

John 20:19-31 • From Fear & Doubt to Courage & Assurance

Introduction

Whereas the first half of chapter 20 focusing on the experience of Mary Magdalene is more of a study of faith in the shadows coming out into the light, the emphasis in the latter half is on overcoming unbelief. This is a particularly powerful and detailed lesson when it comes to understanding that, as it is with most things biblical, an issue not of knowledge but faith and the greater working of God's Word. A number of transformations take place in these verses to illustrate this on a practical and personal level.

¹⁹So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side.

The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." ²²And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

[Read v.19-23]

Q: This is the second time in this chapter that John notes it is "the first day of the week". How might what is taking place have a greater meaning because of the Sabbath?

A: The Sabbath commemorates God's finished work of Creation (Gen. 2:1-3); now it is the day when Christ finishes the work of redemption as a work of "new creation". God the Father worked for six days and rested; God the Son suffered on the cross for six hours then rested. The former work of creation is here foreshadowed the latter work of **new** creation.

Q: How might this also be a contrast to the true intention of Sabbath versus what it had become in Israel at that time?

A The Sabbath was the sign of the Old Testament covenant that Israel belonged to God. (Ex. 20:8-11, 31:13-17; Neh. 19:14) The nation was to use that day for rest for both man and beast, but it was not specifically commanded to be a day of assembly and worship. By Jesus' time religious authorities added a myriad of their own restrictions and observances until it became a day of bondage rather than blessing. Although Jesus deliberately violated such Sabbath traditions, He honored the Sabbath in accordance with its original intention of resting from works.

Q: How, then, did the first day of the week come to be known as "The Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10)?

A: Christ made at least five appearances on this first day of the Resurrection: to Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:11-18), the other women (Mt. 28:9-10), Peter (1 Co. 15:5; Lk. 24:34), two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:31-32), and the disciples minus Thomas. (Jn. 20:19-25) The next Sunday all eleven were meeting and visited by Christ. (Jn. 20:26-31) It appears that from the beginning the disciples and the early church met on the first day of the week to worship Christ and to commemorate His death and resurrection. (Acts 20:7; 1 Co. 16:1-2)

Application: For centuries the Jewish Sabbath has been associated with the Law symbolizing six days of work followed by a day of rest; but "The Lord's Day", the first day of the week, is associated with grace so that **first** comes faith in the living Christ, **then** follow afterward the works which verify that faith. In either case, Paul makes it clear that Believers must not make "special days" a test of fellowship or spirituality. (Rom. 14:5-9; Col. 2:16-23)

Q: Why might it be remarkable to us that they were actually afraid? Had they not already received several credible testimonies of the risen Savior?

A: In Mark's Gospel it is specified that Jesus "reproached them for their **unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen**". (Mk. 16:14) Their fear was not because they were afraid of what others would think about their belief

that Christ was resurrected, but from the fact that they did not believe at all.

Q: What is the first step Christ took to transform their fear into courage?

A: He came to them not just supernaturally in a different kind of body so that they could see for themselves the result of the Resurrection, but He came to them personally in order to comfort and reassure them.

Q: What is the second step Christ took to transform their fear into courage?

A: Instead of rebuking them for their unbelief and cowardice, He instead greeted them with, “Peace be with you”. (v.19)

*He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.*

— Psalm 103:10

Q: What is the third thing Jesus did?

A: He reassured them by His Word and by showing them His hands and side so they would know this was not a vision or apparition, but to show that He was indeed their Master and Savior.

Q: How did showing them His wounds fit His personal greeting of peace?

A: More than just being a form of identification, His wounds were also the evidence that the price of salvation had been paid so that through Him man could actually have true biblical peace with God.

Application: *The basis for true peace is found in the person and work of Christ who died for us, rose from the grave in victory, and now lives for us. He comes to us in grace and reassures us through His Word.*

Q: What did the Lord do when their fear was transformed into joy in v.20?

A: He commissioned them by stating, “as the Father has sent Me, I also send you”. (v.21) It was a way of stating that they would now take His place in the world. (Jn. 17:18)

Point: *It is important to note both the privileges and responsibilities of Christ’s true followers:*

1. *Jesus loves us as the Father loves Him. (Jn. 15:9; 17:26)*
2. *We are in the Father as Jesus is in the Father. (Jn. 17:21-22)*
3. *He sends us into the world just as the Father sent Him. (v.21)*

As He was about to later ascend to Heaven He again reminded them of their commission to make disciples as He had made disciples. (Mt. 28:18-20)

Q: But Jesus did not stop at reassuring them—what else did He further do?

A: He enabled them through the Holy Spirit. (v.22)

Q: How does this also hearken back to the Creation?

A: God breathed life into the **first** creation (Gen. 2:7); here He breathes life into the **new** creation. In both the Greek and Hebrew the word for “breath” also means “spirit”. Although the Spirit had dwelt with them in the person of Christ, now the Spirit would dwell personally within them! (Jn. 14:17)

Q: Are the privileges granted in v.23 exclusively restricted to just those who were literally in that room that day?

A: No. A more correct literal translation into English would be, “Whoever’s sin you forgive shall have already been forgiven (because of

what I did on the cross), and whoever's sins you do not forgive shall have already not been forgiven". In other words, we do not **provide** forgiveness but rather **proclaim** forgiveness on the basis of the message of the Gospel.

Point: *All that Believers can do is announce the message of forgiveness; God performs the miracle of forgiveness. It is just like Lazarus: all we can do is roll away the stone so that the "dead" can hear and respond to Christ's voice. We can authoritatively declare that any sinner who believes on Christ can have their sins forgiven, but we are not the ones providing forgiveness.*

Application: *The transformation from fear to courage was accomplished first by Christ's personal visit, in graciously dealing with them not as their sins and behavior deserved, by reassuring them with His Word and proof of authenticity, by further commissioning them to carry on His work in the world, and by enabling them through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. How might these things relate to our own faith and behavior?*

²⁴But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

²⁶After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you."

²⁷Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing."

²⁸Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

[Read v.24-28]

Q: What is probably a good object lesson we can learn from the fact that Thomas was not with the other disciples when they met on the evening of Resurrection Day?

A: The incorrect action to take when faced with great disappointment and/or fear is to seek isolation. We need friends and fellowship all the more in times of defeat and discouragement because solitude feeds the discouragement and often grows it into something even worse: self-pity.

Q: What did Thomas miss by forsaking fellowship?

A: He missed seeing Christ, hearing His words, and receiving His commission. Instead he had to endure a week of fear and unbelief when he could have experienced a week of joy and peace.

Application: *How might this lesson be applied to our personal need for Church fellowship and the times we forsake it?*

Q: How is John's account of Thomas at this place and time a contrast to what John previously recorded about the character and attitude of Thomas?

A: First of all, in Jn. 11:6 it was Thomas who was basically courageous, willing to go to Judea and die with Christ. Then in Jn. 14:5 Thomas seems to be a spiritually minded person who wanted to know the truth and was not hesitant to ask questions. He has not been previously portrayed as "The Doubter".

Q: Why is the moniker "Doubting Thomas" an incorrect representation of what actually took place?

A: Christ did not rebuke Thomas for doubt but for unbelief: "...do not be unbelieving, but believing". (v.27)

Point: *Doubt is most often an intellectual problem where the person wants to believe but their faith is overwhelmed by problems and questions; unbelief is a moral problem because the person simply will not believe.*

Q: How is this condition of unbelief actually proven by the text of John's account?

A: The verb used in v.25 is not "said" as in being told once, but "saying" as in a continuous, repeated action. It could be translated, "So the other disciples **kept** saying to him..." No doubt the women and the men from the road added to this testimony. But it is ultimately proven by his own words in v.25, "*I will not believe*". In fact, his statement could be properly rendered from the grammatical Greek as the double negative, "I positively will not believe!"

Q: How did Jesus treat Thomas differently from when He first appeared to the Ten the week previous?

A: Actually He did no such thing. (Trick question.) Just as He did not confront Thomas as he deserved, Christ re-issued the assurance of peace. Like all encounters with Christ recorded in Scripture, Jesus always meets a person at their level of need in order to lift them to where they ought to be.

Q: What is the dangerous thing Christ sees in Thomas which He wants to bring to an immediate end before it can progress any further?

A: A heart of unbelief.

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.

— Hebrews 3:12

Q: How do we know that Thomas' reaction to Christ came about as an act of true biblical faith?

A: There is nothing to suggest that Thomas actually touched Jesus; his testimony (v.28) came about by **seeing and hearing** Christ rather than **touching** Him.

Q: Why does Thomas' confession, "My Lord and my God" sound familiar where the Gospel of John is concerned?

A: It is the one of the seven testimonies he records concerning the deity of Christ in his overall Gospel:

1. John the Baptist—Jn. 1:34
2. Nathanael—Jn. 1:49
3. Jesus Himself—Jn. 5:25; 10:16
4. Peter—Jn. 6:69
5. The healed blind man—Jn. 9:35
6. Martha—Jn. 11:27
7. John himself—Jn. 20:30-31

Point: *It may appear to be sophisticated or intellectual to question Jesus and what He did, but this is most often evidence of a hardened heart rather than a searching mind. Thomas represents the scientific approach which is qualified by someone who asserts, "I will not believe unless..." They are already admitting they do not believe and although they can have faith in their so-called scientific approach, they are incapable of having faith in what God revealed. It always comes down to the bottom line issue of Christ's deity—those who finally confess, "My Lord and my God".*

Application: *The transformation from doubt to assurance was accomplished by restoring faith in Christ and His Word; otherwise faith is placed in something else, most often one's self.*

²⁹Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.”

³⁰Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

[Read v.29-31]

Q: What is John's main point about the Resurrection?

A: The Resurrection miracle was not exclusive for those alive at the time it took place so that we should envy them, but is experienced by every Believer of every age regardless.

Q: What is John's main point about belief in Christ?

A: It comes to all who “see” Christ by faith (Rom. 10:17) as a result of believing His Word, not by the historically small number of eyewitnesses who lived at the time of His life, death and Resurrection.

Observation: *The Gospel of John contains nearly 100 references to believing on Christ.*

If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

— 1 John 5:9–13

Q: What is important about the way John closes this section?

A: The signs John selected are proof of the deity of Christ so that salvation can come by belief in the deity of Christ, not by believing in miracles. In fact, there are several instances in his Gospel where John specifically notes this problem. (Jn. 2:23-25; 6:2; 6:66; 11:47) Jesus Himself explained this:

“But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.”

— John 5:36-40

Application: *Faith in Christ as the Son of God through belief in His Word accomplishes the ultimate transformation from death to life.*

Overall Application

Salvation is not an act of resuscitation but resurrection from the dead to the living. The Ten were transformed from fear to courage and Thomas from doubt to assurance, and John invites us to trust in Christ in order to be transformed from death to eternal life.

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

— John 3:36

- *Where do you see yourself where the personal work of the Gospel is concerned?*
- *Where do you see yourself in carrying out the work of the Gospel where others are concerned?*