

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – April 28, 2019

[John 20:19-31](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](#).)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on John 20:19-31

(From *Homiletics*; “Eyewitness Talk”, April 28, 2019)

This week’s gospel text contains two complete pericopes, plus a conclusion. Most scholars contend that the conclusion read in verses 30-31 marked the earliest ending of John’s gospel, with chapter 21 a later addition to the text. If this were the case, the resurrected Jesus’ first appearance to his disciples (vv. 19-25), coupled with his return appearance “a week later” (v. 26) before the doubt-ridden Thomas, would constitute the whole of John’s original resurrection tradition.

Instead of focusing on the popular story of what doubting Thomas did, this week we want to look more closely at what Jesus said. Jesus’ first resurrection appearance to all his disciples (except the absent Thomas) involved his suddenly bolting through the locked doors of the hiding place where the disciples were huddled for safety. Some scholars have noted that in John’s text, this resurrection appearance can be counted as the seventh, and of course the greatest, of the divine signs or miracles in Jesus’ ministry. (The first six are identified at 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-9; 6:1-14; 9:1-38; and 11:1-45.)

This seventh sign consists of two parts. First, the miraculous deliverance of Jesus from death through the resurrection — which Jesus himself documented for the disciples when he “showed them his hands and his side” (v. 20). Second, this seventh sign is accompanied by a miracle that is bestowed upon all the disciples — the gift of the Holy Spirit — which the resurrected Jesus breathes out upon them. For this reason, this first pericope from today’s gospel reading is often referred to as the Johannine Pentecost. Jesus appears to his disciples not just to testify to the miracle of the resurrection, but in order that the final action of his earthly mission might be accomplished — the giving of the promised Spirit.

But in John’s text, Jesus’ resurrection appearance actually makes possible two gifts — imparting the Holy Spirit and bestowing Jesus’ peace upon the disciples. Although Jesus had spoken about this peace and had long promised it to his disciples (see the Farewell Discourse 14:27-28), the Johannine Jesus never greets his disciples with this salutation of “Peace” until after the resurrection has been accomplished. For John, this peace is intimately connected to Jesus’ passion.

According to John's theology, the Holy Spirit is a shalom-Spirit. Close communion with God, which only the Holy Spirit makes possible, can bring true peace, the peace of Christ, to the believer. Thus, Jesus could bestow neither his peace nor his Spirit upon the disciples until after his death and resurrection (as implied in John 1:33 and 7:39). Jesus relinquishes his own spirit on the cross (19:30) so that it may become available to all after his resurrection.

Jesus formally proclaims, "Peace be with you," to his disciples as introductory words to a great commissioning sentence — "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The Greek uses two different verbs for these "sendings" in this declaration, but exegetes generally agree that they are used synonymously. Although the theme of Jesus's sending his disciples has been noted and discussed before (4:38; 13:16, 20; 17:18), this commissioning sentence stands apart. For the first time, Jesus has offered his disciples the gift of his peace. This peace serves as a portal to a new shalom-age — the Age of the Spirit. The commissioning sentence thus is a creative word. Just as in Genesis God spoke before creating the world, so Jesus declares the existence of this new shalom-saturated reality before he breathes the Holy Spirit out onto the disciples, creating them anew.

The focus of this new creation, the Age of the Spirit, is immediately apparent. Jesus defines the primary characteristic of this age to be the giving and receiving of forgiveness. Because of the salvation made possible through Jesus' sacrifice, forgiveness is now made possible. The disciples themselves are not the cause of the forgiveness now offered to others, even though they have now received the Holy Spirit. The verb here, "they are forgiven," is proclaimed in the Greek perfect tense — a grammatical structure that expresses a past action which results in a present state (Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of John* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1980], 615). Thus, Jesus' declaration is of God's already-accomplished forgiveness, a gift the Spirit-endowed disciples may offer now to others.

That some will accept the good news of Christ's sacrifice and God's forgiveness, and some will reject it (and thus their sins will be "retained") is evident through Jesus' first pronouncement: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (v. 21). Jesus' sacrifice was given freely, and humans retain their own freedom to respond to that sacrifice positively or negatively, with belief or with disbelief. The disciples' mission is empowered by the same Spirit and limited by the same freedom that marked Jesus' own mission.

In Luke's Pentecost scene (Acts 2:1-21), the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples and immediately transforms them into preaching powerhouses. In John's Pentecost, the disciples' first Spirit-assisted missionizing attempts are considerably less productive. The story of "doubting Thomas," which follows this gift of the Holy Spirit, is not only about Thomas' doubt and distrust. It also demonstrates just how faltering were the disciples' first attempts at witnessing the miracle of the resurrection. Despite the new shalom-relationship they now share with the risen Christ, despite the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, when the disciples first excitedly proclaim the news of the risen Christ's appearance, Thomas utterly rejects their message. Thomas becomes the first post-resurrection example of how human freedom can stonewall the message of God's forgiveness. It is an inauspicious start for the church.

Yet in the second pericope of today's text, Jesus reappears to the gathered disciples, this time with Thomas in their midst. This resurrected Jesus cannot be stopped by locked doors or even Thomas' locked heart. He once again proclaims "Peace" to his disciples — a greeting that testifies to the upgraded nature of their Spirit-enhanced relationship. Despite their failure to pass along the good news to Thomas, the power of the Holy Spirit has not left them. The peace of Christ is still with them.

Thomas' demands to see the wounds on Jesus' flesh simply mirror the evidence Jesus himself gave to the other disciples at his first resurrection appearance. Yet Thomas' refusal to believe without seeing for himself puts him into a new category. He is not merely a frightened, hiding disciple. He is faithless: "Do not doubt but believe" (v. 27). Thomas was the first person approached by the Spirit-endowed disciples. He was also the first person to refuse to take the Spirit-empowered authority of their witness to heart.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on John 20:19-31

1. Twice in this text, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples. Both times, the text explicitly states that the doors were locked (vv. 19 and 26). And immediately after both, he shows the disciples the wounds of his hands and sides, seemingly to demonstrate that it is really him. But if Jesus can materialize behind locked doors, how convincing are the physical signs he offers in his body? How are we to understand the nature of Jesus' appearance?
2. Most of us have long associated Thomas with doubt, even bestowing the label of "Doubting Thomas" on those who raise questions about doctrines or traditions of the church. The commentary above goes so far as to label Thomas as "faithless." Is this a fair portrayal? After all, did Thomas ask for anything more than what the rest of the disciples had been given? What is the relationship of doubt and belief? Faith and peace?
3. From Susan Hulen, *workingpreacher.org* (April 7, 2013): *What is expected of later followers of Jesus, and should they understand themselves as like or unlike the disciples of the story? In verses 19-23, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit onto the disciples. Is this a special possession of the early church?"* Some have suggested that this action of Jesus was a unique blessing for the original apostles. Others contest that we should understand it as a blessing on all disciples of Jesus. What do you think?

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?