

John 20:19-23

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- [0 : 0 0] Um, commencement is an interesting word because it marks not only an end, but also a beginning. Literally, that's what the word commencement means, a new beginning.
- But of course, the question that raises is, what exactly is it that you are beginning? If you're moving on, where are you going? What's next? Now, when I was a senior in college, I got sick of that question because everybody asked you that question all the time.
- And I didn't have an answer. And one of my greatest fears my whole senior year was to get to commencement and walk and graduate and have no answer to that question.
- What's next? Well, I guess I'm going home to live with my parents. They're not that bad. But I wish I wanted to have something more concrete to say.
- And I didn't. It's all right. It worked out eventually. But all of us, uh, sometimes transitions in life force us to reexamine this question of where is our life going?
- [1 : 0 9] Not only what's our next step in pursuing our career or pursuing a family or another goal in life, but what's the purpose of all the projects that we're investing our time and our life in?
- What is our mission in this world? And that's the question that this passage speaks to today. Um, so let's read together John chapter 20 verses 19 through 23.
- 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 again, 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.
- [2 : 2 0] If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you withhold forgiveness from any is withheld. Now this morning, I want to consider two things. First, I want to consider the mission to which the risen Lord Jesus calls us.
- And second, the resources that Jesus provides for us to carry it out. I know some of you may be here today. Perhaps you're not a regular churchgoer.
- Perhaps you're not a follower of Jesus. Let me ask, let me encourage you to consider the question. What is the mission that you are pursuing in your life? And to compare it to this mission that Jesus offers and calls us into.
- If you are a Christian, this is the mission set out for you. Set out for us from our Lord. The mission to which we are called. Jesus says, as the father has sent me, even so I am sending you.
- So in other words, the mission that Jesus calls us to is to be God's ambassadors. Extending his life-giving presence into the world.

[3 : 30] Now if you read the whole Bible, this is actually the original mission that God gave to the entire human race in the book of Genesis. According to Genesis, God made us in his image.

In other words, to be his representatives displaying his character on the earth. And he put human beings in a fruitful garden of his life-giving presence.

And then he commissioned them to do two things. First, he said, work and keep the garden. That's Genesis 2.15. And second, he said, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

Genesis 1.28. Now if you put those two things together, the original mission for the human race was to extend the garden of God's life-giving presence into all the world.

To work and keep the garden. To dwell in God's presence. And then to spread throughout the world and spread that life-giving presence of God throughout all the world. And this mission to extend God's life-giving presence into all the world would be fulfilled through a variety of means.

[4 : 41] Through relationship. Human relationship. Ever deepening friendship. Marriage. Reflecting the love of God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Through work. Cultivating the land. To bring out its God-given potential. Raising children. And teaching them to know and love God. Through creativity.

Poetry. Art. Architecture. Music. Reflecting the beauty and the grandeur of God. And through authority. A wise ordering of various parts to make a cohesive whole.

Reflecting God's wisdom and God's justice. Relationship. Work. Creativity. Authority. These were some of the means through which God's life-giving presence would be extended through all the world.

And each of these human pursuits would be an extension of the very life of God himself. It was a glorious mission to which we were called. Problem is we messed it all up.

[5 : 46] Because we decided to put ourselves in the center of everything instead of God. We distrusted God. And so we turned away from him.

And so we forfeited our calling to be his ambassadors. His representatives in the world. And now in our fallen state, even our most noble pursuits are tainted with impure motives.

So our relationships are often hindered by mistrust or even betrayal or unforgiveness and distance.

Our work often degenerates into what Ecclesiastes calls chasing after the wind. Anxious striving after quickly vanishing results.

Anyone identify with that? Our creative pursuits can be tainted by pride and self-promotion. Or our exercise of authority is distorted by self-serving motives.

[6 : 48] So we have become like a polluted river. Or even a leaky sewer pipe. Spreading throughout the world. But spreading self-centeredness and envy and fear and shame.

As the human race. Now the good news is God did not give up on the human race. God did not give up on his creatures. In the Old Testament God called a people, the people of Israel, to be his ambassadors.

To dwell in his presence. And extend his life-giving presence to the world. And he put them in the land of Canaan, which is like a new garden of Eden. And called them to be a light to the world.

But like the first human beings, like Adam and Eve, they messed it up. Over and over again. And so the story of the Bible continues that God sent his son into the world in the fullness of time.

To become a fully human being. And to do what none of us had ever fully accomplished. To be the perfect ambassador of God.

[7 : 51] To be the exact representation of God's character and being. To be his life-giving presence in the world. Perhaps one of the most famous verses in the Bible, John 3.16, puts it well.

It says, God so loved the world. This world that had fallen into darkness and sin and death. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him would not perish.

But have eternal life. God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world. But in order that the world might be saved through him. In other words, Jesus Christ was the perfect ambassador of God.

He was God himself. The word made flesh. And he was not only the conduit, not only the pipe, but the very source of new and unending life for this world.

Jesus described himself as the bread of life. The light of the world. The true vine. And yet, ironically, Jesus' life ended with his body being broken, with his blood being spilled, and the light of his life being snuffed out.

[9 : 07] And the world plunged into darkness. You see, when Jesus Christ died on the cross, he entered into the depths of our fallenness. Our sin.

Our alienation from God. Our death. He took that all upon himself. And then in his resurrection, he triumphed over those things, over sin and death.

And he planted the life-giving presence of God among us, once and for all. And now, in passages like this one, the risen Lord Jesus calls us into his mission.

To be God's ambassadors. Extending his life-giving presence into the world. And we see this throughout Jesus' teaching. Jesus said, I'm the vine.

In other words, I'm the source of true life. And you are the branches. Extending the life of God into the world. I've chosen and appointed you to bear good fruit that will last.

[10 : 09] Jesus said, I'm the spring of life-giving water. John 4, 14, whoever drinks of the water I give him will never be thirsty again. And later, he went on to say, whoever believes in me, out of that person's heart will flow rivers of living water.

In other words, Jesus is the spring and we are the conduits. Verse 23 in our passage, he even says, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.

Now, you might have wondered, what does that mean? Well, that verse doesn't mean that Christians or any Christian leader can decide independently on our own whether or not to forgive someone.

Hmm. I want to forgive them. I don't want to forgive them. And that it does not mean that we have the authority to do that and that God will stand by our decision.

No. The context of this passage, we are God's ambassadors. Jesus' ambassadors. An ambassador can only speak on the authority of the one who sent them.

[11 : 16] If Jesus has sent us, we are only authorized to speak and act according to what he has already said and done. So, what verse 23 does mean is that as Jesus' ambassadors, we are given authority to announce the king's verdict.

That everyone who turns to Jesus and believes in him has forgiveness of sins and eternal life. And that everyone who rejects him has rejected God's only provision for forgiveness and remains in a state of spiritual death.

Now, I realize that to some of you, that message may sound harsh. But, you know, it only sounds harsh if you don't really believe that you need forgiveness from God at all.

If you know that you are deathly ill, you will want to know whether there is a cure for your illness. And if the doctor says to you, there is one cure and only one cure, but it will certainly eradicate your illness with relatively minimal side effects.

You wouldn't say, but why aren't there ten different options? Or why can't I make up my own cure? No, you will rejoice that there is one certain cure that will exactly match your need.

[12 : 39] And you will share your joy in finding that cure with anyone who will listen and anyone who has the same disease. Now, that's all that Christian witness is about.

Someone said it's one beggar telling another beggar where to find the bread of life. It's the most humble and loving thing to do as someone who has found and been found by Jesus.

Christian witness is not arrogantly looking down on other people. It's not using manipulative tactics. It's simply being an ambassador of the king. The one who laid down his life so that we might be healed.

Now, if you're a Christian, I think one implication of all of this is that many of our ambitions are far too small, far too narrow.

We often tend to focus in on one good thing. Maybe it's a relationship. Maybe it's a career. Or a family. Or a hobby.

[13 : 47] Or a creative pursuit. Or a position of authority. And that becomes the ultimate thing. The thing that defines us. The thing that we live for.

The thing that we build our lives around and sacrifice for more than anything else. But those little things can never bear the weight. Because we either achieve them and then have to ask the question, what's next?

Because it's never enough to fully satisfy us. Or we fail to achieve it and we're crushed. But the mission that Jesus gives us is far bigger than our own little and often self-centered ambitions.

The mission that Jesus gives us is the overarching drama that gives meaning to our particular roles. It's the orchestral symphony in which each of us have a part to play.

In his Easter sermon, Pastor Nick used this example, but I'm going to use it again. The British architect Christopher Wren designed one of the great London cathedrals. And he was touring the work site one day and came upon an old man mixing cement in a mortar box.

[15 : 05] And he said to this man, sir, what are you doing this for? And the man said, why, sir? I am building a great cathedral. You see, he kept in mind the big picture.

And so he was able to carry out even the most menial and humble task with dignity, with diligence, and perseverance. Jesus has called us into the mission of being his ambassadors.

Extending the life-giving presence of God wherever we go. Now, that's a great and glorious mission, but it's also intimidating.

If you really think about it, who of us is fully equipped to do that? But Jesus not only calls us, he equips us.

So second, what does Jesus give us to carry out this mission? Jesus gives us three resources in particular that this passage points us to, to carry out his mission.

[16 : 13] So first, he gives us one another. And this is throughout the whole passage. But if you go back to Genesis, in the garden, God gave Adam a task.

He said, work and care for the garden. But then he didn't leave him alone. He brought him a helper. Or perhaps another translation of that word would be an ally.

One who comes alongside him. To be joined with him. To provide something that he lacked in himself. And in the New Testament, the risen Lord Jesus does not leave us alone to carry out his mission.

He gives us one another. Brothers and sisters in the family of God. Members joined together in the body of Christ. You know, when Jesus rose from the dead, he didn't set up a bunch of successive one-on-one counseling meetings with his disciples.

He, for the most part, he appeared to groups of people. If you put it all together, the New Testament authors record only two or three appearances of Jesus to individuals.

[17 : 22] Where possibly they were the only person present. To Peter, to James, and possibly to Mary. But there were at least eight. Excuse me. At least eight separate occasions.

Where multiple people. Where groups of people. Met, touched, ate with, and talked with the resurrected Jesus. At the same time. Here is just one of them.

And it seems there were ten of the apostles. Luke 24, which recounts the same incident. Indicates there were several others as well. Now, as an aside, this is one of the reasons why we can trust that the gospel accounts of Jesus being raised from the dead and appearing to people were not simply hallucinations.

Or myths. Now, individual people sometimes hallucinate. Right? They see things that aren't really there. And they hear voices that are only in their own head.

You know, have you had, maybe you've had people share voices that they've heard in their own head. Or things that they've seen. That some relative who's passed on has been talking to them.

[18 : 32] Well, I can't prove it wrong. But I'm not going to bank my life. On the testimony of one isolated person who makes such a claim. But what if there were twenty people who all said, saw, and heard the same thing?

At the same time. And remembered it distinctly afterwards. You see, it's very rare for groups of people to hallucinate and actually hear and see the same thing at the same time and remember it clearly afterwards.

But this is exactly what happened over and over in the New Testament. With the risen Lord Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul said, Jesus appeared once to five hundred people at the same time.

And he says most of them are still alive. In other words, he's saying, if you don't believe me, you can go and ask them. You can interview all of them and compare their stories. If the New Testament authors were just making up this story.

Or if they simply meant it in a non-literal, purely metaphorical, symbolic way. They would never say things like this. These are things that really happened.

[19 : 53] Jesus really rose from the dead and appeared to people. So I want to challenge you to consider that. Jesus appeared to groups of his disciples. And here he breathed and said, receive the Holy Spirit.

And on the day of Pentecost, recorded in the book of Acts, what Jesus here promised and symbolically enacted, breathing his spirit on them, became a life-transforming reality.

The spirit came down in power on the community of believers as they were praying together. Now the point of all this is if you want to participate in the mission of Jesus, you cannot do it alone.

If you try to be an ambassador of Jesus in a self-directed way, you will not get very far. And you will get off track more quickly than you realize.

If you're an ambassador, by definition, you belong to a local embassy. That's how ambassadors are constantly reminded of their identity in a foreign culture.

[20 : 57] That's how they regularly receive their assignments. That's where they find support within a sometimes hostile world. And in a similar way, every Christian belongs in a local church.

A gathered community of Christian believers. So as Pastor Matt already said, I encourage you, make it a priority if you're leaving New Haven, to find and join a church wherever you go.

After you're leaving, you've probably put a lot of work. Or if you've recently moved here, you've probably put a lot of work into researching apartments, searching for jobs, or maybe connecting with friends or family that you know.

You know, you probably wouldn't just get on a plane tomorrow, fly to San Francisco, and say, I'm just going to get there. Maybe I'll stay on the street for a while.

Maybe I'll just see how it goes and trust it'll all come together somehow. But you know, sometimes we put forethought and effort and research and energy into everything else except our relationship with God or our relationship to a local body of believers.

[22 : 08] So let me urge you, make that a priority. The risen Lord Jesus sends His Spirit among us and speaks His Word to us and carries out His mission through us as we are gathered together in Christian community.

As Christians, our lives are marked by the first day of the week. John notes in verse 19 that it was the first day of the week when Jesus rose again.

Sunday morning. And one of the defining characteristics of the early Christians is that whenever it was possible, whenever possible, they met early on Sunday morning. Sometimes they would meet before dawn because they would have to work in their society and Sunday wasn't a day off for all of them.

But they would find ways to gather together regularly. And their gatherings, their weekly gatherings, would be the drumbeat that drove the rhythm of their lives.

It would be the checkpoint that everything else came into line gradually more and more with, where they received their instructions from the risen Lord Jesus.

[23 : 17] So make that a priority in the structure of your life. Jesus gives us one another. That's the first resource that He gives us. Second, Jesus gives us His peace.

This is verse 19 and 21. Jesus said to His disciples, Peace be with you. Now this was and still is a common Middle Eastern greeting, but Jesus repeated it twice.

Which meant He was not merely saying it out of habit or by accident. The calling to be an ambassador is not an easy task. At times it can be difficult or even dangerous.

And Jesus' disciples were afraid. It was the Passover feast when this was happening. It was the busiest time of the year in Jerusalem. And one of the most exciting times was they were huddled inside with the doors locked for fear of the religious leaders.

And they also had reason to fear the government authorities because the government authorities had just executed Jesus, their leader, and they were associated with a condemned criminal. And they were not only afraid of their potential opponents, but they were also afraid of Jesus Himself.

[24 : 30] Three days earlier, they had all abandoned Jesus. Peter had publicly denied Jesus three times. They had failed Him. They had failed their leader, and they knew Him. And Luke tells us that their first response on seeing Jesus was not to be immediately overcome with joy, but to be startled and frightened.

What are the fears that hinder you from living as an ambassador of Jesus? There could be a lot.

But perhaps are you fearful of other people? Do you spend a lot of time thinking about what other people think of you? Or are you tempted to gossip and complain behind someone's back instead of lovingly confronting someone that you have a problem with?

Or do you make strategically placed comments in conversations, hoping to be recognized and affirmed instead of being content to listen well and speak only what builds up those who hear?

All of these are things that I struggle with. Fear of other people. It's very common.

[25 : 47] But Jesus said, Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid.

You see, the peace that Jesus gives us is unlike anything else because it can never be taken away from us. Jesus has secured our peace with God through his death and resurrection.

The most important person in the whole universe who the king of everything has made peace between him and you.

And if that is true, then ultimately it doesn't matter what everybody else thinks. It'll all work itself out.

Since you're at peace with the king, everything will follow from there. Now this doesn't mean we'll always feel peaceful on the inside. Jesus said, Let not your hearts be troubled.

[26 : 49] Neither let them be afraid. It's a command. And sometimes we have to fight our fears in order to pursue the kind of peace that he's talking about. Richard Sibbes, a Puritan writer, wrote, True peace is found in conquering sin, not in yielding to it.

So sometimes it's a battle to fight against our fears with the peace that we have from God. So first, are you fearful of other people?

Second, are you fearful of the society in which you live? Some of us can have a similar tendency as the disciples here to huddle together with a group of Christians and lock the doors and avoid the rest of the world as much as possible.

And if you go on the internet and read things that are out there, sometimes that's a powerful motivation. But that is not the way of Jesus.

Jesus said, I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. And then he went on to say, In the world you will have trouble, but take heart. I have overcome the world.

[28 : 03] We can have confidence in living in the world because Jesus lived in this world. And when he prayed for us, he said, I do not ask that you take my followers out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. We can have confidence in going out into the world and loving our neighbors and interacting with people, even who may disagree with us or even look down on what we believe.

But we can live confidently and in love because of Jesus. Perhaps you're fearful of an uncertain future. Jesus said, I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Or perhaps you're fearful of Jesus. Like the disciples, you feel that because you have failed him in the past, you're not sure that you qualify to serve him anymore.

Well, in the very next chapter, Jesus restores Peter, who had denied him publicly three times, renounced him.

[29 : 09] And Jesus restores him and commissions him. And truly, he can do the same for us. So Jesus gives us one another.

Jesus gives us his peace. And finally, Jesus gives us his spirit. The spirit is God's very own life-giving presence. The Holy Spirit is not merely a force or an idea, but he is the third person of the Trinity.

What this means is that as God's ambassadors, we are never alone. We are indwelt and empowered by his very own spirit. Just as God breathed life into Adam, just as God breathed life into the dry bones in the valley, in Ezekiel's vision, Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, receive the Holy Spirit.

And the imagery, the parallel there, is not an accident. It's the beginning of God's new creation, bringing new life to dry bones. The first day of the week, the first day of God's new creation, a new beginning.

And Jesus described the Holy Spirit as the spring of living water that never runs dry, that cleanses us, and that goes out from us into the world.

[30 : 34] Jesus described the Holy Spirit as a helper, as an advocate, a counselor, one like himself who comes alongside us. Jesus described the Holy Spirit as the one who renews all of God's creation, who brings about spiritual rebirth that results in eternal life.

So the Holy Spirit has come to heal and restore our relationships. He has come to renew and reform our work. He has come to energize and direct our creative pursuits.

He's come to redeem and guide our exercise of authority so that in all these things we might be ambassadors of the risen King Jesus, extending his life-giving presence to every corner of his creation.

And he has given us his Spirit to empower us to do so. You know, when Jesus was on earth, it says he was constantly filled with the Spirit. John the Baptist said of Jesus, I have seen that the Spirit came down and remained on Jesus.

And when Jesus prepared to go back to heaven, he promised that the Holy Spirit would come down and remain with us. You know, if you are a believer in Jesus, do you realize that the same Holy Spirit who dwelt in Jesus himself when he was on earth dwells in you?

[31 : 59] That's powerful. He is there with you. He is in you. And he will never leave you.

So receive the Holy Spirit. Whether for the first time, by putting your faith in Jesus, he will send his Spirit to you. Or in a renewed way, Jesus said, those who ask will receive.

Those who seek will find. To those who knock, the door will be opened. He said the Father delights to give good gifts to his children, especially the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus gives us one another, he gives us his peace, and he gives us his Spirit. That is what gives us confidence to be God's ambassadors, extending his life-giving presence into all the world.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.