

Aftermath: Behind Closed Doors

John 20:19-31

What do you do after Easter?

A sermon preached by
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What did you do after Easter last Sunday? Was it a big family day? It was a beautiful day; did you go out and do something special?

I took a nap. Easter Sunday starts for me at 3:30 a.m. to get ready for sunrise service, so by the time I do that and preach two services, as wonderful as the morning is, I need a nap. After the nap, we went visiting. We drove to see my younger son and his family in Fayetteville and played with two of the grandkids for a little while.

What did Jesus do after Easter? He had a big Easter morning, too. But he didn't take a nap. He did, however, go visiting. He began to make appearances to his disciples who were still mourning his death. He began to show them the glory of his resurrection—alive and in person.

What did the disciples do after Easter? They didn't go out anywhere (except for Thomas). They huddled in fear and grief and doubt behind closed doors. John says they were afraid of the Jews. That is understandable. They had seen what happened to Jesus; they were afraid the same thing would happen to them if they were caught. They weren't even sure what had transpired that morning. Mary Magdalene had come to them and told them she had seen Jesus alive. But they weren't sure they believed her. Thomas was not the only one who doubted.

But then all of a sudden, Jesus came to visit. He came through the locked door, yet he was in bodily form. What was going on? Some have suggested that this was some sort of group hallucination. Maybe the disciples—several times, and up to 500 believers at one time, according to Paul—were so overwhelmed by grief and fatigue that they were seeing things that weren't real.

Justin Brierly has done some research into the claims against the resurrection, and he notes that recent studies have shown that older adults who have lost a long-term spouse are the most prone to experience the presence of a loved one after death. About 50% of older adults say that they have felt the presence of a spouse after they are gone. But only 7% say that they have actually had a visual appearance of a loved one. All of these hallucinations are solitary; psychologists can't find evidence of mass hallucinations. And nobody asserts that their loved one comes back in bodily form.¹

On the other hand, all of the disciples,—100%—experienced Jesus in the flesh. They touched him; they heard him; they ate with him. Clearly, when Jesus comes to visit, it is a different and unique order of reality.

When Jesus comes to visit on Easter afternoon, there are four words that set the stage for the rest of the disciples' journeys and create a foundation for the age of the church moving forward.

The first word is PEACE. Jesus comes through the locked door and says "Peace be with you." When he returns a week later, he comes through the door again and says, "Peace be with you." This is not an unusual greeting between Jews; they still greet one another with the word for peace: *shalom*. But coming from the lips of Jesus in that moment, it meant far more than "howdy." The disciples were distressed. They were grieving his death. They were scared of being arrested and crucified like Jesus. They didn't know what they were supposed to do now. They were not at peace. But Jesus had promised them on the night before he died, "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*"² Now he was making good on the promise. The resurrected, living Lord was bringing peace.

The second word follows immediately on the first: SEND. The disciples must have been somewhat taken aback by his appearance, so he repeated himself: "*Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'*"³ Immediately, Jesus sets his disciples on a path outward. Immediately he gives them a mission. They are not to stay huddled in fear behind closed doors; they have a world to win for Jesus.

All four Gospels record some sort of sending language of Jesus: Mark 16, Luke 24, Acts 1. He sends them out to be witnesses of the resurrection. The most famous sending word is in Matthew; we call it the Great Commission: "*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. (See? Still doubting!) And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'*"⁴

Disciples are not meant to be dormant. Disciples are sent. Those are still our marching orders today. Larry Phillips is a father who took his family to a restaurant, and he asked his six-year-old son to say grace over the meal. As the family bowed their heads, he spoke out loud and clear, "God is great, God is good. Thank you for the food, and I would thank you even more if Mom gets us ice cream for dessert. And liberty and justice for all! Amen."

Along with the chuckles from nearby tables, one woman made an audible remark, "That's what's wrong with this country today. Kids don't even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream. Why, I never!"

The little boy immediately tuned up to cry and asked his dad, "Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?"

Larry put his arms around his son and assured him it was OK, and God was certainly not mad at him. Then an elderly gentleman approached the table and winked at the boy and said, "I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer."

"Really?" the boy said.

“Cross my heart,” the old man said. Then he added, glancing over at the woman who made the remark, “Too bad she never asks God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes.”

Naturally, Larry Phillips did buy ice cream for his kids for dessert. But his son just stared at the bowl for a moment. Then he did something the family will never forget. He picked up his ice cream and took it to the woman who had criticized his prayer. Setting it down in front of her, he said with a big smile, “Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes, and my soul is good already.”⁵ Our souls are good, if we are responding to the word of Jesus that sends us out to share his love.

The third word Jesus says to the disciples is BREATHE. “*He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’*”⁶ We call this the quiet Pentecost. In the Book of Acts, the gift of the Holy Spirit comes on the day of Pentecost in a very dramatic way: rushing wind, tongues of fire, unlearned languages, a big crowd of people. It was quite the scene. But in John, Jesus gives the gift of the Holy Spirit with a breath. (Remember, in Hebrew and Greek the word for “breath” also means “wind” and “spirit.”) The gift is given not to a crowd, but to eleven fearful disciples in a cooped-up room behind closed doors. But like the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the presence of God in the breath of Jesus became the driving force that carried the disciples into all the world to spread the Gospel.

I think we can relate to these two different versions of the gift of the Spirit. Some people have Pentecostal experiences. The Holy Spirit comes upon them in a dramatic way; they draw a crowd and give their witness. It is a convincing and converting evidence of God.

But others receive the Holy Spirit in a more Johannine way—quietly, in a small group, with no big fanfare. But the Spirit is the Spirit, and it still transforms people, guides their life, and gives them power. The presence is still unmistakable.

One of the other things I did on Easter was to watch the final round of the Masters golf tournament, part at my house after my nap, and part at my son’s house. For golfers, Augusta National golf club is heaven, and the Masters is when the saints gather around the throne. It is arguably the most prestigious course and tournament in golf. Many legendary moments have happened at the Masters, and those stories are told and retold by the commentators every year, keeping the spirit of the great golfers of the past alive.

In 1984, a great golfer named Ben Crenshaw won the Masters at the age of 32. He won the Masters again in 1995, at the ripe old age of 43. Only Tiger Woods and Jack Nicklaus have won the Masters at an older age. The key to Crenshaw’s second victory was a man named Harvey Penick.

Harvey Penick was Ben Crenshaw’s mentor and golf coach. He was one of the great teachers of the game, and he had put a club in the hands of Ben Crenshaw when Ben was just seven years old. Through the years, Harvey taught Ben with a combination of stern correction and wise counsel, always emphasizing the grace and dignity of the game. The Sunday before the Masters tournament in 1995, Harvey Penick died at the age of 90. Ben Crenshaw buried his oldest friend on Wednesday, then began the tournament of his life on Thursday. On the next Sunday, Crenshaw was the Masters champion for a second time. He stood on the 18th green and wept after winning, saying, “I had an extra club in my bag. It was Harvey. It was like someone put their hand on my shoulder and sort of guided me through.”⁷

That's how the Holy Spirit works. God's hand is on our shoulder and guides us through and gives us the victory. It doesn't matter if it's dramatic and flamboyant or quiet and personal. The important thing is not *how* it happens but *that* it happens and that *when* it happens, you *let* it happen.

The final word that Jesus speaks to the timid little gathering of disciples on his resurrection day is BELIEVE. Thomas, the disciple who had previously displayed a tendency toward pessimism, did not see the original appearance of Jesus. So when his friends told him about it, he expressed doubt. "Let me see his hands and feet, and let me touch the hole in his side, then I'll believe."

A week later, Jesus came back to visit again. This time Thomas was there. After sharing the peace, Jesus said to Thomas, "Here. Touch my hands and feet. Put your hand in my side. Do not doubt, but believe." Thomas' first thought may have been, "How did he know I said that?" But his response was to fall on his knees and cry out, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus then gave a response that was obviously intended for a later audience, "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*"⁸

Many scholars consider this the original ending of the gospel of John. It does seem to tie things up in a neat package. What Thomas did was the whole purpose of the Gospel, which was written "*so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*"⁹

There is nothing we need more than a belief in the saving life and power of Jesus Christ. Faith, more than anything else, will make our lives worthwhile and meaningful. A foundational belief in Jesus Christ can help us overcome any and all challenges we face.

The late Black poet Maya Angelou describes her lonely childhood in the book *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. Maya was shunted back and forth among various family members and friends, never having a stable home life growing up. Looking back on that time, she commented, "Of all the needs ... a lonely child has, the one that must be satisfied, if there is going to be hope and a hope of wholeness, is the unshaking need of an unshakable God."¹⁰

We have an unshakable God who loved the world so much he gave his only Son. We have a Christ who lived and died and rose again so that we could know life abundant now and life eternal forever. There is nothing we need more than this. How could we ever doubt?

German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg said, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."¹¹

Now we may be onto something!

What are you going to do after Easter? How are you going to spend your time—your life—in light of the resurrection? Let me offer four suggestions that come from the lips of the risen Christ himself.

If you are anxious, fearful, distressed, or grieving, let the **peace** of Christ dwell in your soul.

Figure out how you are **sent**. What is the mission in life God is calling you to accomplish? Get started, or take the next step.

If you are looking for guidance, for direction, or for encouragement in anything big or small, remember the presence of the Holy Spirit. God is with you. God is in you. Just **breathe** God in. The wind, the breath, is the Spirit, and it's God's gift to you.

Finally, **believe**. Do not doubt. There are many things that will tear down faith. Hold fast. Hold firm. Don't let go. Jesus is your Lord and your God. Some people were lucky enough to see him in the flesh. You have never seen him, yet you believe. Blessed are you! Believing in him, you will have life in his name.

¹ Justin Brierley, *Unbelievable?: Why After Ten Years of Talking With Atheists, I'm Still a Christian*, (London: SPCK, 2017), 137f.

² John 14:27.

³ John 20:21.

⁴ Matthew 28:16-20.

⁵ Larry Phillips, *Homiletics*, March/April 1998, pp. 51ff.

⁶ John 20:22.

⁷ Rick Reilly, "For You, Harvey: Ben Crenshaw's Second Masters Win Was A Memorial To His Mentor," <https://vault.si.com/vault/1995/04/17/for-you-harvey-ben-crenshaws-second-masters-win-was-a-memorial-to-his-mentor>.

⁸ John 20:29.

⁹ John 20:31.

¹⁰ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/340302-of-all-the-needs-there-are-none-imaginary-a-lonely>.

¹¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, in a conversation with Prism magazine. *PreachingToday.com*.