

Bible Study Guide: Week of 4-13-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Over the next two weeks we will explore Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to his disciples. This week, we look at Jesus' coming among his disciples on Easter evening according to John. Next week, we have what is perhaps my favorite New Testament passage—Jesus' meeting two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. I look forward to reading and studying these stories with you from a distance and continue to long for the day we are back together again.

Peace be with you,

Pastor Andrew

Gospel: John 20:19-31

¹⁹When 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." ²⁴But 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."

²⁶A 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." ³⁰Now 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.

¹⁹When 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."

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"That day" is Easter Sunday. According to John, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, found it empty, and went to tell Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Those two ran to the tomb, saw it empty, and went home. Mary stayed at the tomb where she encountered the risen Jesus. Later that evening, Jesus appeared to the disciples. Notice that the doors are locked because of the disciples' fear of "the Jews." In an historical sense, Jesus' followers were probably afraid that they would be rounded up and crucified as well. For John's community (remember, John's gospel was written in the late first century AD) the fear of "the Jews" was likely a bit different. John's church members were mostly Jewish folks who had been expelled from their synagogues for their belief in Jesus. So fear of "the Jews" for the first hearers of this gospel was a very real condition. We might imagine our own fears that cause us to

metaphorically or literally “lock the doors.” Jesus comes into the midst of our fear and bids us peace. Jesus’ invitation to the disciples to see his hands and side serves to prove that he is really the one who was crucified and raised.

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.”

The disciples react with joy, at which point Jesus again greets them with peace. He then follows this greeting with the words, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” On one level, this is a command, similar to the Great Commission in Matthew 28. On another level, this is an ominous warning of what is to come. The Father sent Jesus to suffer, be crucified, and be raised. Could the same thing be in store for Jesus’ followers? Many of Jesus’ disciples were, in fact, martyred. But remember why Jesus said the Father had sent him: “Not to condemn the world, but to save the world” (John 3:17), “to work the works of the Father” (John 9:4 and other places in the gospel where Jesus discusses the work of the Father), and “to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). Now Jesus sends his disciples not to condemn, but to bring about salvation. Now Jesus sends his disciples to continue the work of the Father. Now Jesus sends the disciples to testify to the truth. This is a tall task, indeed.

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.”

How will the disciples complete such a daunting mission? Not alone. Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit to help, guide, and lead them into all truth. Verse 23 presents a concept that has been called “the power of the keys” throughout Christian history. In Roman Catholic tradition, this is a power conferred by Jesus on Peter and his successors (i.e. the Bishops of Rome or the Popes) to forgive sin. The Catholic teaching is based on another place Jesus promised this authority to Peter in particular (Matthew 16:19). When Luther wrote about this “power of the keys” he talked about it in terms of the authority of church leaders to welcome new members (or not welcome new member) into the church. Here, Jesus speaks these words over all of his disciples, indicating that all the disciples (at least those gathered there) had a role to play in forgiving sins.

In John’s gospel, “sin” doesn’t mean “bad things people do.” Sin is a category in John’s gospel that indicates a lack of faith in Jesus. See, for example, the conversation about sin in John 9—the story of the man born blind. The Pharisees and disciples want to know “who sinned that this man was born blind?” But the Pharisees in particular, Jesus says, are the ones whose sin remains because they do not believe in Jesus or see God’s work evident in his life and ministry. So, in this context, what would it mean to “forgive the sins of any?” It would seem to mean not only overlooking or pardoning those who do not believe in Jesus, but also perhaps helping to lead them to belief. As I said, this is a tall task, indeed, for the disciples.

²⁴But 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.”

Thomas is often called “doubting Thomas,” but this is an unfair slight against Thomas. He merely asks for what the others have already received—to see the wounds of Jesus. Notice he refuses to believe. Just before this, Jesus has given the power to the disciples to forgive sins—that is, to pardon the unbelief of those whom they encounter. Here is an opportunity for the disciples to practice.

Though we cannot know where Thomas was, we might wonder where he would have been. On a night the others were huddled behind locked doors fearing for their very lives, where did Thomas have to be that was so important? Why was he not with the others? These are impossible to know, but tantalizing nonetheless.

²⁶A 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.”

Notice that the disciples indeed welcome Thomas back into their midst. They “forgive his sin” of disbelief. Notice also that this time, a week after Easter, the doors are just “shut,” not locked. The peace of Jesus eases the burden of fear on the disciples. Once again Jesus appears and shares peace with the disciples.

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.”

Jesus doesn't begrudge the disbelief of Thomas. He meets his request head on and invites Thomas to believe. Thomas' confession is the strongest statement of faith in the whole Gospel of John. Yet Jesus blesses all those who will come after Thomas (you and me, for example) who will not have such an opportunity to see and touch, but who will nevertheless come to believe in him.

³⁰Now 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.

This is a “false ending” to John, as John will continue just after this telling about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances in John 21. Here, though, we have a restatement of the purpose of this gospel—that the readers/hearers of this gospel might come to believe in Jesus and have life.

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Jesus shares peace three times with his disciples?
2. What do we have fear of such that we choose to lock our doors as the disciples did?
3. How does Jesus meet us in the midst of these fears and invite us to deeper faith?