John 20:19-31

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

**Jesus and Thomas**

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin\*), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ 27Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ 28Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ 29Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

**The Purpose of This Book**

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe\* that Jesus is the Messiah,\* the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

 Poor Thomas has been given a bad name: *Doubting* Thomas. Just because he happened to be out of the hotel room (the door was locked!) when Jesus appeared to the other disciples, who were huddled in fear for their lives. Before Christ’s appearance, did they truly believe Mary’s testimony? And *what about* Mary? Despite seeing the empty tomb, two angels, and *Jesus himself,* she still believed that Jesus was dead and his body stolen. So does Thomas really deserve to be singled out as the one who doubts?

 And is he much different from us? Who among us would not appreciate a visit from the resurrected Christ, just to bolster our faith a tad. Wouldn’t it be convenient for Jesus to just show up when we’re clumsily explaining our faith to a “Doubting Thomas”? *See, Tom? This is Jesus. Jesus, meet Tom. Tom, Jesus.*

The problem is that Jesus didn’t stick around for long. Fifty days, then he ascends to heaven. So why do the disciples get the privilege of a personal visit while you and I don’t? Wouldn’t the Church benefit so much more from Jesus’ continued presence on earth? Can you imagine Jesus going on a world tour, appearing at the Meadowlands, Madison Square Garden, Vegas, or Woodstock? What a worship festival! And who wouldn’t want to be billed with Jesus? Who wouldn’t become a disciple of Jesus if he were still appearing today?

Stop! Who are we kidding? Last week I posited that if Jesus had come to the world two thousand years later than he did, he would still be executed. Someone would consider him a threat. Someone would discredit him. Someone would kill him. So if he remained with us long after the resurrection, wouldn’t he simply be re-executed? And if he couldn’t be eliminated, someone would just lock him away where no one would be able to hear him, to see him. Perhaps…

And perhaps there is another, a better reason that Jesus ascends to heaven and leaves his disciples to build the Church. But before we consider this, we should first ask ourselves *what is the mission of the Church?* Is it to promote Jesus? To build him into a rock star? A celebrity? A superhero? I don’t know any rock stars, celebrities, or superheroes. I suppose they all have bodyguards or agents to protect them and keep them away from the loud throngs, from the dangers of the masses. And one must pay a great deal of money just to see a celebrity up close. I was fortunate enough to have Bill Clinton speak at my commencement ceremony at City College. Though I didn’t pay directly to see him that day, I had paid city college a great deal of money and done a lot of work just for the privilege of being there.

If Jesus were *physically* with us today, I believe that he would be quite a celebrity. And human nature being what it is, problems would arise. Some people would want to know Jesus just to have boasting rights. “*I know Jesus. He’s my pal. We’re tight. Just the other day I had lunch with him…” Y*ou get the picture. Furthermore, access to Jesus would be quite limited, or expensive. You’d either have to know the right people, grease the right palms, or in some way pay for the privilege of meeting him. People would see Jesus as a marketing opportunity *(“For only $95, you can see Jesus live”).* If Jesus were a celebrity, no one would really want to know him for who he really is; instead they would want to know him for purely selfish reasons, for boasting rights or financial gain.

Jesus’ mission on earth was never to be a rock star or celebrity or superhero; it was, in his own words, “to do the will of Him who sent me.”

And what was God’s will, his mission for Jesus, his reason for sending him? **It was to bring us back into a relationship with God.** Jesus life story is one of perfect submission to the will of God. In that way, Jesus serves as a model for us. But it was also God’s will for Jesus to die for us, not just to show how far God was willing to go to rescue his lost children, but it was also to take away our sins, to show us that we are forgiven. Jesus has made us clean and whole, and through Jesus we are back in God’s realm, God’s kingdom. If we paraded Jesus around like a celebrity, we would be so distracted by his popularity that we would never recognize the purpose of his life, or death, or resurrection.

What brings us into relationship with God is our relationship with Jesus Christ. If we look upon Jesus as some celebrity, we can never have a relationship with him, and hence, we can never have a sincere relationship with God. This is why Jesus left it to the disciples to witness to his resurrection. He empowered them with the Holy Spirit not to be carnival barkers promoting a God who does magic tricks, but to convey to us the length and breadth and height and depth of God’s love as experienced through Jesus Christ in a manner that only the disciples could truly convey. All this so that we might know Jesus *personally*, not simply as a man who God lifted from the grave, but as the Son of God, perfect in every way, an incarnation of God’s perfect love for us. It’s our ability to recognize Christ’s perfect love for us, and his perfect offering of his own life for our sake that enables us, with all sincerity, to proclaim *HALLELUIA!* to the news that Christ is risen. Thomas did not mourn the fact that he had missed seeing something truly amazing by not seeing a resurrected human being when the other disciples had; Thomas wanted to see JESUS alive. And when he did, he forgot about the criteria he had set for his own belief in the fact (“I won’t believe it until I place my hand in his side”); Thomas simply declared “My Lord and my God.” *My Lord* and *my* God! It was personal. He was not just expressing excitement at witnessing something unusual; it was seeing the one he loved, HIS Lord and HIS savior, alive. It was an expression of pure joy!

When Jesus breathed his Spirit into the disciples that evening in the upper room, he didn’t just empower them to tell people about himself; he breathed something of himself into the disciples, something divine that could communicate not just by word, but by deed, who Jesus is. Think about how you became a believer in Jesus Christ. Did someone show you some tricks, perform some miracles to convince you of God’s power? Or did someone close to you communicate God’s own love to you? It was probably someone who was very close to you at the time who demonstrated Christ’s love by caring for you, praying for you, helping you with problems. Someone with whom you had a relationship, just as God desires a relationship with you. Were you convinced that Jesus was your savior by intellectual discernment, by hard physical evidence, or did the love of God penetrate your heart of hearts and fill you with a joy that can only come by way of knowing that God abides with you, one who loves you?

The Bible describes the Church as the bride of Christ; we are married to Jesus. Celebrity marriages don’t usually pan out, because both the bride and the groom are in it for their own interests. God’s interest is purely in us, and he our interest to be in Him. Let us be thankful that we have been given the opportunity to get to know Jesus for who he is, one who came not to be idolized but to serve us. Let us be thankful that God is not a magician who wants us to be impressed by his powers; let us be thankful that God wants nothing more than to love us, and have us experience the full measure of joy and peace that comes from dwelling in his presence.