate student who attended a sermon.

And before that he was a self-confessed agnostic. He didn't know. But after hearing a sermon where somebody spoke from words written down, he found himself believing.

[31 : 23] And if you've ever been to Cambridge, England, they have those backs, you know, and you can just envision this undergraduate student walking out of a church building hearing a sermon from written text coming to faith.

And this is what he says concerning his own conversion. As the former agnostic who a few minutes later was running back to his lodging to be in by midnight, it was as though my feet scarcely touched the ground.

And I have the most vivid recollection of saying to myself over and over as I ran, I've seen Jesus. I've seen Jesus. words that I had certainly never used before nor heard anyone else use.

I've seen Jesus here. Or as some even within our own midst who gave their lives to Christ in university and postgraduate days, finding themselves listening to a sermon and faith emerging in the heart saying to themselves, this better not be a fad.

Let this not be a fad. Only to look back decades later and find themselves still believing. Christ Church Chicago, I have a challenge for you.

[32 : 52] Put fear aside. Proclaim the gospel. It is your singular mission. Individuals at Christ Church Chicago, put your disbelief aside.

Come to faith. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for just these minutes together and we pray that you would meet our expectation that we would be a church not really known for hearing a pastor's thoughts on the issues of the day, but rather a church that hears from Christ through His Word so that we might know how to live rightly in this age.

Protect the seeds. Strengthen the weak. Afflict those who for far too long have been silent. In Christ's name, Amen.