

## ***Easter & Beyond***

### ***John 20:1-21:25***

Given that the Good Friday service came from the passion narratives in John, this week's devotional readings reflect on the resurrection narratives there. The Gospels do not merely describe 'what happened' in some sort of dispassionate chronologue. Instead, they interpret the significance of the resurrection appearances, applying those lessons to the particular context, needs, questions, and issues of their church. To understand the point of each narrative, we look for clues to the original situation, and the light it sheds on author's application of Jesus' resurrection to that occasion. This takes careful reading, sensitivity to the special emphases of each gospel, and a little detective work, but the results reward the effort.

#### **Day 1: John 20:1-31 Seeing is believing ... or is it?**

The first feature we note is that John 20 records six post-resurrection encounters with Jesus, illustrating various ways that his followers came to faith, and the implications for subsequent generations of believers. In particular, he considers the relationship between 'seeing' and 'believing'.

**20:1-2** Mary **sees** the stone rolled away and does not come to faith, but supposes that someone moved the body.

**20:3-10** The 'beloved disciple' **sees** the empty tomb and comes to some weak form of faith, without clear understanding.

**20:11-18** Mary **sees** both angels and Jesus, but does not come to faith until she hears Jesus speak to her.

**20:19-23** The disciples **see** Jesus' wounds and come to faith.

**20:24-29** Thomas refuses to believe in Jesus because he has not **seen** Jesus and until he **sees** the nail imprint in his hands and touches the wound in his side, though he believes when he **sees** (with no mention of touching).

**20:30-31** Blessed are those who believe even though they have not **seen**.

This was the last of the four Gospels written. So it is no surprise that the earliest readers – most of whom would never have known Jesus personally – are unsettled by the challenge of faith. "How can we believe in Jesus," they seem to be asking, "when we have never seen him or his miracles?" John implicitly answers both questions in the way that he tells the resurrection story. More than any other Gospel, John emphasizes what people *saw* after the resurrection, and what impact it had on their faith. His point is that no direct correlation exists between seeing and believing. Besides, he has provided this Gospel as reliable eyewitness testimony, for

the sake of those who did not see Jesus at work (20:30-31). So subsequent generations – including our own – are at no disadvantage. In fact, those who believe without seeing Jesus receive his greater commendation.

### **Day 2: John 20:1-18 The apostle to the apostles**

According to contemporary sociologist Rodney Stark, one of the reasons that Christianity spread so rapidly in the ancient world was its high regard for women. In this trait, the early believers followed their master's lead. Notably, all four Gospels affirm that Mary – whether alone or in the company of other women – was the first to visit Jesus' tomb. John indicates that she was also the first to see the risen Christ. In quick succession she conveys two distinctively different messages to the disciples. Her first sets the disciples in motion: "They have taken Jesus out of the tomb, and we don't know where they put him" (20:2). Her second proclaims the resurrection for the first time: "I have seen the Lord!" (20:18). Jesus' first post-resurrection directive to the disciples came through Mary (20:17). And so, the early Church called her, 'the apostle to the apostles' (apostle means 'authorized representative'). As we periodically revisit the role of women in the contemporary Church, this is a key data point to bear in mind: in a highly patriarchal culture, Mary was the first to visit the tomb, the first to meet Jesus, the first messenger from Jesus to his disciples, and the first to proclaim the resurrection.

### **Day 3: John 20:19-23 Mission at the heart of discipleship**

These few verses are John's version of the Great Commission. Four features deserve notice. First, Jesus commissions them: the Father had sent him, now he sends them. Some forty times in this Gospel, John notes that Jesus was 'sent' by the Father. Now Jesus sends. This is an affirmation of his authority: from one who was sent, he has now become the one who sends, an implicit claim to deity. Secondly, it is an extraordinary commission: they are not just Jesus' representatives; they share in comparable authority to that which he possesses from the Father. Thirdly, to equip them for their task, Jesus' empowers them with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who empowered the judges and prophets of old, the Spirit who empowered him during his earthly ministry. Fourthly, he grants them the authority to announce the forgiveness of sins. This is not priestly absolution. In the Gospel of John, 'sin' is to reject Jesus; salvation comes through believing in him, and judgment comes on those who reject him. So 'to forgive or retain sins' is to preach the gospel, offering salvation to those who believe, and warning of judgment against those who refuse (3:16-18).

This is still our commission today: to proclaim the gospel of Christ, imbued with his authority and empowered with his Spirit, offering forgiveness of sins to the repentant, and warning of judgment upon the unrepentant.

#### **Day 4: John 21:1-14 Breakfast by the sea**

To our way of thinking, this is an odd account. The disciples have already received Jesus' commission, and the Spirit who empowers mission. And yet, a new day finds them, not evangelizing or preaching to crowds, but apparently hanging around, somewhat randomly deciding to go fishing together. Professional fishermen, they catch nothing at the best time of day for fishing, when a stranger tells them from shore to throw their net from the other side of the boat. They catch 153 large fish in one cast, though, surprisingly, their net does not tear under the weight. Peter concludes that the stranger is Jesus, and is in such a rush to get to shore, he jumps overboard. Then they all eat breakfast together. Like I said, it all seems just a little odd.

But a few points might be made. First, the account drives home graphically how dependent the disciples still are on Jesus. Apart from Jesus, they can do nothing (John 15:5). Despite receiving both a commission and the Spirit, they cannot succeed even at their 'secular' vocation without Jesus' help. (In fact, none of the Gospels record any of the professional-fishermen disciples ever catching fish without this carpenter's advice!) How much more will they need his help to catch men. Secondly, Jesus has secured his own food, though he invites them to add to the supply from their own recent success (which he also provided). This seems a transparent metaphor for Christian ministry. We are not indispensable to the mission of God: we accomplish nothing that Jesus could not do on his own, and whatever we do is actually his doing through us. Last, yet not least, eating and fellowship are central to the Christian life: they could simply have worshipped Jesus; instead, he eats with them.

And so, we too can achieve nothing in mission or service for God without him working in and through us. At the same time, the mission of God is not just about accomplishing goals and outreach; it is also about fellowship, and even about eating together.

#### **Day 5: John 21:15-19 Jesus and Peter**

Jesus has some particular unfinished business with Peter, the disciple who had pledged to die for him (John 13:37), but who soon thereafter denied him three times. "Do you love me more than these?" Jesus asked. More than what? More than his boat and fishing gear? Or more than the other

disciples? Likely the latter. Peter had promised never to desert Jesus, even if everyone else did. When Jesus appeared beside the lake, it was Peter who jumped into the water to get to him faster. Does he think that he loves Jesus most of among all the disciples? Peter does not rise to the bait ... he replies simply, "You know that I love you." Twice more Jesus asks, and the point sinks in: three denials, three queries about love. Sometimes with us, too, Jesus has to cut deeply to clear out the root of sin.

Still, Jesus' intention is not to humiliate Peter but to restore him. Three times he assigns Peter a crucial task: "Feed my lambs." "Shepherd my sheep." "Feed my sheep." Peter had failed miserably. But he has been redeemed. And he will have one more chance to prove himself: he will be imprisoned for his faith, and then martyred. This time, John implies, Peter will not fail. And so Peter serves as an assurance and encouragement to failed disciples: Jesus restores, Jesus recommissions, Jesus gives a second chance to prove oneself. And he may do so for us, too, if we need it.

#### **Day 6: John 21:20-25 Peter and John**

This is a surprising little addendum, explicitly connected to the previous episode: Jesus says to Peter, "*Follow me*"; Peter looks over his shoulder and sees the Beloved Disciple (likely the apostle John) *following* them. "What about him," Peter asks? "Will he, too, be martyred? Will he live until you return?" "That's none of your business," Jesus rebukes, "all you need to concern yourself about is you *following me*."

At the very least, John – or perhaps one of his disciples who added 21:24-25) – is quashing a rumor that he would not die before Jesus returned. Jesus never actually said that, the author insists; it is a misunderstanding of what Jesus meant (21:23). Jesus offered no assurance that he would return any time soon, not even to rescue those suffering for him. They would do well – as we would – to settle in for the long haul, to commit to living for Christ no matter what trouble we face or how long we must wait for his return.

Additionally, we recall that the Corinthians pitted Paul against Apollos (1 Cor 1-4). Given the widely attested phenomenon of 'survivor guilt,' we can suppose that when Peter and other apostles began to be martyred, surviving apostles might face aspersions on their commitment to Christ from rank-and-file Christians. Here John commends Peter's ministry, while affirming the validity and value of his own. In so doing, John sends a reminder to his readers, both ancient and modern: both Peter and John receive Jesus' commendation; so we must not promote one leader against another, or to be loyal to spiritual mentors but only to Jesus.