

The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the most important event of human history. ***In a single moment, the Resurrection changed literally everything.*** No other event in history compares, with a reversal so sudden, so extreme, and so impactful.

The only analogy I can think of comes from classic literature—specifically, the scene toward the end of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* where the Ring of Power is finally destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom. In the moments just before, the king is dying, evil is winning, and Middle Earth is falling into darkness. But the instant the Ring dissolves, the terrible Tower of Sauron crumbles, an explosion of power bursts out from the falling tower, and an ever-expanding circle of light overruns everything in its path, destroying all evil and leaving the victors to pick up the pieces and celebrate.

John 20 describes that unstoppable wave beginning to roll over human culture—the wave of God’s kingdom and the spread of His gospel. Before the Resurrection, the King is dead, His tiny handful of followers are huddled in fear and doubt, and the powers of evil appear to have won. But then a burst of glory explodes from the tomb, truth and power fill the disciples, and God’s kingdom starts its unstoppable advance.

John 20 doesn’t look nearly as dramatic as the scene from the *LotR*. As God so often does, He begins small, personal, quiet. But this is the start, as the resurrected Christ takes His disciples from fear and doubt to praise and power. John is showing us the dramatic changes that came to Jesus’ followers because of the resurrection:

- from cowering in fear to empowered for mission
- from adamant skepticism to profound worship

The Holy Spirit wants the same changes for us.

Jesus & the 10 Disciples

v19 *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."*

It’s still the first Easter: “that day, the first day of the week.” Earlier that same day, Peter and John observed the empty tomb and abandoned burial linens (vv1-10) and Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene (vv11-18). The disciples have gathered, and John specifically tells us they’ve locked the door “for fear of the Jews.” No doubt there’s a low murmur in the room as they discuss the reports they’ve heard from Mary and others.

Suddenly, Jesus is there right among them. Luke tells us they were startled and frightened—I’m sure they were! You’re already edgy, doors are locked, a guy appears out of nowhere—someone who just died a few days ago. “Startled and frightened” would be putting it mildly.

Notice what Jesus says to them: “Peace be with you.” It’s a standard greeting among people of the Middle East and other parts of the world. ***But there’s nothing standard about it, coming from the mouth of Jesus.*** The last time Jesus saw most of these men, they were running for their lives just as He had predicted (16:32). He could have reminded them. Blamed them. Rebuked them. Instead, He blessed them. He comes to them, not as a stern Judge pointing out their failures, but as the Prince of Peace, putting their hearts at rest. How can He treat these guys that way? Shouldn’t they repent before He can forgive them? ...maybe do a little penance and prove they’ve changed? ...show their guilt and regret? How can He offer peace to these sinners?

Because their peace is why He went to the cross in the first place—to achieve peace between sinful people and their holy God. Jesus’ greeting of peace here is the complement to His cry from the cross: “It is finished.” ***The holiness of God was satisfied; the love of God was gratified. Sin was paid; reconciliation was made.***

NOTE: Tyndale’s effort to capture this effect of the sin offering in one word: “a sin offering for ___?” How to say it. The word “purification” wasn’t quite relational enough. The sin offering didn’t just purify, it reconciled. It brought the 2 parties together and made them one. No word in the English language quite conveyed the essence of it, so he made one up. He took the phrase: “at one,” added a suffix to make it into a noun, and put it in his new translation: “at-one-ment.” That’s what a sin offering accomplishes—it makes at-one-ment, i.e., “atonement.”

Friends, because of the work of Christ on the cross, He always comes to us with this greeting on His lips. He doesn't wait for you to fix yourself. He's not holding out until you are grieved enough. Remember all the worst moments of your life, the worst moments of your week, the things you would be so ashamed of if He were to appear before you right this moment? The blood of Jesus washes all of that away. He truly did finish the work. He completed everything necessary for you to have peace with God, and His resurrection proves it. If you believe Jesus atoned for all your sins, you have peace with God.

v20 *When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.*

Just days earlier, Jesus had foretold this exact moment:

16:20, 22 *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. ²² ...You have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*

What changed their fear to joy? Seeing Jesus. But isn't it interesting how He identified Himself? "He showed them His hands and His side." Whenever Jesus wanted to prove to anyone it was really Him, He never pointed to His face, His eyes, His voice. It was always His wounds.

When God's promises seem too good to be true, when fear steals your joy away, the cross is the only place to go. But not in the abstract: "Somebody sure did a nice thing for me by paying for my sins..." Jesus gets specific, personal, and real—ruined hands and a pierced side. An abstract concept of the cross won't do much to quiet your gnawing doubts and clawing fears. You have to get real with it. Somewhere not far away from this scene in this small room in Jerusalem are the physical, tangible artifacts of the cross. Imagine them. Picture them in your mind's eye: a twisted circle of thorns with bloody tips, a hefty spear, three iron nails, a wooden sign. Jesus really went through all that, and He survived. Surely, He can handle your problems.

But the resurrection is more than just therapeutic. It doesn't just heal us; it also compels us:

v21 *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."*

All four gospel writers have a version of the Great Commission (Mt

28:18-20, Mk 16:15, Lk 24:46-48). This is John's. All through this gospel, Jesus been portrayed as the one sent from the Father; now in that same way, He sends His followers into the world to continue His mission:

17:18 *As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*

Of course the resurrection gives us a mission! This truly is something worth talking about! The founder of every other religion is dead; ours is alive! Furthermore, every other religion is about how people can get close to God. Christianity is about how God drew close to us.

Did you notice how Jesus blessed them again with peace (v21) before He commissioned them? That order matters, because you will never join Jesus on His mission until you are convinced—and glad!—that you have peace with God yourself. Sharing the gospel will always be a duty and a dread for you as long as Christianity means simply accepting certain doctrines or keeping certain commands. But if we realize that Christianity's most basic concern is that Jesus Christ died on the cross so that sinners like me and you could have peace with God, we'll be eager to talk about it!

Jesus equips them for their mission:

vv22-23 *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 anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."*

What is this breathing and what is this authority to forgive sins? It's the promise of the Spirit and the power of the gospel.

The Promise of the Spirit (v22). I say "promise of the Spirit," not the actual giving of the Spirit for several reasons:

- Jesus promised He would send the Spirit once He ascended to the Father. In fact, He went so far as to say He *couldn't* send the Spirit until He had departed to the Father:
16:7 *Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.*
- There is no apparent change in the disciples after this moment. They still meet behind locked doors (v26) and are not bold in witness. They even return to fishing (ch 21).
- There's no reason to assume Jesus' imperative had to take place

immediately (cf. 17:5 “Glorify me in your presence.”)

- The book of Acts clearly describes the coming of the Spirit at a later time under much different circumstances.

So what is Jesus doing? He’s making a symbolic promise of the Spirit which will be fulfilled later. John has made so much throughout this gospel of Jesus’ promise of the Spirit (1:33 “the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit / 3:34 “he gives the Spirit without measure” / 7:38-39 “rivers of living water... he said about the Spirit” / chs 14-16 “I will send the Comforter... it’s better if I go...”). In order to bring that theme to its completion, John had to say something about the actual coming of the Spirit. And so he does, in this beautiful symbol of Jesus’ breath settling on the disciples as a foreshadowing of the Spirit Himself who will soon fill them with His power. Many commentators see a reminder here of Genesis 2:7, where the Lord breathed life into Adam—a hint that this new Messianic community is also the beginning of Jesus’ New Creation, His whole new humanity, energized not merely with the breath of life but with the very presence of God Himself, the 3rd Person of the Trinity.

The Power of the Gospel (v23). Jesus’ statement here is simply a dramatic way to describe what is at stake as you carry out the mission you’ve been given to proclaim the gospel. There is only one possible assurance of pardon for our sins—not the word of individual Christians, not even the collective authority of the church. ***Our only assurance of forgiveness is found in the word of Jesus saying “Peace be to you” to those who have believed the gospel.*** As the church proclaims the message of forgiveness through faith in Christ, it declares that those who believe are forgiven and those who don’t are not forgiven.

If someone says, “Here’s the sin I’ve committed,” and you ask, “What have you done about that?” If they say, “I’ve repented and trusted Jesus Christ for my forgiveness,” you have the authority of God in the gospel to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” You aren’t forgiving their sin; you are simply confirming the word of the gospel—***that God forgives sinners who repent and trust Christ. Sins are dismissed on that basis.***

So Jesus takes the disciples from cowering in fear to empowered for mission. One commentator says: “Jesus’ encounter with the fearful, guilt-ridden disciples is a model of what should happen every time we gather together in Jesus’ name to worship God. Jesus comes into our

midst and speaks to us by his Word, and then applies the gospel of peace to our souls and breathes his Spirit upon us, commissioning us to go forth as servants of the gospel.” (Scotty Smith, *Gospel Transformation Bible*) Exactly right.

Jesus & Thomas

vv24-25 *Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”*

He could not be more adamant in his unbelief: “Unless my conditions are met, I WILL NEVER believe.” There are people like that all over the world, aren’t there? We’re never told why Thomas doesn’t believe, probably because he’s a prototype, representing 100s of different reasons people take this same posture. Verbal testimony alone will not convince them. Jesus must act for them to believe. What can you do with someone like this? Keep going over the gospel, keep bearing witness. But in the end, the Lord Himself must do something within for them to be convinced.

vv26-29 *Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

Jesus shows up and offers evidence in precisely the terms Thomas requested. Instantly, he believes and makes one of the clearest declarations of Jesus’ deity in the gospels. If he’s wrong, it’s blasphemy. (NOTE: JW’s and Mormons sometimes suggest that Thomas is so surprised, he takes God’s name in vain. It’s an explanation that is completely unfaithful to the narrative, that a conservative Jewish man would use God’s name this way and that Jesus would commend him for it.) Jesus doesn’t correct him; He accepts his confession as a true profession of faith—and one that Jesus anticipates will come from many

more who do not see but still believe.

Should we conclude from this narrative that it's empirical evidence that changes a skeptical heart? No.

1. There's no indication he actually took Jesus up on the offer.
2. Jesus commends Thomas for his belief but offers a special commendation for those who believe without seeing—those who accept the truth based on truth and testimony alone.
3. Thomas's own words show he didn't have merely a change of mind; he had a change of heart—not "It's you!" but rather "My Lord and my God!"

What changed him? What convinced him this wasn't just Jesus, his former rabbi and friend, but this Man was God in the flesh?

1. Glory. John says they all saw it and knew:

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Somehow in that room, Thomas's eyes were opened and he saw Jesus' glory like he had never seen it before. A vision of God's glory will always do that.

2. Grace

Jesus offered him evidence in precisely the terms he had demanded it. What a shock for him to realize that, at the height of his skepticism, Jesus had been listening. But when the Lord appears, He doesn't reprimand him for his arrogance or his unbelief. He humble Himself to meet the terms Thomas demanded. And that grace melts him.

Oct 2006, Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. An armed man stormed into an Amish schoolhouse, released the boys and adults, and shot 10 girls, killing five. And then he killed himself. When following the story of his funeral, I was amazed to read that about half of the mourners at his funeral ceremony were Amish, though Roberts himself was not. In fact, the leaders of this Amish community opened a fund to collect donations for Roberts wife and children. The media likewise was amazed, seeing a side of the Amish they had never known before—something other than their resistance to technology, simple living, and rigid lifestyle. The secular media, normally detached and cynical, were obviously surprised

and deeply affected by the show of grace and forgiveness. It was like nothing they had ever seen. Why? How?

Alexander Pope said: "To err is human; to forgive is divine." When you encounter grace and forgiveness like that, you know it's supernatural. It changes people, just like it changed Thomas.

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