

## “They Weren’t Expecting Him”

*John 20:19–31*

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It’s the evening of the first Easter Sunday. The women had come back from the tomb with the most astonishing report about the tomb being empty. Peter and John had run to see for themselves. And yet that evening — these disciples are locked in a room. Why?

John tells us why: “*for fear of the Jews.*” The same authorities who had arranged the execution of Jesus might come for them next. Door bolted, curtains drawn.

What’s locked you in in your life — maybe shame, you did something and you’ve never been the same. Grief, sorrow, and loss have been the walls around your life ever since .... Disappointment, someone did not show up, you didn’t show up, and failure memory is never far from you. Exhaustion. Cynicism. Are you locked behind something?

*Pray*

### THE LOCKED ROOM

The disciples were behind locked doors out of fear for the Jews. But there’s another reason as well. They had *heard* the resurrection reports but they hadn’t yet been *changed* by the resurrection reports. Not yet. Fear had them. Hearing about the resurrection and being transformed by the resurrection are two entirely different things — for them, and for us. Then into that locked room — Jesus walked ... and changed them.

Nixon's "hatchet man," Chuck Colson, one of the central figures in Watergate — read C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* and found it interesting. He remained unchanged. Then one night, sitting in a friend's driveway after a conversation about pride and ego, something broke open in him and he wept for the first time in years — alone, in a car, unable to drive. He couldn't even articulate a prayer, just a kind of surrender. He went from that driveway to federal prison and came out founding Prison Fellowship. The book *informed* him. Someone else *transformed* him. Jesus into his room (car).

Jesus still walks into rooms. He can walk into yours.

## THE SUDDEN PRESENCE

Verse 19: "*Jesus came and stood among them.*"

No knock. No entry through the door. He was simply — there. His body was a body (he ate fish at one point, so that kind of body) — the same body, and yet different (going through doors it seems). The text doesn't want us to solve how his body got through the door. It wants us to pay attention not to how he got in, but to *what he brought in*.

Himself and ... well, the first thing he says is, "*Peace be with you.*" He brought Shalom.

The first thing Jesus said was not "*Explain your betraying selves.*" Not "*Where were you?*" Not even "*I forgive you.*" Simply: *Peace*. He doesn't wait for them to earn it. He walks in, he embodies it, and he gives it.

In Tegel prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote letters his readers found almost inexplicable — a man awaiting execution who seemed to have more peace than the people writing to him from freedom. Guards said he seemed like the only genuinely

free person in the prison. A fellow prisoner described him leading a worship service the morning before he was taken to be hanged: *“He was one of the very few people I have ever met for whom God was real and ever present.”* He was hanged at Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945 — two weeks before American troops liberated the camp. It was not the peace of a man who had escaped his *circumstances*. It was the peace of a man whose circumstances could no longer confine him.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking peace comes from unlocked circumstances. The peace Jesus gives comes from his presence *inside* the locked-room, inside the circumstances. The circumstances themselves, in fact, may be the very things that throw you onto Christ, that brings him in in a way that wouldn’t happen if they were gone.

#### NOT PRESENT, ABSENT

Now — Thomas. Verse 24: *“But Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.”*

He has been called Doubting Thomas. But consider: the others hadn’t believed on the basis of testimony at first either. When the women came back from the tomb on Easter morning, Luke (24:11) tells us their report *“seemed to the disciples an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”* The disciples didn’t believe the women. Thomas didn’t believe the disciples. They’re all working from the same logic. Thomas is not an outlier. He just wants the same evidence as them.

And here is something remarkable: a week passes, and Thomas is still there. He didn’t quit. He stayed with the group of people who believed what he couldn’t yet bring himself to believe. That, I think, is smart— stay in the room. Keep reading the Bible. Keep going to church.

## EIGHT DAYS LATER

Eight days later, Jesus came again. Same setting. Doors locked. But this time Thomas is present.

And Jesus looks at Thomas and says: *“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting, and believe.”*

The text doesn’t actually say Thomas touched the wounds. It just says Thomas said, *“My Lord and my God.”*<sup>1</sup> The highest confession of who Jesus is that had even been made. The Doubting Thomas who couldn’t believe becomes the Confessing Thomas: My Lord and my God.

And then Jesus says something meant for us as much as for Thomas (maybe more!): *“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

The surface reading sounds like a concessionary rebuke: *You needed evidence. Fine. But there’s a higher grade of faith.* But that’s not what’s happening. The beatitude isn’t a criticism of Thomas; it’s an expansion of blessing beyond Thomas’s situation – of favor, help, effectiveness, relationship beyond this historically and geographically bound moment.

Maybe a way to understand this is to look at the gospel writer himself. In verse eight of chapter 20 it says that he looked into the and seeing it was empty and made some deductions and came to the conclusion of belief. Others can do that too.

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1. This is particularly astounding when you consider the great sobriety that Jews had about God.

The word *blessed* — blessed, the same word from the Sermon on the Mount — is not a comparative ranking. It is a declaration of favor, of *enoughness*. Jesus is naming an irreversible historical reality: Thomas was there. We are not there. No amount of sincerity closes that gap. The faith that reaches across it — that trusts the testimony without standing in the room — is not lesser faith. It is the faith the rest of history will have to live by. And it, too, is blessed.

John understands that we do not have the same opportunities as Thomas and the original twelve disciples. But just as he saw what has been left behind: the remnants of divine activity, written in stone and fabric, and he decides to believe, we can too.

Jesus is a person — God Incarnate in human history — and in entering history, he has left evidence that can be seen and measured and trusted. We are not invited to believe in something vague. We are *challenged* to believe in a person who was there ... and left evidence behind.

#### WHY JOHN WROTE THIS

The ending of this passage gives us the reason for the whole Gospel.

Verses 30–31: *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”*

John wrote this knowing that the people who would read it — including you, sitting here this morning — who would not have been in that room. He wrote it because the signs in John’s Gospel — the water into wine, the healing of the blind man, the raising of Lazarus, the resurrection — he says, are *evidence*. Here is

not myth but things that happened, observed by witnesses, recorded for your sake, so that you might look at the evidence and believe. And believing, have life.

In other words, some can meet Jesus in person (years ago) and the rest can meet Jesus in equal fashion through the scripture.

Those two phrases — *believing in his name and have life* deserve a moment's attention. In the ancient world, a name was not merely a label. It was a summary of a person's character, authority, and identity. To believe means entrusting yourself to *who he is* — the whole person John has been revealing across twenty chapters -- the Word made flesh, the Lamb of God, the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the true vine. Believing in his name means leaning your full weight on him, the way Thomas finally does when he says *My Lord and my God*. There is a difference between believing a rope can hold you and actually grabbing it. John is asking you to grab the rope.

And the life John promises is a life of a different kind altogether, not merely extended duration but a different quality of existence, begun now, not only after death. Jesus defines it himself in chapter 17: *"This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."* Life, for John, is not a destination you arrive at after death — it is communion with the Father through the Son, available now. This is what John wants you to have by concluding and believing.

However you are today, Stay in the room – with the book and the people of the book and the table that tells the story of the book. Amen.

TABLE

In a few moments we'll come to this table. It is one of the places where the risen Christ makes himself known — in the breaking of bread, in the cup poured out. If you come with faith the size of a mustard seed, come. If you come with Thomas's doubt still lingering, come. He is not waiting for you to have everything sorted out.

He walked through a locked door for Thomas. He will meet you here.

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#### AFTER COMMUNION

Verse 21: *"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."*

He breathes on them. *"Receive the Holy Spirit."* This is a commissioning. An appointment to a role. A deployment.

They came into that room as fugitives. They left it as witnesses.

The risen Jesus doesn't simply *reassure* people. He *reorients* them. He doesn't say, *"Everything is going to be okay."* He says, *"Now go."*

The resurrection is not primarily a comfort. It is primarily a commission.

The peace he gives is not the peace of inactivity. It is the peace of You and I having something to do. Wherever you are he has put you there, there is something he wants to do through you there. Go in peace — and with peace *for your world*.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or have someone pray with you, the pastor and elders would welcome your call.  
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