

Cornerstone

*“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”
(John 20:21 ESV)*

As The Father Has Sent Me

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John 20:19-23

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Introduction:

Good morning Cornerstone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to John 20:19-23; that’s on page 906 in the church Bibles. I mentioned last week that in the Providence of God we ended up with TWO Sundays between the end of our series walking through the Acts of the Apostles and the start of our Advent series in December so we have decided to look at TWO of the FOUR Great Commission passages in the New Testament. Last week we looked at the one in Luke 24:44-49. That is the THIRD of the FOUR Great Commission passages, chronologically speaking. It takes place just hours before Jesus’ ascension. The one we are looking at today is the FIRST of the FOUR; it takes place on Easter Sunday evening – the very same day on which Jesus rose from the dead. The disciples are hiding in Jerusalem behind locked doors. They are still trying to figure things out at this point. They know the tomb is empty. They know that Jesus has already appeared to some of the women in their group and they are starting to remember some of the things that Jesus said about suffering and dying and rising from the dead and they are starting to realize that maybe Jesus wasn’t speaking metaphorically there – maybe Jesus was speaking LITERALLY. Maybe he meant for this to happen. Maybe this had to happen. Maybe Jesus HAD TO DIE and descend TO THE DEAD and defeat death and hell and on the third day he would rise physically, actually, BODILY from the dead – MAYBE that was the plan all along! They’re just starting to put that together - they are just starting to connect those dots - when all of the sudden Jesus passes through the walls, appears in their midst and begins to speak.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (John 20:19-23 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

I mentioned last week that this Great Commission passage in John is a little more confusing and controversial than the other three – and that is true. Partly that is because it was the one that came first – chronologically speaking. Jesus unpacked all this stuff over the course of the next 40 days – he elaborated, he repeated, he clarified like any good teacher will do - but here he is speaking in broad brush and vivid symbol. Remember they’re scared; they’re hiding; they’re trying to figure out what in the world just happened – so Jesus is helping them to understand and embrace this new reality. In this important transitional passage Jesus offers the disciples 4 things:

- 1. A peace grounded in forgiveness**
- 2. A mission patterned on his own example**
- 3. A power connected to the new creation**
- 4. An authority rooted in the Gospel**

We’ll start where Jesus starts, with a PEACE grounded in forgiveness.

A Peace Grounded In Forgiveness

Look again at verses 19-20:

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.” 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. (John 20:19-20 ESV)

There is a lot of change that happens over those two verses, isn't there? At the start of verse 19 the disciples are scared. They're hiding for fear of the Jews. The disciples had abandoned Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – despite all their brave protestations, despite all their talk of being with Jesus no matter what comes, when danger and trouble came, they all turned tail and ran away – and they're feeling that. They are feeling their weakness and humanity. They are very aware of their sin and betrayal – and then at the end of verse 20 the disciples are very GLAD – so what happened? How did we go from guilty and depressed to grateful and glad? And of course the answer is they saw the wounds of Jesus and they heard from him the words of PEACE. Colin Kruse says here:

“The disciples, and especially Peter who had denied him three times, would have felt deeply ashamed that they had abandoned Jesus in his hour of need. When Jesus appeared to them behind locked doors, his greeting of ‘Peace be with you!’ showed he was not holding their failures against them; rather, he was offering a restored relationship.”¹

All lasting peace begins right there.

All lasting peace begins with knowing that because of Jesus God is no longer holding our sins and failures against us.

All lasting peace begins with understanding what Jesus accomplished for us in his body on the cross.

Do you understand that?

Do you understand what he did, where he went and what he purchased?

The disciples are GETTING THAT NOW, just like Jesus said they would. He prophesied this peace before he gave it to them. In John 14:27-29 he said:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. 28 You heard me

¹ Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 374.

say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. 29 And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe.” (John 14:27-29 ESV)

So I TOLD YOU about this peace. I told you that I would have to go away and then I would come back. I told you ahead of time so that when it happened you would believe – and now it has happened! And the disciples DO BELIEVE and believing they receive, and receiving they are GLAD.

They understand in that moment – when they see the wounds of Jesus and when they hear him speaking peace – they understand that they are forgiven, that they have been reconciled with God, that they are forever friends with Jesus and there is life beyond the grave – and when you know those things; when you believe them in your heart; when you receive them from his hand – then you have peace. A peace that passes understanding, a peace not as the world gives, but a peace that only comes from Jesus. And when you have that peace, then you are ready to be sent out on mission to the world.

Can I can just stop and ask you a question: Do you have that peace?

We live in an anxious world and our kids are often described as “the anxious generation”. Jonathan Haidt has a book coming out in March called “The Anxious Generation”. He’s not a believer, he’s a social psychologist at New York University, but he has observed what I think most of us have observed – that kids today are more anxious and less peaceful than at any time previous in living memory. They are worried that the world is going to end because of some kind of climate disaster. They are worried that they are never going to be able to buy a house because of skyrocketing interest rates and property values. They are worried that they are never going to find a mate because of the collapse of traditional forms of social interaction and gender norms. And most of all they are worried about themselves – who they are, how they look and whether they measure up.

If there has ever been a world that needed messengers of PEACE it is this one.

This world NEEDS people who are not afraid.

This world needs people who know what matters, who know what's true and who know what's coming.

This world needs people who know Jesus – because Jesus is the only one who can give us TRUE and LASTING PEACE. Not a peace like the world gives. Not a peace that is passing, not a peace that is fading, not a peace that is fake – but a peace that passes understanding, a peace that is real, a peace that is solid, a peace that literally comes from another world.

If you have that peace then you should be GLAD and if you have that peace then you should be willing to go and share that peace with other people.

And that's the next thing we see in this story. Jesus gives them a peace grounded in forgiveness and then he sends them out on a mission patterned on his own example.

A Mission Patterned On His Own Example

Look again at verse 21:

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” (John 20:21 ESV)

What does that mean, exactly?

Are we suppose to do everything Jesus did? Are we suppose to walk on water? Are we supposed to multiply loaves of bread? Are we supposed to open the eyes of the blind? Heal the sick? Die on the cross? Rise from the dead?

Some of that symbolically, representatively maybe, but some of that clearly not. You don't have to die on the cross right? Jesus did that for you, and when he did that he said:

“It is finished” (John 19:30 ESV)

So a lot of stuff has been done FOR US – we don't have to REPEAT IT, IT'S BEEN DONE! So what are we talking about here? What does it mean that Jesus is sending us out in the same way that the Father sent him out? Andreas Kostenberger says helpfully here:

“just as the Son represented the Father, so Jesus' followers are to represent the Son as they are indwelt and enabled by the Spirit.”²

So that's the comparison: just as Jesus came as a representative of the Father, so now we are being sent out as representatives of him. We are his ambassadors – that's the point.

Now remember, this is the FIRST of the FOUR GREAT COMMISSION passages in the New Testament, so Jesus is going to flesh this out. Several days after this, when the disciples are up in Galilee Jesus will appear to them again and give them some more specific instructions; he'll say:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20 ESV)

That's what we tend to think of as “the nuts and bolts” of the Great Commission. Make disciples by going, baptizing and teaching – ok, but here, before they are given the nuts and bolts of the assignment they are being reminded that wherever they go and whatever they do they are representing Jesus.

Did your mom and dad ever remind you of that before you went out on the town on Saturday night? My parents used to remind me of that and I remind my kids of that – I will say to them: “Don't ever forget that people in this town know who you are. They know who your parents are. They know who we claim to be. So be careful how you represent.”

Now I don't just say that to my kids because I'm a pastor – I'd like to think that if I was the butcher, the baker or the candlestick maker I would still be known as a follower of Jesus in this

² Andreas Kostenberger, *A Theology Of John's Gospel And Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 544.

town – and so I want my kids to represent that. I want them to understand that people may decide whether or not to follow Jesus based on what they see in us.

That’s a huge responsibility – but it is an ASPECT of the mission!

The Apostle Paul says that this is one of the reasons God rejected the Old Covenant community:

For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” (Romans 2:24 ESV)

That is one of the major reasons WHY the Old Covenant HOUSE had to be ground down to one pure and perfect Cornerstone – because God was not being properly represented among the nations. So a new representative was chosen: JESUS.

“He is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15 ESV)

As Jesus himself said:

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9 ESV)

Jesus represented God PERFECTLY. He SAID what he was told to SAY and he did what he was told to do. That was the claim that he made again and again in John’s Gospel. He said to the disciples in places like John 5:19:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” (John 5:19 ESV)

In John 12:49 he said:

“I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak.” (John 12:49 ESV)

When Jesus was sent out by the Father he said what he was told to say and he did what he was told to do. He was **CONSTRAINED** in his speech and **CONSCIOUS** of his demeanor at all times – that’s what it means to be an ambassador.

It is tremendous responsibility to bear the name of Christ among the nations!

It is a terrific and terrifying honour to be known in this community as a Christian – literally, as a **LITTLE CHRIST**.

Are you aware of that?

Do you understand that when you walk through those doors today you will walk out as a living **REPRESENTATIVE OF JESUS CHRIST**?

You’re an ambassador. You’re supposed to talk the Jesus talk and walk the Jesus walk.

Speak. And shine.

That’s the mission.

Now how in the world are we going to do that? Well thankfully, there is a third component to this message. Jesus gives to the disciples a peace grounded in forgiveness, a mission patterned after his own example **AND**:

A Power Connected To The New Creation

Look again at verse 22:

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:22 ESV)

Now this is part of this passage that can be a little confusing. I thought the disciples didn’t receive the Holy Spirit until the Day of Pentecost, which happens 10 days after the ascension of

Jesus – but this is WAY BEFORE THAT. Remember this story in John 20 takes place on EASTER SUNDAY EVENING! So this is 50 days before Pentecost! So what in the world is going on here? Did the disciples receive the Spirit twice? Were there two Pentecosts? How are we to understand this passage? D.A. Carson is helpful here, he says:

“The episode in 20:22, which most will agree is in some sense symbolic, is best understood as symbolic of the enduement *that is still to come.*”³

Notice that it doesn’t SAY in this passage the disciples received the Holy Spirit – all John records is Jesus’ invitation to receive the Holy Spirit. More than a month later in the timeline Jesus will still be reminding the disciples to:

“stay in the city **until** you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49 ESV)

So more than a month later the actual RECEPTION of the Holy Spirit was still in the future – so what Jesus does here in John 20 is clearly symbolic. He BREATHES ON THEM and invites them to RECEIVE THE SPIRIT. This is a PROPHETIC ACTION – a SYMBOLIC ACTION but symbolic of what specifically?

The first text that comes to mind of course is Genesis 2:7 which says:

“then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and **breathed into his nostrils the breath of life**, and the man became a living creature.” (Genesis 2:7 ESV)

So there when God breathed on a lump of clay it became a living being – it became A MAN.

There are a couple of other passages that probably influenced how the disciples interpreted this symbolic action by Jesus but the most obvious of those would be Ezekiel 37 – we talked about that passage a few weeks ago when we were looking at Paul’s speech before King Agrippa. Paul said that he was on trial for believing in the hope of the Jews, which fundamentally was a hope in the prospect of resurrection as prophesied in places Ezekiel 37. In Ezekiel 37 the prophet is

³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 653.

shown a valley filled with dry bones. The dry bones represent the nation of Israel. God asks the prophet if dry bones can be brought back to life, and the prophet says:

“O Lord GOD, you know.” (Ezekiel 37:3 ESV)

Then the Lord speaks to the bones and says:

“Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” (Ezekiel 37:5 ESV)

He tells the prophet to prophecy to the bones saying:

“Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” (Ezekiel 37:9 ESV)

He does. The prophet speaks to the BREATH and it falls upon the bones and the bones come back to life.

So what do you think it meant to this room full of Bible reading Jewish boys when Jesus passes through the walls and BREATHES ON THEM and says: receive the Holy Spirit?

I’m pretty sure they heard that as a promise of resurrection and new creation life – how could they not?!

In fact this seems to be the point that John’s entire Gospel is driving towards. John’s Gospel takes the reader on a journey from Creation to New Creation:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” (John 1:1-4 ESV)

That’s where John begins and that’s why Jesus came! He came to give us LIFE! To do that he had to live a perfect life, die a sacrificial death, rise victoriously from the dead and give to us the gift of the Holy Spirit – that’s the story John’s been telling all along, and this is it’s climactic conclusion.

When Jesus invites the disciples to receive the Holy Spirit he is inviting them to receive the POWER OF NEW CREATION LIFE. He is inviting them to be raised from the dead, as it were. He is inviting them to be RESTORED by one degree of glory to the next into the very image and likeness of God – for this comes from the Lord WHO IS THE SPIRIT.

That's what the Spirit is FOR! That's why the Spirit was promised! And in the life of every born again believer, that is what the Spirit DOES – praise the Lord!

Jesus gives to the disciples a peace grounded in forgiveness, a mission patterned on his own example, a power connected to the new creation and then finally:

An Authority Rooted In The Gospel

The last part was the bit that can be confusing; this part is the bit that can be controversial. Look again at verse 23. Jesus says:

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (John 20:23 ESV)

Ok – well what exactly does that mean?

Last week Jesus said pretty clearly:

You are witnesses (Luke 24:48 ESV)

So we're not the accused, we're not the accusers, we're not the judge, we're not the jury – we're the witnesses.

Phew!

We RESTED in that truth! We rejoiced in that truth, but here it kind of sounds like MAYBE WE ARE the judge. It sounds like we are granting or withholding forgiveness from people. Is that what Jesus is saying here?

And the answer, thankfully is NO. John Marsh in his commentary puts it very simply, he says:

“There is no doubt from the context that the reference is to forgiving sins, or withholding forgiveness. But though this sounds stern and harsh, it is simply the result of the preaching of the gospel, which either brings men to repent as they hear of the ready and costly forgiveness of God, or leaves them unresponsive to the offer of forgiveness which is the gospel, and so they are left in their sins.”⁴

What Jesus is saying here is actually no different than what he said in Matthew 18:18:

“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:18 ESV)

As preachers of the Gospel we are in the binding and loosing business – not because of our own authority, but because of the authority of the Gospel itself. When we preach the Gospel to people we are handing them the KEY TO THE KINGDOM. We are giving them the ability to PASS THROUGH THE GATE. We are presenting them with a binary option: embrace the Jesus we preach and pass through into everlasting life or reject the Jesus we preach and pass through into everlasting death.

That is the power of the Gospel!

So what Jesus says here in John 20 is no different than what Jesus says 40 days later in Luke 24. We are witnesses. We open our mouths and we speak. We speak about Jesus. We hold him forth. And as we do – as our words go out – they divide all the world into light and dark – into death and life on the basis of their own authority – the authority of the message!

It is a terrifying responsibility – the Apostle Paul was well aware of it. He said:

⁴ John Marsh, *The Gospel St. John* (UK: Penguin, 1968), 641-642 as cited by Carson.

“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:15-16 ESV)

Using very similar imagery Paul says that we walk through the world giving off a certain smell. To some it smells like life. They draw near. They find Christ and they enter into eternal life. To others though, it smells like death. They turn away. They reject us and they reject Christ and in doing so they enter into eternal death.

That’s your job: wander throughout the whole world speaking and smelling like Jesus and affecting eternal destinies.

Who is sufficient for these things?

And the answer of course is that reconciled to God through the person and work of Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit – WE ARE.

That’s the answer that Paul intends for you to give to that question. Of course the mission is impossible! Of course we can’t do it in our own strength – but no one is ASKING YOU to do it in your own strength. In fact, in Luke 24, as we talked about last week, Jesus explicitly tells the disciples NOT TO TRY THIS:

“until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49 ESV)

You can’t do this in your own strength – but you can do this when you are clothed with power from on high. So – (deep breath) – RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT. Drink deeply from the wells of living water and go - as the Father has sent HIM so now HE is sending us.

O God help!

Let’s pray together.