

Bible Fellowship Teaching Plan for John 20:11-23 (September 6, 2026)
The Risen Christ: From Grief to Joy and Fear to Empowerment

Central Truth: As the risen Lord Jesus is personally present with His people, He transforms our grief into joy and our fear into peace, then sends us in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim His gospel to the world.

John's purpose (20:31): "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."

Key Passage: (21) "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you.'"

Opening Question: Have you ever been in a situation where everything seemed hopeless, only to discover that God was already at work in ways you could not see or even imagine?

Lesson Objectives:

1. Describe Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus and truly engage with how her grief was wondrously transformed into the most incredible joy.
2. Recognize the deeply personal nature of the Lord's relationship with His followers, illustrated by Jesus calling Mary by name and her response.
3. Understand more clearly the peace Jesus gives--not merely freedom from trouble, but deep, spiritual well-being and fellowship with God.
4. Explain the significance of the resurrection appearances as evidence that Jesus truly conquered death.
5. Understand and commit to carrying out the believer's commission: just as the Father sent Jesus, Jesus sends His followers.
6. Understand more effectively how the risen Lord Jesus should change our response to grief, fear, and opportunities to witness.

Background: The disciples had spent the previous two days in grief, horror, and fear. The One Whom they believed would redeem Israel had been arrested, tortured, condemned, crucified, and buried. As Sunday morning breaks, Mary Magdalene and some other women make their way to the tomb, expecting to complete the bleak and gloomy work of anointing Jesus' dead body, never suspecting what they would find there.

John's purpose in recording these events is particularly important. He deliberately focuses on personal experiences that demonstrate the reality of Jesus' resurrection as he leads his readers to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

I. Mary: From Unimaginable Grief to Undreamed-of Joy (11-18)

- A. Mary arrives at the tomb only to find it empty
- B. She tells Peter and John what she's found, and they verify her words.
- C. When she returns, two angels ask her why she's weeping.
 - 1. They didn't ask because they didn't know, but to help her articulate her grief and prepare her for what came next.
 - 2. In the fog of tragedy, we can become so overwhelmed that we fail to recognize hope even when it is standing before us.
- D. Her words express her deep love for and dependance upon Jesus: "My Lord."
- E. Then Jesus appears and asks, "Whom are you seeking?" --not "what" but "whom?"
- F. Jesus calls Mary by name
 - 1. One word changes everything.
 - 2. The Good Shepherd had previously said that He knows His sheep and calls them by name. Now Mary hears that familiar voice and recognizes Him.
 - 3. Her response is "Rabboni!" --"My great Master."
 - 4. It's a response of recognition, devotion, worship, and joy.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Mary had such difficulty recognizing what had actually happened?
2. What does Mary's repeated reference to Jesus as "my Lord" tell us about her relationship with Him?
3. Why is Jesus' calling Mary by name so powerfully significant?
4. What does this encounter teach us about the personal nature of our relationship with Christ?
5. When have grief, fear, or disappointment made it difficult for you to recognize God's work in your circumstances?

G. Mary understandably wants to cling to Jesus and hold on to the moment, but there's work to be done.

1. Jesus tells her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." Jesus is not forbidding physical contact. The word means "to hold onto" or "cling to." Mary must learn that her relationship with Christ can't remain dependent upon His physical presence.

Discussion Questions

1. Why might Mary have wanted to hold onto Jesus physically?
 2. What does it mean for Christians today to "walk by faith and not by sight"?
 3. In what ways do we become overly dependent upon circumstances, experiences, or feelings rather than faith?
 4. How can we maintain a close relationship with someone we cannot physically see?
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2. Jesus tells her, "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. 'I ascend to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God.'"
 - a. This is an extraordinary statement. The disciples had failed Jesus, abandoned Him, and scattered when He was arrested. Yet His death and resurrection had not broken their relationship with Him or with the Father.

- b. Through Christ, believers become children of God and heirs with Christ (First John 3:1 and Romans 8:15-16).

Discussion Questions

1. What would these words--“my Father and your Father”--have meant to disciples who had failed Jesus so badly?
2. What does it mean to you personally to know that, through Christ, God is your Father?
3. How should our identity as God’s children affect the way we respond to failure? To service in His Kingdom’s work?

II. The Disciples: From Fear to Peace (19-20)

- A. Later that evening, the disciples cower behind locked doors because they are afraid, discouraged, confused, and uncertain about what the future holds.
- B. Then Jesus appears, and His first words are, “Peace be with you.”
 1. Jesus’ presence changes everything.
 2. His presence confirms that He is alive.
- C. Jesus proves that He is truly risen, showing them His hands and His side. He wants them to know that the One standing before them is the same Jesus who was crucified.

Discussion Questions

1. Why were the disciples still afraid even though they had heard reports that Jesus was alive?
2. Why do you think Jesus’ first words to them were “Peace be with you”?
3. How is Christ’s peace different from just having peaceful circumstances?
4. What fears in our lives are most likely to cause us to “lock the doors” spiritually?
5. How can remembering the reality of the resurrection change the way we face our fears?

III. The Risen Christ Gives His Followers a Mission (21-23)

- A. Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”
- B. This commission extends beyond the disciples to every believer.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Jesus’ statement “I am sending you” mean for every Christian?
2. Where has God placed you where you can represent Christ?
3. Why is it easy for Christians to think of the Great Commission as only something for pastors or missionaries?
4. Who is one person in your life who needs to hear about the risen Christ?

C. The risen Lord empowers those He commissions. Strengthened by His presence, reinforced with His peace, restored to a new purpose in life by His commission, the risen Lord Jesus then conferred on His disciples the power necessary to do what He had called them to do--verse 22: “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

1. The disciples weren’t sent to accomplish the Lord’s mission in their own strength.
2. At Pentecost, they would be filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered for the work the Lord had given them.

Discussion Questions

1. Why would Jesus’ disciples need the help of the Holy Spirit to accomplish their mission?
2. What happens when we try to accomplish God’s work in our own strength?
3. How should dependence upon the Holy Spirit affect and shape our witness?
4. What is the difference between simply talking about Jesus and being empowered by His Spirit to encourage others to trust Him?

D. The message we proclaim has eternal consequences (23): “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”

1. God alone forgives sin. The responsibility of all disciples is to bear witness to the truth about Jesus Christ. Those who receive Christ through faith receive forgiveness; those who reject Him remain in their sins. “The same heat that softens wax also hardens clay.”
2. We don’t possess the ability to forgive sins ourselves. We proclaim the gospel by which people discover the forgiveness Christ makes available.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does rejection of the gospel have such serious consequences?
2. How should the eternal significance of the gospel affect our willingness to share it?
3. What keeps us from speaking openly about Christ?

Summary:

1. The progression of John 20:11-23 in six words: Grief → Recognition → Joy → Peace → Mission → Empowerment.
2. Mary begins the morning weeping; Jesus calls her by name; Her sorrow becomes joy.
3. The disciples are hiding in fear; Jesus comes into their midst and gives them peace; He gives them a mission and the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish it.
4. The resurrection isn’t just an historical event to believe. It is a reality that changes how Christ’s followers live out their daily lives.

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Am I looking for Jesus, or just looking for relief from my circumstances?
2. When I’m grieving or confused, do I bring my cares to Christ, or do I allow my circumstances to define my view of God?
3. Do I recognize the voice of my Shepherd? Am I spending enough time in Scripture and prayer to know Him more intimately?
4. What does it mean to me personally that Jesus knows me and calls me by name?

5. What am I clinging to that Christ is asking me to release?
6. Am I living primarily by what I can see, or am I learning to walk by faith?
7. Where do I need to receive Christ's peace today?
8. What fear has caused me to figuratively lock the doors of my life?
9. Where has Jesus sent me? Who has He placed around me who needs to hear of His peace, His love, His forgiveness?
10. Am I attempting to serve Christ in my own strength, or am I consistently depending upon the Holy Spirit?
11. Who is one person I need to tell about the risen Lord and Savior?
12. If someone observed my life this week, would they see evidence that the risen Jesus has changed me?

Closing Challenge: Jesus' resurrection changed everything for Mary and the disciples. It changed their sorrow into joy, their fear into peace, their confusion into purpose, and their weakness into Spirit-empowered witness. The same risen Christ calls us by name, gives us His peace, and sends us into the world with His message. Will you go and tell the world that He's alive?

Sunday School Lesson for September 6, 2026
John 20:11-23

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, in our current study, we've been discovering how John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, reveals the life and ministry of the Lord "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."

On this First Sunday in September, as we've seen that purpose played out in every word on every page of this precious book, John brings us in chapter twenty back to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid, a stone rolled against the opening, and guards posted to ensure His disciples didn't steal the body.

Now, it's Sunday morning. All of Jesus' followers have spent the last two nights in unimaginable grief, horror, and fear as they've reeled at the totally unexpected and shocking events of the last three days as the One they knew was the Messiah arrested, tortured, found guilty in a mockery of a trial, and crucified and His body laid to rest in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

Chapter twenty opens on a somber note as we find Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb early in the morning to complete the burial preparations. But what she found was the last thing she would have expected: the stone had been rolled away and the body of her Lord was gone. They will speak about her message to the disciples and what they found when they arrived, but our focus is on Mary in verses eleven through eighteen and a meeting of the disciples later that day in verses nineteen through 23.

In his gospel, John often compresses his record of events to get to his main point, and he does so here as well. The other gospel writers provide us with much more detail about the first few moments after the sun had risen, but John, because he's telling us about these events so that we would believe that

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, wants us to hear the tender, precious stories of those who truly believed because of what they experienced.

The other gospel writers tell us about the appearance of angels at the tomb. Mark tells us that the angels told the women who accompanied Mary to the tomb, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter,” but John passes right by that to tell us that Mary Magdalene ran back to Peter and “the other disciple whom Jesus loved” to announce to them everything she had just seen. Peter and John ran to the tomb, only to find it exactly as Mary had described. Then--verse ten-- “the disciples went back to their homes.”

“But Mary,” John writes in verse eleven, “Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.” It seems that, by the time Mary arrived at the tomb for the second time, Peter and John had already left. Finding the tomb still empty and no one there to explain what had happened, she stands there weeping, confused, and devastated, and pours out her distress in her tears. The grave being empty, the whole earth is now empty to her. Jesus had been more to her than life itself, and now, not only was He dead, but His body was gone. There was no shred of anything physical to remind her that it had been all so real--His deliverance from the demons that had plagued her life for so long, His compassion, His forgiveness, His love. She wasn’t able to process what she had seen as Peter and John had done; her thoughts were more practical and far more personal.

As we look upon Mary--alone, broken, sobbing in overwhelming sorrow--we have the picture of a real and profound grief that naturally flowed from a real and profound love. Perhaps she felt that she had been so foolish, so heartless, as to leave the tomb at all. She looks despairingly at the empty grave-clothes that had so recently held all that was dear to her in the world. Maybe she thought that, if she had been there, she could have stopped whoever it was who took the body, but now that the tomb is empty, she can’t fill it again. Her dependence upon the Lord was unconditional, complete, fixed, absolute. It was the foundation of her life. He was the vine, and she was a branch that wholly depended on Him for her life--for everything--but

now He's gone, and apart from Him she can do nothing and her life is nothing. All she can do is let her tears flow freely from a broken heart.

Verse eleven: “Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she 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?’” Do you think they didn’t know? Do you think they were rebuking her for crying? No, of course not--they knew exactly what was going on. They wanted her to put the reason for her tears into words so she would understand her own grief more clearly. “Why are you weeping?--Take an inventory of what’s happening in this moment--identify and name all the things that are contributing to your sense of hopelessness and despair in this moment.” So often, when we’re in the midst of a tragedy and the fog and friction of what’s happening around us, we get disoriented to the point that we can’t even recognize hope when it comes. “Why are you weeping?”

“She said to them, ‘Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.’” She apparently hadn’t perceived the truth yet of Jesus’ many statements about the reality and the necessity of His death and His resurrection. She’s still looking for a visible, flesh and blood Jesus, but all she sees is “two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.” All four gospel writers tell of the appearance of angels at the tomb--although some of the details differ, most likely from the different perspectives from which each of them wrote.

But the presence of angels was, it seems, of little consequence to Mary. So consuming is her grief that the vision of angels doesn’t surprise her. Her heart, filled with grief, has no room for wonder. Her heart is fixed on her Lord. Their kind words can’t comfort her; it’s another voice she longs to hear. She had but one thought, “They have taken away my Lord,”--*my* Lord, as if no one else in the world could feel the same crushing grief that she felt. Her broken heart needed more than an empty grave and folded clothes to heal her pain,

and more than two angels clothed in white to hold back her tears, so she turned away from the interruption of their question to return to her sorrow.

One early church father, John Chrysostom, reflecting on her turning away from them suggests that she turned because she saw the angels look toward the risen Lord Jesus suddenly appearing behind her, and, following their gaze, she turned to look at what they saw. It could have happened just like that.

John tells us in verse fourteen: “Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ 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.’” As she turned away from the tomb, she saw someone she thought was the gardener.

Scholars have offered several explanations to explain why she didn’t immediately recognize Jesus. Some say His appearance was so changed by the resurrection that she didn’t realize it was He. Others say her tears or her grief kept her from seeing clearly. And still others suppose that, like the two on the road to Emmaus, she was kept from recognizing Him until the most appropriate moment.

Even His voice didn’t give her a clue at first when He asked, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” He didn’t ask, “**What** are you looking for,” but “**Whom** are you looking for?” She’s so overcome by her confusion and sense of loss that she assumes that this man who has appeared at the tomb at this early hour in the morning was the gardener. She doesn’t answer the Man’s question--almost as if it didn’t register in her mind--, and she doesn’t ask for Jesus by name, most likely because she assumed that everyone would know Who it was Who had been crucified and laid to rest in the open and now-empty tomb. In her loving devotion, she doesn’t ask about His body, // she asks about Him, the One she calls, “my Lord”: “Sir, if you have carried **Him** away, tell me where you have laid **Him**, and I will take **Him** away.”

There's so much John wants us to understand in this powerful moment. We see in Mary the kind of affection that Jesus had longed to see from His disciples when He told them back in chapter fourteen, "He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him." But that's not all of the promise He made to them. He said, "He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him // and show myself to him."

So, who would be the one Jesus would first show Himself after His resurrection? Should He make His first appearance to the high priest to show them how terribly wrong he had been? Should He appear before Pilate to prove that all his efforts to kill the Messiah had been fruitless and he should have listened to his wife? Should He appear in the Temple in the way that many of the Jews thought He would from Malachi, chapter three: "Then the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple--the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight."

To whom does He reveal Himself first? One commentator answers, "He appears to a poor woman who can do nothing to celebrate His triumph and might only discredit it, if she proclaimed herself His friend and herald. But [such] is the character of Jesus through death and resurrection. The meekness, the true perception of the actual sorrows and wants of men, the sense for spiritual need, the utter disregard of worldly powers and glory, characterise Him now as before. The sense of need is what always effectually appeals to Him. The soul that truly recognises the value and longs for the fellowship and possession of Christ's purity, devotion to God, superiority to worldly aims and interests, always wins His regard. When a [person] prays for these things--not with his lips but with his life's effort and his heart's true craving--his prayer is answered. To seek Christ is to feel as Mary felt, to see with practical, constraining, clearness as she saw, that He is the most precious of all possessions, that to be like Him is the greatest of all attainments; it is to see His character with clearness, and to be persuaded that, if the world gives us [the]

opportunity of becoming like Him and actually makes us like Him, it has done for us all that is vital and permanently important.”

Suddenly, supernaturally, wondrously, she hears the One she assumed was the gardener speak her name, // “Mary.” One word erases the tears from her eyes and liberates her heart with sudden joy. The utterance of her name was enough to tell her it was Someone Who knew her; but there was a recognizable thrill, an awaking of old memories, and a reverberation in her heart at the tone of that voice that told her Whose voice alone it could be.

With tenderness and simplicity, Jesus only says, “Mary.” Earlier, Jesus had told His followers, “I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. The sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice.” “[The Good Shepherd] calls his own sheep by name.” Immediately Mary recognized the voice of the Good Shepherd and cried out, “Teacher” or “Master,” and falls before Him and clings to His feet in worship.

Her response was simple and tender, “She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means, Teacher).” Rabboni is a Hebrew word that means, “my great Master.” Because John is writing primarily to a Greek audience, he translates the word for his readers. The title was the highest of three given to Jewish teachers--“Rab,” meaning “master;” “Rabbi,” meaning “my master” and a title of higher dignity; and “Rabboni,” meaning “my great master and the most honorable of all.” For Mary, the title was one of profound respect, for she had found in Jesus the One in Whom she could place her complete trust and confidence, the One Who alone could fill the deepest longings of her heart.

Naturally, her first response was to fall at His feet in joy and adoration. But Mary’s expression was imperfect in that it expressed a continuation of their previous relationship--something that could never be the same as it had been before. As a result, Jesus--Whose appearance had invited the touch in order to establish faith and banish doubt,--quickly tells her to not to hold onto

Him--verse seventeen: "Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.'" This is a far better translation than those that read, "Do not touch me," because the word doesn't mean to touch in the sense of physical contact / since He would later encourage Thomas, for example, to touch Him. Instead, it means "to hold onto" or "cling to." The tense of the verb also indicates that Jesus is telling her to stop doing something that she's now doing.

Scholars have suggested various ways to understand the Lord's command to Mary as she sought to give expression to her relief and joy at seeing Him again. It's most likely that Mary was so overjoyed to see the Lord that she didn't want the moment to end, much like Matthew's record of Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration when He told Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Jesus' simple acknowledgment in speaking her name, "Mary," immediately assured her of His faithful remembrance of her devotion to Him and of her present place in His love, but, when she clung to His feet, she was seeking to keep what she had to learn to give up. It seems appropriate to say that Mary's knowledge of Jesus was largely confined to the physical without fully considering the spiritual reality. For this reason, Jesus responded to her as if to say, "Stop clinging to me as if what I am is limited to your physical senses, for there is yet something beyond My outward restoration to earth that has to be understood before the fellowship that you're seeking can be permanently established. I have not yet ascended to the Father. When that's accomplished, then you can enjoy the communion with me that you seek."

Jesus had warned His disciples on so many occasions that He would return to the Father who had sent Him. The time for this had not been reached on the day of the Resurrection, but it was near. When He ascended into heaven, returning to His place with the Father Who had sent Him, those who loved Him on earth would have learned to live without His physical appearance--the actual seeing, touching, and hearing their beloved Master.

There would be no more grasping of His feet, but worship of a far more profound and deeper kind. In the meantime, His followers had to learn to walk by faith and not by sight. They would have to learn the more trusting faith that would honor the Lord in His physical absence while developing an innate, internal love of righteousness that can grow freely only when it's disconnected from the Lord's visible presence.

“Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father;”
 “Besides,” we could imagine Him saying, “I have work for you to do.” In the second half of verse seventeen, the Lord says, “Go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”

With these words, He was following through with what He had explained to them in chapters thirteen through seventeen in the Upper Room and as they made their way to Gethsemane. He had been preparing them for what was about to happen on the previous Friday: “I am going to go away so that I can be with each and every one of you more intimately than I am even in this moment.” Jesus was telling Mary, “I must finish what I have come to do, and you have things to do as well.”

He tells Mary to let the others know He is going to His Father and their Father. Nothing could have given them greater confidence than to know that they belonged to God just as much as their Lord belonged to God. Even though He had been crucified to bear the full punishment for the sins of the world, they were still inseparably attached to the same Father and God. He was going away to prepare a place for them, just as He had promised in the first two verses of chapter fourteen. Not only does He affirm that they are His friends, He elevates that relationship to identify them as brothers and joint heirs with Him to all the promises of God. The mystery of neither His death nor His resurrection--not even their own personal failures in deserting or betraying Him--had broken the unity between them and their Lord and between them and the Father. He still remains the Son in a way that we could never be, yet we are sons through Christ and can only call God our Father

because of our relationship with the Son. And John celebrates that relationship in the opening verse of the third chapter of his first letter when he says, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”

Paul, writing to the followers of Christ in Rome, chapter eight, verse fifteen, tells us “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, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” Our Lord’s announcement that Mary was to take to the disciples--“I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God”--was an introduction to the secure, abiding, and ever-deepening relationship they would have with Him and with the heavenly Father for all eternity.

One commentator summarizes his remarks with these words: “Mary’s happiness is easily understood. No explanation is needed of the peace and bliss she experienced when she heard herself owned as the friend of the risen Lord, and called by her name in the familiar tone by Him who stood now superior to all risk, assault, and evil [--even death itself]. This perfect joy is the reward of all in [response to] their faith. Christ rose, not that He might bring [unspeakable joy] to Mary alone, but that He might fill all things with His presence and His fulness, and that our joy also might be full. Has He not [also] called us by name? Has He not given us [an awareness] that He understands [who we are] and what will satisfy [the deepest needs of our hearts], that He claims [a closeness] no [one else] can claim, that His utterance of our name has a significance [that] no other lips can give it? ... As truly as by the audible utterance of our name does Christ now invite us to the perfect joy there is in His friendship; so truly as if He stood with us alone, as with Mary in the garden, and as if none but ourselves were present; as if our name alone filled His lips, our wants alone occupied His heart. Let us not miss true, personal

[fellowship] with Christ. Let nothing cheat [ourselves out] of this supreme joy and life of the soul. ... He has won His supremacy by love ...; and He maintains His supremacy by love, ... not by a remote exhibition of cold, unemotional perfection, but by the persistence and depth of His warm and individual love” as He calls you and me by name today.

We shouldn’t be surprised that Mary immediately went to tell the disciples everything she had seen and heard as John tells us in verse eighteen.

Later that day, the disciples met together, probably in a familiar location--perhaps the upper room where they had shared their last meal with Jesus. John tells us in verse nineteen that “the disciples” were there, most likely including the twelve, minus Judas and Thomas, and it’s likely that there were others based on Luke’s comment about “those with them.” Commentators suggest that might have included the two who had come from Emmaus, Mary Magdalene, some of the “other women” we’ve read about, as well as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

Wherever they were and whoever was there, John says, “the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews.” It seems they assumed that, since the Jewish leaders had disposed of Jesus, His followers would be the next victims of their purge, especially as rumors of the disappearance of the Lord’s body spread. Besides, the things they had heard throughout the day needed some explanation.

It’s probably well after sunset. It was already evening when the disciples had left Emmaus, and they had run back to Jerusalem. John tells us that the doors were shut. Terrified from fear of the Jews, discouraged because the One they hoped would redeem Israel had been killed, thoroughly confused by all the things they had heard that day, “Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”

John mentions this both here and in verse 26 to show that the Lord’s appearance was unquestionably real--“so that you might believe that He is the

Christ, the Son of God” The Lord Jesus, before his death, showed on many occasions that He was able to move / in a way that was nothing short of miraculous--His repeated escapes from His enemies, the power of His voice and a mere glance from His eyes, His transfigured body when He appeared with Moses and Elijah, and His walking on the sea and quieting the storms. After the Resurrection, the Lord’s human form, although it was still physical and real as we’ll see shortly, was not limited to the ordinary conditions of material bodies. His appearance, John wants us to know, was indeed miraculous, and he doesn’t make any effort to explain it.

Jesus didn’t ask permission, He didn’t sneak into the room, nor did He make any attempt to hide Himself from them. He stood right in front of them so that every eye could see, every hand could touch, every ear could hear that He was indeed alive, that He was truly there with them physically, victoriously, genuinely. As the Lord Jesus stood before His fearful, discouraged, confused disciples, His physical presence alone surely silenced their fears and calmed their hearts, just as completely as He had calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee when He said, “Peace, be still.”

The peace that our Lord offered was not the kind of peace the world could offer. Just a little while before, He had told them, “In the world you will have tribulation.” If there is ever peace between the Christian and the ways of the world, it’s because the Christian has allowed himself or herself to be compromised. Our Lord bestowed His peace to the first citizens, not of a worldly empire, but a spiritual kingdom, and they would soon know that their hope was not to be set on that which was seen but upon that which is unseen.

Most important is the fact that it is / His peace. It flows from Him, it draws us to Him, and it finds fulfillment in Him. His peace is “well-being”--not well-being in the sense of physical tranquility, but well-being in the greatest sense of balance in the soul, order and harmony in your heart, and true friendship with God. This was the peace that He gave to those troubled

disciples as they huddled behind closed doors in fear of the Jews; and it's the very same peace that He offers to you and me today as well.

With His words and With His presence, He brought peace--verse twenty: "When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side." He offered them every evidence they might need so they would believe it was really He Who stood before them. Luke tells us that He even asked them if they had something to eat, and, when they told Him they had some fish, He ate it. He proved to them that He was the same Jesus who had suffered and died, that He had truly risen from the dead, and had now appeared before them with the same body.

As you can imagine, scholars are at a loss to explain the nature of Jesus' body--was it His glorified body, was it His physical body, or was it something in-between? One commentator simply says, "This is one of the places where the narrative transcends experience and imagination, and appeals to faith in a higher order of being than crosses the field of scientific vision."

In that blessed moment of recognition, their extreme sadness is transformed into triumphant conviction of the truth. His presence brought a new revelation of the very nature of life, and the veil that had concealed the mystery of death from the beginning of time had been ripped away.

In his first letter, John says they heard, they saw, they handled, the Word of life. Here he says, "The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord." In that moment, Jesus' prediction recorded in John, chapter sixteen, verse twenty was fulfilled: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy."

As their grief has now been replaced by joy because of His presence and the peace He offered, He gives them a commission--a task to accomplish--verse 21: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.'" Just as He had been sent, our Lord was sending

His disciples. It was a personal commission given in a personal way, and they, now confidently assured of His presence and His victory over death, go with Him.

Although a few scholars limit this commission to the disciples there at that moment, most understand the larger context of Jesus' words here and elsewhere to apply to all believers. It's quite clear that every believing man and woman, boy and girl, is sent by Jesus. The vision of the risen Lord Jesus, the touch of His hands, the peace that He breathed over their souls, and the gladness that leaped in their hearts that had been so dry and dark *were* limited to those disciples that we read about in this passage, but there have been multitudes of those who have believed in Jesus through their message, as Jesus had prayed in chapter seventeen, verse twenty--multitudes who have seen the risen Lord through the eyes of faith, who Have felt His touch, and whose hearts have been filled with the same gladness of these first disciples, and who are now the recipients of this same great commission--all through faith. Every believer has been sent by the Lord Jesus in much the same way as He had been sent by the Father--with the same purpose, the same provision, and the same promise.

Alexander MacLaren asks, "How shall the servants continue and carry on the work of the Master? The chief way to do it is by proclaiming everywhere that finished work on which the world's hopes depend. [First,] we are to reproduce His attitude towards God and the world. He was sent to be 'the Light of the world'; and so are we. He was sent to 'seek and to save that which was lost'; so are we. He was sent not to do His own will, but the will of the Father that sent Him; so are we. He took upon Himself with all cheerfulness the office to which He was appointed, and said, 'My [food] is to do the will of Him that sent Me,--and to finish His work'; / and that must be our voice too. He was sent to pity, to look upon the multitudes with compassion, to carry to them the healing of His touch, and the sympathy of His heart; so must we. We are," he says, "the representatives of Jesus Christ, and if I might dare to use

such a phrase, He is to be incarnated again in the hearts, and manifested again in the lives, of His servants. ... ‘as My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.’”

Strengthened by His presence, reinforced with His peace, restored to a new purpose in life by His commission, the risen Lord Jesus then conferred on His disciples the power necessary to do what He had called them to do--verse 22: “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

During their last supper with Him on Thursday night, they had heard Jesus speaking of the Holy Spirit Who would come to lead them into all truth, Who would be with them and Who would remind them of all the things that Jesus had said. His breathing on them was a certain sign or pledge that they would be endowed with the Holy Spirit and enabled by all the gifts and influences that God intended for them. Very soon, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit would come upon them. The disciples had gathered to pray when a sound like rushing wind filled the whole house where they were sitting. In that moment they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with God’s peace and enabled by His power.

Jesus tells them to “receive” the Holy Spirit, encouraging them to receive the gift that was being offered to them. Because Jesus is calling them to do something in the future, it seems that the Holy Spirit did not come upon them at that moment followed by a later, second blessing.

Having presented Himself alive and well to the disciples, blessing them with His peace, His commission, and His power, He now has a specific word for them in verse 23 that immediately follows on the heels of His instruction, “Receive the Holy Spirit:” “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.” As you can imagine, this verse has caused some confusion for those who have misunderstood what the Lord intended by these words.

Alexander MacLaren begins his comments by saying, “I am not going to enter upon controversy. The words which close our Lord’s great charge here have been much misunderstood by being restricted. It is eminently necessary to remember here that they were spoken to the whole community of Christian souls.” After mentioning how some churches have erred in limited this giving and withholding of forgiveness to the clergy, he goes on to say how all believers have failed in their responsibility to fulfill this calling. To understand what Jesus meant, we need to remember what John himself said about the Lord’s mission. In First John, chapter three, verse five, John wrote, “You know that He appeared in order to take away sins,” and, in the letter to the Hebrews, chapter nine, verse 26, we read, Jesus “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” In a very real sense, we continue His work as we call men and women, boys and girls, to “behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” as we like Jesus, bear witness of the truth.

This bearing witness of the truth naturally has a two-fold effect depending on whether it’s accepted or rejected. Only God can forgive sin--even the Jewish teachers of the Law understood that as Mark tells us in chapter two, verse seven. To those who accept and embrace the truth about Jesus Christ, they are forgiven of their sin and restored to a right relationship with Jesus Christ. As a result, believers who testify of the truth can truthfully say, “Your sins are forgiven because you have placed your faith in Jesus,” and we should faithfully and confidently reassure and affirm believers of this glorious fact.

On the other hand, those who reject the truth about Christ / bind themselves to their sin and willingly choose to pay the eternal penalty for their sins themselves. As a result, the faithful witness of Jesus Christ can truthfully say, “You remain in and retain your sin.” It’s just as Paul says in Second Corinthians, chapter two, verse sixteen: “We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.” The same heat

softens wax and hardens clay. The message we proclaim of the truth will either remove blindness to the truth or it will add yet another layer of darkness to the eyes of those who reject the truth. In this way, under the leadership and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we either celebrate the acceptance of the gospel and the forgiveness that's received, or we mourn the refusal of the gospel and the rejection of God's forgiveness. Our task is simply to go and tell.

Such were just some of the events of that glorious resurrection morning. As you meditate on these wondrous words from the disciple whom Jesus loved, recalling Mary's thrill of hearing her name called and seeing her Lord, the disciples' joy when He appeared in their presence, and His commission to them and to us, let me share with you the closing words of Max Lucado's book, *No Wonder They Call Him Savior*.

"The door is locked. Deadbolted. Maybe even a chair under the doorknob. Inside sit ten knee-knocking itinerants who are astraddle the fence between faith and fear. As you look around the room, you wouldn't take them for a bunch who are about to put the kettle of history on high boil. Uneducated. Confused. Callused hands. Heavy accents. Few social graces. Limited knowledge of the world. No money. Undefined leadership. And on and on. No, as you look at this motley crew, you wouldn't wager too many paychecks on their future. But something happens to a man when he witnesses someone who has risen from the dead. Something stirs within the soul of a man who has stood within inches of God. Something stirs that is hotter than gold fever and more permanent than passion."

"... Though the door was locked, he still stood in their midst. 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And send them he did. Ports. Courtyards. Boats. Synagogues. Prisons. Palaces. They went everywhere. Their message of the [risen Lord Jesus] dominoed across the civilized world. They were an infectious fever. They were a moving organism. They refused to be stopped. Uneducated drifters who shook history like a housewife shakes a rug. My, wouldn't it be great to see it happen again?"

“Many say it’s impossible. The world is too hard. Too secular. Too post-Christian. ‘This is the age of information, not regeneration.’ So we deadbolt the door for fear of the world. And as a result, the world goes largely untouched and untaught. Over half of the world has yet to hear the story of the Messiah, much less study it. The few believers who do go out often come home weary and wounded, numbed at the odds and frustrated at the needs.”

“What would it take to light the fire again? Somehow, those fellows in the upper room did it. They did it without dragging their feet or making excuses. For them it was rather obvious. ‘All I know is that he was dead and now he is alive.’ Something happens to a man when he stands within inches of the Judaean Lion.”

“Something happens when he hears the roar, when he touches the golden mane. Something happens when he gets so close he can feel the Lion’s breath. Maybe we could all use a return visit. Maybe we all need to witness his majesty and sigh at his victory. Maybe we need to hear our own commission again. ‘Will you tell them?’ Jesus challenged. ‘Will you tell them that I came back . . . and that I am coming back again?’ ‘We will,’ they nodded. And they did.”

“Will you?”

Thank you for being a part of our brief overview of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus seen through John’s eyes that’s meant to lead you to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, by believing in Him, you might experience the fullness of life that can only come in Him.

Next week, John closes his story of the Lord Jesus as he invites us to join him for breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Peter’s there, and so is Jesus. And in a remarkable moment of reflection, affirmation, restoration, and delegation, the Lord Jesus sets the once-broken rock on an amazing journey of leadership and ministry in chapter 21, verses fifteen through nineteen.

As always, as it's still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

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