

Message #64

Kurt Hedlund

John

6/9/2019

## A GREAT GOSPEL

JOHN 20:19-31

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

It is often in the midst of dark times that events happen that change our lives forever. Sometimes it is for the good; sometimes it is for the bad. How we respond to those dark times, of course, is crucial. These dark times include things like the death of a loved one, divorce, business failure, a health challenge, and a job loss. This week we were reminded of another dark time, as ceremonies took place to commemorate the 75th anniversary of D-Day. Thousands of families lost loved ones on that day. Some of our troops were scarred forever by what they experienced. Heroes were also made on D-Day.

Military conflict led to a life-transforming event in Jeff Guthrie. He earned his GED and left home at age eighteen. He set off for Europe to find the German exchange student whom he met in high school in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina. That relationship did not develop. So he bummed around Europe for the next eight years. He says that he had bittersweet memories and more than a few regrets.

He came back to the States and split time in the next three years living with his mom in South Carolina and his dad in the state of Washington. He tried college, but did not get very far. In 1999 he entered a Marine Corps recruiting office. He thought that an experience in the military might help him to get his life together. After boot camp in Parris Island, he was assigned to an infantry unit. He also acquired a wife.

In early 2003 Jeff Guthrie was deployed with the First Battalion Fifth Marine Regiment to the Middle East. On April 12th his unit was part of the first wave of Americans to reach Baghdad and to occupy Saddam Hussein's palace. Some of Guthrie's comrades were killed and wounded. Most made it through, and their exploits were regarded as a great military success.

That evening Navy Chaplain Carey Cash found Jeff Guthrie almost in tears. He asked him why. **“Sir... I’m, I’m just so sorry.” “Sorry for what, Guthrie?” “It’s just what I’ve done in my life. All I can think about is that I’ve just been through the worst experience of my life, and yet, God protected me through it all. But why did He do it? How could He do it after all the things--- bad things--- I’ve done? I don’t know what else to say, what else to feel. I’m just so sorry.”**

I wonder if the apostles of Jesus felt like that on the first Easter Sunday morning. They were in the midst of the darkest time in their lives. They had spent the previous three years following Jesus around the countryside. They had seen Him do incredible miracles. They had heard His powerful teaching. They also witnessed the rising opposition to Him that came from their own religious leaders. Then three days earlier He was killed. On top of the grief that this brought them, there was guilt and shame that came from their own inaction. They had fled from the scene of Jesus’ arrest. Peter was the only one of them who showed up for Jesus’ trial. But then he denied that he even knew Jesus. At the site of the crucifixion it was only John and several female disciples who were present. None of the apostles came to the tomb. Such was the setting for a life-transforming event and a solid spiritual commitment.

We left off last time in our study of John’s Gospel in #20 with a woman with a sketchy past providing a brave witness about the resurrected Jesus. Mary Magdalene was first at the tomb and the first to find the tomb empty and the first to see the risen Christ. Though her testimony would not have been allowed in a Jewish court, the Lord honored her for her faithfulness and devotion to Him.

I.

We saw last week from the other Gospels that the disciples did not believe her testimony or the testimony of the other women who also encountered the risen Christ. We take up the story from there. In vv. 19-23 of #20, which is p. 906 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we learn about JOHN AND THE GREAT COMMISSION. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. JOHN AND THE GREAT COMMISSION) Each of the four Gospels describe incidents in which Jesus after the resurrection tells His followers to go into the world and bring people the good news about Him. This is the earliest of those incidents and the first time after His death and resurrection that Jesus commissions His followers.

A.

In vv. 19 and 20 we encounter THE BASIS for this commission. (I. JOHN AND... A. THE BASIS) According to v. 19, **“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.’”**

Early on that morning Mary Magdalene and other women showed up at the tomb with spices, prepared to make further preparations of the body of Jesus. They found that the stone blocking the tomb was removed and the tomb was empty. Mary Magdalene ran back into Jerusalem and told Peter and John about her discovery. They ran to the tomb and confirmed that discovery. They went back into Jerusalem, but Mary lingered by the tomb. Two angels appeared to her and then Jesus Himself. She returned to Jerusalem to tell the disciples what she had witnessed. They didn't believe her.

In Luke #24 we are told about two followers of Jesus who were returning to their home outside of Jerusalem when they encountered Jesus later that day. They did not recognize Him at first. When they finally realized that it was Jesus, He disappeared. They returned to Jerusalem to describe their encounter with Jesus to the other disciples. (LUKE 24:33-43 PAGE 885) Luke #24 vv. 33-43 provides an account of what happened next that gives us a few more details than what we have in John #20. So I am going to read that passage. Beginning in v. 43 of Luke #24 we are told,

**33 And they** [the two disciples who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus] **rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together,** [Notice that there are more than the eleven remaining apostles who are gathered together.] **34 saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" 35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread. 36 As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" 37 But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. 38 And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate before them.**

(PROJECTOR OFF) It appears that the followers of Jesus are having a kind of wake. They are mourning the death of Jesus. Today the Jews call it "sitting shiva." Normally friends and relatives are invited to come and participate in the mourning. But v. 19 in our passage notes that the doors are shut. The noun form of the Greek verb here means "keys." So the implication is probably that the place where they are meeting is locked up tight. The disciples are not only dealing with grief and shame, but also with fear. The Jewish leaders who arrested and had Jesus killed may come for them next.

At the same time, these Jesus followers are trying to make sense of reports of Jesus sightings. Then suddenly Jesus appears in their midst. The fact that John has just indicated that the door is shut, or locked, indicates that this is a miraculous appearance.

Jesus gives the traditional Hebrew greeting, "Shalom." This means more than just a declaration of peace. It refers to a general well-being. The apostles have been dealing with guilt and shame. They might have feared a greeting more along these lines: "Where were you guys? Why did you leave Me alone? What happened to your promises of commitment to the point of death?" But, no, He indicates that everything is OK. There is peace. There is no resentment from Jesus.

In Luke's account we are told that these Jesus followers initially thought they were seeing "a spirit." But Jesus says in v. 20 of our passage, **"When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord."** The forensic and medical experts tell us that nails through the hands of crucifixion victims would not be sufficient to hold the weight of these victims. It is likely that the nails would be put through their wrists. But the Greek word here was used of wrists as well as of hands.

That the disciples were glad is probably an understatement. They rejoiced. They were ecstatic. Jesus really was risen from the dead. This recognition and conviction will become the basis for the message that they will present to the world.

B.

In v. 21 we come to THE COMMISSION. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. JOHN... A. THE BASIS... THE COMMISSION) The Apostle John writes, **"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.'"** Not only is Jesus not holding their behavior against them, He is sending them out. As the Father sent Jesus, so He is sending them. Everything is going according to the divine plan.

The primary problem that human beings have is sin. The solution has to do with the death of Jesus. Thus it was that we saw in the first chapter of John the declaration of John the Baptist. (JOHN 1:29) In v. 29 we read, **"The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"** The message of the apostle and great evangelist Paul was in this direction also. (1 TIMOTHY 1:15). In 1 Timothy #1 v. 15 he declared, **"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the**

**foremost.**" In 2 Corinthians #5 v. 20 he described the mission of all of us Christians. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:20) He wrote, **"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."** Reconciliation comes through accepting the gift of salvation in Jesus.

Christ's commission means sharing the message of salvation in Jesus. As we see in the life and example of Jesus, it is also to be accompanied with meeting the needs of other people, with promoting justice, with confronting wrongdoing, and with displaying Christian virtues.

C.

In v. 22 we find THE POWER for this Great Commission. (I. B. C. THE POWER) **"And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"** The exact meaning of John's description and Jesus' words is uncertain. John Calvin said that this was "the sprinkling with grace of the Holy Spirit." Later at Pentecost it was "the saturation of the Holy Spirit." One commentator says that this is the power for ministry. At Pentecost it was the work of the Holy Spirit who provided power for new life.

Many commentators have suggested that what happened here was a temporary provision of power that was provided permanently at Pentecost. Some have said that this is a symbolic promise that finds its fulfillment at Pentecost.

The first thing that we should notice is that the original text does not actually say that Jesus breathed on them. John uses a verb that does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament. It also has no direct object. So literally it says simply, "He breathed." I wonder if we should not understand this as some kind of marker of an important statement--- something like our expression "He took a deep breath."

The last statement is a simple command that uses a common verb that can be translated as "receive" or "take" or "take up." The thing to consider with this is that there seems to be no change in these Jesus followers after this incident. A week later we still find them hiding out in Jerusalem. After that, the apostles are in Galilee, and they have gone back to fishing. There is no evidence of any greater boldness or power. That happens only at Pentecost after Jesus has ascended into heaven and when the Holy Spirit comes visibly and powerfully upon all of the Jesus' followers who are gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish religious feast.

So my best guess is that Jesus is saying something like: Get ready. The Holy Spirit is coming. Remember what I told you in the Upper Room. Don't lose heart. Power is coming.

However we understand this verse, it is clear that at Pentecost in Acts #2 the Holy Spirit did come upon the followers of Jesus in a new and dramatic way. It is then that these first Christians experienced boldness and power to carry out the Great Commission. That power and boldness is also available to us today.

D.

Verse 23 in our text deals with THE MESSAGE of the Great Commission. (I. C. D. THE MESSAGE) Jesus says, **"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."** This is another verse that presents interpretation challenges.

Our Catholic friends regard this as the basis for the sacrament of penance. In the middle of the 1500s the Council of Trent (COUNCIL OF TRENT QUOTATION) came out with this doctrinal claim: **"But when the Lord principally instituted the sacrament of penance, when, being raised from the dead, He breathed upon His disciples, saying... (QUOTATION PART 2) Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."** (Council of Trent, Session XIV First Decree 1.k)

This authority was understood to be given to the apostles who passed this authority on to their spiritual descendants. It was especially resident with the popes who delegated it to the priests. Past sins are forgiven in the sacrament of baptism. After that sins are forgiven through confession with the priest and the sacrament of penance. Thus Catholic priests are understood to have the power to forgive sins.

There are several problems with this understanding. Jesus was speaking to more than just apostles on this occasion. It appears that women were also part of the audience. It is difficult also to find a Biblical basis for a distinction between priests and other Christians. First Peter in the New Testament makes the claim that all Christians are priests before God. The Apostle John in this Gospel says that it is Jesus alone who has power to take away sins.

In #10 of the Book of Acts (ACTS 10:43) Peter makes this statement about Jesus: **“To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”** The emphasis of the New Testament is that forgiveness comes through Jesus.

In our passage Jesus is speaking about sending His followers out to preach the gospel. The response to that presentation determines the status of forgiveness of the hearer. As ambassadors of Christ, we can pronounce forgiveness, or the retaining of sins, according to the response of those who are presented with the gospel. If one believes in Jesus, we can announce the forgiveness of their sins. New Christians may need that assurance from us. I think that the correct interpretation of this verse has to be something along this line.

Such is the nature of the Great Commission as described by the Apostle John. Its basis is in the resurrection, which validates the claims of Jesus about what His death has accomplished. The power behind this commission comes from the Holy Spirit. The message has to do with forgiveness of sins that comes from faith in Jesus.

II.

In vv. 24-29 we encounter JOHN AND THE GREAT EXAMPLE. (II. JOHN AND THE GREAT EXAMPLE)  
According to vv. 24 & 25, **“Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen our 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.’”**

John is the only one of the Gospel writers who gives any details about the life or behavior of Thomas. He does this to set him up as the great example of belief in the face of an attitude of skepticism. In #11 Thomas is mentioned as being reluctant to return to Jerusalem at the news of the sickness of Lazarus. He says of Jesus, **“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”** In #14 in the Upper Room he expresses his honest confusion in asking Jesus where He is going when He speaks of going away.

For reasons unknown Thomas is not present when Jesus makes His first appearance to the gathered disciples. Perhaps he feels left out by that encounter. He has been a loyal disciple. He has witnessed the miracles of Jesus. He has seen Jesus raise at least two people from the dead. But now, having convincing evidence that Jesus is dead and buried, it is difficult for him to accept the notion that Jesus has risen from the dead.

Thomas is typical of the modern man. He is skeptical. He finds it difficult to accept the notion that someone could arise from the dead, especially after the physical abuse that Jesus has suffered. So he demands scientific proof. He wants experiential evidence that he can see and touch.

Verse 26: **“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.’”** In the Jewish method of reckoning, eight days later would be the following Sunday. Conditions were the same as the earlier Sunday. The doors are locked. The Jesus people are still in fear of being arrested by the Jewish authorities. Suddenly Jesus shows up. This time Thomas is present.

According to v. 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.’”** Jesus graciously offers to meet the test that Thomas has required. How did Jesus know about what Thomas demanded? He is the omniscient and omnipresent God-man. The risen Jesus knows and sees His disciples. Notice also that His physical wounds are visible in His resurrection body.

Verse 28: **“Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”** Did Thomas carry out his touch test? The impression that I get is that the sight and sound of Jesus was enough to convince him.

This is the climax of the story. Here is the recognition from a skeptic of the truth of the claims of Jesus that John has recorded in his Gospel. He is not just a great religious leader. He is not just Thomas’ rabbi. He is not just the Messiah. He is God. Only a divine being could come back from the dead as Jesus has done. Only a divine being could enter a locked room as He has done. But not only is Jesus God, He is Lord. He has a just claim on the life of Thomas.

At the time of John’s writing of this account Domitian was the Roman Emperor. An early Roman historian by the name of Suetonius (SUETONIUS QUOTATION) says this about him: **“Just as arrogantly he [Domitian] began a letter, which his procurators were to circulate, with the words ‘Our Lord God instructs you to do this!’ And ‘Lord God’ became his regular title both in writing and conversation.”** (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, “Domitian,” 13) Christians could not accept this claim. Jesus was the only Lord and God. Thus it was that the Apostle John was in exile when he wrote the Book of Revelation. Thus it was that other Christians were killed because they would not acknowledge Domitian as Lord and God.

This is also the nature of the challenge that we Christians face every day. Jesus, are you God and Lord of my life today--- at this moment? Are you Lord of my time, of my finances, of my thought life?  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 29: **“Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”** The first sentence from Jesus could be translated as either a question or a statement.

Among the first recipients of John’s letter there was hardly anyone still alive who had seen the risen Jesus. So the challenge for them, and the challenge for us, would be: Is the written testimony of John and the other New Testament writers sufficient to produce belief? The Apostle John has culminated his Gospel story with the testimony of the converted skeptic. Thomas is the great example.

III.

In vv. 30 & 31 we come to JOHN AND THE GREAT PROMISE. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. JOHN AND THE GREAT PROMISE) We might also have called this “the great purpose.” For throughout this study I have referenced these two verses as a clear statement of the Apostle John concerning his purpose in writing this book. But here we will focus on the great promise.

In vv. 30 & 31 he says, **“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.”** We have seen that the term “signs” refers to miracles. John has organized his biographical material around seven miracles, which culminate in the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The last and best sign is the resurrection of Jesus Himself. John acknowledges that there were many more signs that Jesus did. He chose these seven, in addition to the resurrection of Jesus.

John has recorded these signs with two purposes in mind. He wants his audience to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. The witness of Thomas is the great example of this. Thomas is convinced that the resurrection of Jesus means that He is more than just a mere man. He is God.

The second purpose that John has in mind is that His readers might discover life. In #10 John recorded the statement of Jesus that His desire was that people might experience an abundant life in the here and now. But this abundant life has an eternal component to it. Thus it was that Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well in #4 (JOHN 4:14), **“...but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”** Our one responsibility to receive this eternal life is to believe in Jesus.

The other significant anniversary that was noted this past week was the thirtieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. (PROJECTOR OFF) That was a dark time for many Chinese people. Zhang Boli was a journalism student at Peking University in 1989. During the protests, he began the first nongovernmental newspaper in China in forty years. He had a leadership role in the protests that took place in this famous square in Beijing.

After the massacre, he fled to his home province in the north of China. He hid out in homes of friends and relatives. While staying at the home of a childhood friend's relative, he encountered a Christian. This is Zhang Boli's testimony: **“I was raised with no God, no religion, nothing--- well, other than believing in the Communist Party. When I was hiding out in Heilongjiang for those two years, I met an old lady farmer who introduced me to Christianity and talked with me about Jesus. She had the Gospel of John, not even the full Bible, which had been hand copied onto paper. She was illiterate actually, so she gave it to me to read aloud and then she would explain it to me. In about a year, I became a Christian.”** (Christianity Today, June 2019, p. 67) Today he is the pastor of a church. Has the Apostle John's purpose been accomplished? Here is another evidence that it has been.

The dark time for Lance Corporal Jeff Guthrie resulted in a dramatic change in his life. As he spoke with Navy Chaplain Carey Cash on the grounds of Saddam Hussein's palace, having just survived a fierce firefight that brought them all into the center of Baghdad, twenty other Marines gathered around to listen to the conversation.

According to Chaplain Cash, **“They were listening intently, watching everything. He and I could both feel their gaze, but it didn't matter. He was overcome. ...**

**“I was looking into the face of a man, who, for the first time in his life, was truly encountering the power of God. ‘Jeff,’ I said gently. ‘Do you realize that God sent His Son Jesus for no other purpose than for forgiving all those things you or I have ever done wrong in life...?’**

**"He nodded.**

**"Jeff, do you believe that God loves you and that He sent His Son Jesus to die for you?"**

**"Yes, I do," he said, his voice broken and trembling.**

**"And do you want to experience the joy and peace of knowing that all your sins are completely and forever forgiven?"**

**"I do," he answered.**

**"Then why don't you bow in prayer with me right here right now? Ask God to do just that--- to send His Son Jesus into your heart and life and cleanse you from all your sin and give to you the promise of heaven."**

**"We bowed together as twenty watching Marines stared in disbelief."**

On the next day, Palm Sunday, 2003, Chaplain Cash baptized Jeff Guthrie in the palace of Saddam Hussein. Cash wrote, **"...I baptized Jeff Guthrie, a new creation, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As the waters of baptism poured over his head and onto the marble floors of the palace, the symbolism wasn't lost on anyone. Here we were in the inner chamber of a place known for oppression and tyranny, vice and unspeakable cruelty. Yet that Sacrament proclaimed to us all the greatest freedom and victory that a man can experience. There before our eyes, the courts of evil had become nothing less than the courts of the Lord. A place that had been known for the presence of darkness and treachery had become a place of the presence of God--- a table in the presence."**  
(PROJECTOR ON--- A TABLE IN THE PRESENCE) (Carey Cash, *A Table in the Presence*, pp. 231-237)

Such is the power of God to change lives in dark times and dark places. We have a great gospel and a great God.