

“Peace be With You”

The Sixty-Second in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 20:11-29; Judges 6:11-27

After studying Jesus’ messianic mission for many weeks, we now come to an entirely new phase of Jesus’ ministry—his post-resurrection appearances. In the remaining verses in John’s Gospel, it becomes clear that the fundamental nature of redemptive history has been completely transformed. Now that Jesus is risen bodily from the dead, and begins appearing to his disciples, we are given our first glimpse of the extent of Jesus’ victory over sin, death, and the grave. His victory over our greatest foe is complete and total—even if not finally consummated until the end of the age when Jesus returns to judge the world, raised the dead, and make all things new. Jesus’ bodily resurrection changes everything.

In this new phase of Jesus’ ministry, the humiliation of Jesus—extending from his incarnation until the moment of his death—gives way to his exaltation. When the eternal Word took to himself a true human nature, Jesus gave up the glory which he possessed with the Father and the Holy Spirit before the creation of all things. Jesus was rejected by his people (Israel) and abandoned by his disciples. After his resurrection from the dead, the number of those following him (exercising true faith in Jesus) grows exponentially. Jesus’ role as the suffering servant foretold by Isaiah gives way to his identity as Risen Lord. Although he veiled his glory with human flesh in his incarnation, after the resurrection, Jesus’ human nature has been glorified. The body he now possesses reveals to us the kind of body we will possess after the resurrection on the last day. So, although John’s Gospel is quickly coming to an end (as is our time in John—two more sermons after this one), there is obviously much of interest to us.

When John’s account of Jesus’ passion began in chapter 18, with Jesus’ arrest, it became clear that although Jesus is without sin, he is truly human, and therefore subject to all manner of human weakness—including death. His flesh tears when whipped, nails can be driven through his feet and wrists, he suffers terrible thirst and struggles to breathe, and then dies. Recall that in the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17), Jesus told his disciples that he was leaving them, and that it was actually to their advantage that he go away because he will then be able send to them the Holy Spirit (the comforter) and that he would go to prepare a place for them. These promises were difficult for the disciples to accept because they did not yet have the categories they will need to make sense of Jesus’ instructions to them. After Jesus rises from the dead, all that changes, as the weaknesses of human nature gives way to the transformation of human nature in the resurrection.

When we left off last time (the first ten verses of John 20) with Mary Magdalene discovering that the stone sealing Jesus’ tomb was rolled away, and that Jesus’ tomb was empty, she then ran back to tell Peter and John that someone had taken the Lord’s body. The two disciples hurried to the tomb to see for themselves what had happened. It was just as Mary had said. Jesus’ grave cloths were left behind, the head cloth had been neatly folded, but Jesus’ body was nowhere to be found. John tells us that when he saw the tomb empty and the grave cloths, at that moment he believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. Peter, we are told by Luke, marveled at what he saw, and he and John returned their homes not knowing what to expect, or what would come next.

All of this indicates to the reader of John’s Gospel that it is not until Easter and the discovery of the empty tomb, that the things Jesus told them during the Upper Room Discourse make sense, specifically

his departure so as to go and prepare a place for them, and the promise that he will send the Holy Spirit. What follows, then, with the post-resurrection appearances by Jesus, is the realization of the promises he made earlier in his ministry—as when he first cleansed the temple three years earlier, and again in the Upper Room Discourse just days before. Now that Jesus has risen from the dead, his earlier statements start to make sense as Jesus appears to several of his disciples.

After telling us in verse 10, that Peter and John went home (not yet realizing how Jesus had fulfilled Old Testament prophecy), we learn in verse 11 that Mary went back to the tomb. *“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.”* We do not know why Mary went back to the tomb, perhaps because of grief or because she wanted to know what had happened to the body of Jesus. John tells us in the next two verses that when she returned from the tomb, *“[Mary] saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’”*

Given the low social-standing of women in first-century Judaism, it is truly remarkable that the angel appeared first to Mary, not to Peter or John, or to any of the other male disciples. When Mary comes back to the tomb, obviously upset (to the point of weeping) the angels speak to her. No doubt startled by their presence, Mary answers them, *“they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”* Mary saw the stone rolled away and that tomb was empty when she first went to the tomb earlier that morning—all she told John and Peter was that Jesus’ body was missing. Now two angels in white are present. Luke tells us that *“two men stood by them in dazzling apparel”* (Luke 24:4). Mark indicates that Mary *“saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe”* (Mark 16:4). Various angels came and went, they took on human-like form, and yet were obviously not human.

But the two angels were not the only ones present. The risen Jesus was also there. According to verse 14, *“having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.”* There has been much ink spilt about this account, specifically the question as to why Mary did not recognize Jesus. The Emmaus account seems to indicate that Jesus somehow prevented the two disciples from recognizing him. Later on in John’s Gospel when Jesus appears in Galilee, those in the boat do not recognize him at first. Yet, the gospels also tell us that Jesus’ resurrection body can be seen, he is recognized, and even touched (as Thomas will soon do). Our Lord’s resurrection body still bears all the marks of the nail wounds in his hands and feet and from the spear thrust into his side.

The best resolution we get to this question comes from 1 Corinthians 15, and Paul’s account of the resurrection body, where Paul writes in verses 42-49, *“what is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.”* Jesus’ resurrection body is described by Paul in contrast to the natural, earthly bodies in which we are born. In many ways, the resurrection body has strong identity with our current earthly bodies, and yet, as Paul describes, the resurrection body is completely transformed. The differences between the spiritual and natural body explains why Mary was not scared to death (like she had seen a ghost or an apparition), yet at the same time did not recognize Jesus.

It is also quite likely that at least one reason his disciples did immediately recognize Jesus is that dead people usually do not appear to us after they have been buried. Hollywood makes this common place with Star Wars, Ghost, and a host of others (all of which in some sense are parodies of Jesus' real bodily resurrection). But for Mary Magdalene that Easter morning, all she was thinking about was Jesus' missing body, and the terrible fact that someone had desecrated his tomb. She had no category for what she was about to see, and therefore, she had no expectation that the risen Jesus would appear to her. Since the angels had human form (to some degree) and they speak to her, she is startled by them, but she remains preoccupied with figuring out what happened to Jesus's body.

According to John (v, 15), "*Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?'*" Jesus is polite (addressing formally her as "woman"), but like the angels had done, there is a mild rebuke contained within his first question. Mary does not need to be weeping because of what happened to Jesus, because he is standing there asking her questions! She should not be sad, but overjoyed. Jesus' second question gets to the heart of the issue. Whom is she seeking?" Jesus is gently preparing her for the best news she will ever receive. But even as he speaks to her, Mary still does not realize it is Jesus.

"Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.'" Mary has no category for someone being alive after being crucified. She is distraught with worry because the tomb is empty, the grave clothes remain, but there is no sign of Jesus' body. When Jesus questions her, she thinks he is the gardener, who maintained the garden in which the tomb was located. Mary wants to know what this man has done with Jesus' body, and pleads with him that if only he would return Jesus' body to her, she will take care of it.

All Jesus has to do is speak her name and she immediately recognizes her Savior's voice. According to verse 16, "*Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'* She turned and said to him in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means Teacher)." The words of John 10:3-4 immediately come to mind. [His] "*sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.*" Mary Magdalene hears the voice of the Good Shepherd and whatever worries she had about the body of Jesus being missing instantly vanish. Calling Jesus "Rabboni," Mary now uses this formal title in a very personal and spontaneous way.¹

Mary turns to see the risen Jesus. We can only imagine the joy she must have felt. Here is Jesus, alive—just as he promised—speaking with her. It immediately becomes clear, however, that despite the joy Mary felt, the relationship between Jesus and his disciples (and with Mary) has been fundamentally changed. According to verse 17, "*Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*" Instinctively, Mary likely reached out to touch Jesus, or perhaps, she fell at his feet—John does not say. Matthew reports that that when Mary and the other women who had accompanied her to the tomb saw Jesus alive, "*Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him"* (Matthew 28:9).

There are a host of interpretations about what Jesus means when he tells Mary "do not to cling to me, for I have not yet ascended," but the best (and the easiest) to understand is that Jesus is saying to Mary something like, "do not cling to me because I am in the process of ascending to the Father." Mary need never worry about Jesus again. She should be joyful and realize the magnitude of what has just

¹ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 637.

happened. She should do as the angels have commanded her to, go and tell the disciples that he is risen, and that he will soon ascend to the Father.² As the author of Hebrews speaks of the “days of his flesh” as a time now past, and as Paul contrasts a spiritual body with a natural one, so too Jesus is now glorified, awaiting the time forty days later when he will ascend into heaven and then send them the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Because of this, Mary must not cling to him as she might have done before his resurrection. The reality of Jesus’ relationship to his disciples is now completely changed.

Lest we forget, the male disciples had all been in hiding, afraid of arrest. They abandoned Jesus when he needed them most. Nevertheless, Jesus instructs Mary to “*go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’*” We must not overlook the significance of Jesus calling these men his brothers—meaning they are forgiven for what they have done (abandoning Jesus and not believing that he would rise from the dead). While their relationship with Jesus has been fundamentally changed because Jesus is now in a resurrected and glorified body, the relationship between Jesus and his disciples has not been severed even if it has been completely transformed. So too, Jesus’ relationship to the Father (as Son) is now to be fully enjoyed by Jesus’ disciples. Jesus’ Father is their Father. His God (YHWH) is their God.

Jesus’ sonship, is eternal. The disciples’ sonship is by adoption. But Jesus’ death and resurrection has established forever the disciples’ relationship to the Father as his adopted sons. As Paul put it in Romans 8:15-16, “*for you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.*” Given the weakness and foibles of the disciples during Jesus’ messianic mission, the very fact that Jesus calls them “brothers” and extends to them such wonderful gifts is truly a sign of God’s grace toward sinners. That which Jesus won for his disciples, he has won for us as well.

Mary does as Jesus told her. According to verse 18, “*Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’—and that he had said these things to her.*” John does not mention how the disciples reacted to Mary’s report. But Luke recounts their considerable skepticism before Peter and John went to the tomb to see for themselves. “*Returning from the tomb [the women] told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened*” (Luke 24:9-11).

While Jesus appeared to Mary, and then Mary went to tell the disciples, with Peter and John going to the tomb and then home, shortly after, Jesus appeared to two of his disciples while they were traveling to the village of Emmaus (as recounted in Luke 24, and to which I referred last time). After Jesus revealed his identity to them in the breaking of bread, when the two disciples invited Jesus to join them for a meal, Luke recounts that “*they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread*” (Luke 24:33-35).

On Sunday morning, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and a number of the women, to Cleopas and the

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 644.

other unnamed disciple on the Road to Emmaus, and then to Peter—whose reaction we are not given, but who must have been completely overwhelmed by the knowledge that Jesus had forgiven him, despite Peter’s denial of Jesus. From the time Peter denied Jesus, until the time Jesus appeared to him, Peter must have been consumed by guilt and by shame. We can only imagine the sense of joy and relief Peter felt when Jesus absolved him for his cowardice and lack of faith.

As it grew dark and the first day of the week gave way to evening, Jesus’ disciples assembled together, no doubt, to discuss what had happened, to compare notes (as it were), and most importantly, to share their collective joy at the news that Jesus was alive just as he had promised. We can imagine the disciples recounting the things Jesus had told them throughout their three years with him, especially the things he told them during the Upper Room Discourse during the last Passover together. On this Sunday evening, the things Jesus spelled out to them on the previous Thursday night after they ate the Passover together begin to make sense. Now that Jesus has been raised from the dead, they have the critical interpretive category which helps them make sense of everything else—the resurrection.

Beginning in verse 19, John, who was present when what follows happened, recounts Jesus’ appearance to the assembled group. *“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.’”* We do not know how many had assembled (just the ten remaining disciples, Judas was dead, and Thomas was not present) or whether this was an extended group (which included people like Cleopas and the unnamed disciple to whom Jesus had appeared earlier that day). The group had locked the doors because they had no doubt heard that the Jews had accused Jesus’ disciples of stealing his body, and wanted no trouble from the Sanhedrin or from Pilate.

The locked doors serve another purpose in John’s account—to emphasize the miraculous nature of Jesus’ appearance to them. The door was closed and locked, yet Jesus “appeared” in their midst. Just as his body passed through the grave clothes, so too, Jesus’ body passed through the walls of the room where the disciples had assembled. He literally materialized in their midst.³ After appearing, Jesus pronounced his word of peace, his “shalom” upon those assembled. On several occasions before his death and resurrection, Jesus had also done this (i.e., John 14:27). But this time was different.

Ordinarily a common Jewish greeting, Jesus completely transforms the term “shalom” into a reference to the “peace” which Jesus has accomplished for all those for whom he has died, and for whom he has been raised. This is very much like the greeting the Angel of the Lord extended to Gideon in Judges 6:23 (our Old Testament Lesson), where the Lord’s extending of “peace” is tied to the giving of important revelation. Having extended to them the word of “peace” (which is also a declaration that their sins are forgiven), Jesus removes any fears and doubts the disciples may still have had. John tells us that *“when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.”* Surely, this must be the most understated reaction in all the Bible. Jesus is not only alive, but he’s so much alive that his body bears the wounds so cruelly inflicted upon him. The disciples are privileged to see these wounds as the proof that Jesus is not a ghost or a phantom, but that he had been raised bodily from the dead, with the spiritual body later described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.

Again, Jesus pronounces his blessing upon the assembled group. *“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’”* Since Jesus prayed to the Father in

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 646.

John 17:18, “*as you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world,*” it was only a matter of time before Jesus commissions the disciples to continue the work which the Father sent Jesus to commence. The time has come for the disciples to take the things he has taught them to the ends of the earth. But to do this, they must preach, teach, and evangelize in the power of the Holy Spirit. And so John tells us in verses 22-23, “*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; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’*” Jesus is preparing them for Pentecost just weeks away.

That Jesus “breathes” upon them and then tells them to receive the Spirit, harkens us back to the creation account, when God breathed into Adam and he came to life after being formed from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7). Just as God-breathed into Adam and he came to life, so too, the disciples have been given eternal life through the work of the Holy Spirit, and now the Spirit begins to equip them to continue the work which Jesus has already begun, and which they will now carry forth.⁴ In this act, Jesus is preparing his disciples by explaining that they have been given eternal life, that God is the author of that life which comes through the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and that soon, Jesus will send the Holy Spirit in all his fullness at Pentecost. The disciples receive both a blessing (a provisional reception of the Spirit) and a promise (that the Spirit will soon come in great power at Pentecost). All of this is to prepare them to take the gospel to the ends of the Earth, something which they cannot do in their own power.

Furthermore, Jesus tells them that because God extends the forgiveness of sins to all those who believe in Jesus, the disciples are both to proclaim the forgiveness of sins as well as to practice the forgiveness of sin to all those to whom God extends it. Since the disciples are to carry on the work begun by Jesus, they must preach the words given them by Jesus, and then live the words that they preach. This too is part of the commission which Jesus now begins to extend to them after his resurrection, and which will come in its fullness at Pentecost. Jesus’ disciples must forgive even as they preach the forgiveness of sins.

John now turns his attention to Thomas—the hero of every skeptic—who must see things for himself. According to John (in v. 24-25), “*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 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.’*” Thomas knows the other disciples far too well. He will not accept, nor trust, their testimony. Unless Jesus himself appears to him, Thomas will not believe them.

Remarkably, Jesus allows this very thing. In verses 26-28, we read of the most amazing post-resurrection appearance of Jesus yet. “*Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’*” Jesus again extends his word of “Shalom” with the disciples all present. But Jesus now speaks directly to the doubting Thomas. “*Then [Jesus] 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.’*” Whatever doubts Thomas had instantly vanish in the face of such overwhelming evidence. Thomas saw the risen Jesus with his own eyes. He heard the risen Jesus speak to him with his own ears. He even touches the wounds in Jesus’ hands and side. In his invitation to Thomas, Jesus says to every skeptic and doubter who is genuinely interested in the truth, “put my claims to the test.”

Thomas’ response to Jesus is one of the key confessions of the deity of Jesus found in all of the New

⁴ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 643

Testament. “*Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’*” Thomas makes the correct intellectual leap from the fact of Jesus’ bodily resurrection to a confession offered in faith that Jesus is both Lord and God. More importantly, Jesus accepts Thomas’ confession without rebuke. With these words, it is clear that at this very moment, Thomas has become a true believer.

In verse 29, John recounts that “*Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’*” Thomas has believed because Jesus allowed him to investigate first-hand the object of his faith (himself). Thomas, unlike some of the others mentioned earlier in John’s Gospel, has genuine saving faith, not some sort of passing, temporary faith. Thomas’ verbal confession reflects what is truly in his heart. But to those, unlike Thomas, who are not granted the visible appearance of Jesus, and who believe anyway (all of us), Jesus pronounces a blessing—not in the sense of happiness, but in the sense that we will receive everything Thomas and the others did. We are blessed because we have believed the testimony of others (the apostles) found in God’s word.

As did Thomas, if we confess that Jesus is our Lord and our God, then Jesus is our brother, and YHWH is our God and Father. We are the adopted sons and daughters of God. And now Jesus says to us “peace be with you.”