Life Group Bible Study

*Walking With Jesus - Our Commission!*

July 10, 2022

John 20:19-31

OVERVIEW

Where are we going? What are we trying to accomplish as the church of Christ? How will we do this? How will we pay for it all? These are questions that will guide our conversation in this worship series. We can look to the future with hope and confidence because God is at work, and we have the opportunity to join that ministry of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration.

THEME

Jesus appears and gives his followers a blessing, a commission, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to do this future work.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR LIFE GROUP TO KNOW?

Christ has blessed, commissioned and empowered the church to be about the work of the Kingdom of God in the world.

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR LIFE GROUP TO DO?

Embrace this co-mission and step into the work of God in the world every day.

ICEBREAKER

In what ways has the church and its mission changed over the last 50 years? Where can you see this change most vividly? What are your hopes for the future of the church?

It seems as if the future of the church, our co-mission, is to live in ways that reveal God and open people’s eyes, hearts and lives to believing ... just as Jesus did.

PRAY TOGETHER

Father God, lead us into deeper trust for you and your dream for all creation. Give us eyes of faith to see your intentions and purposes in all things around us. Give us hope for the future, and empower us to live into this future for all that matters to you and your Kingdom. Help us to learn how to love our neighbor in tangible ways and, in doing so, to embody the proclamation that “Jesus is alive” and living in his people. Amen.

Content

Much of John 20 is focused on various people’s response to Jesus’ resurrection: Mary, Peter, the disciple whom Jesus loved, more disciples and eventually Thomas. For John, the appropriate response is believing (not faith or belief; it is never a noun in John’s Gospel).

Our text opens with the disciples huddled in fear behind a locked door. Far from setting them free, the death of Jesus has plunged the disciples into fear that the Jews would do to them what had been done to Jesus. Into their fear Jesus appears. Jesus had claimed to be “the door” (John 10:9), both to believing and eternal life, and so no physical door is any match for him!

Three different times in this passage Jesus says, “Peace be with you.” While this is a standard Middle Eastern greeting still in use today, it has deep meaning in this text. Peace (wholeness, completeness) is about far more than a lack of fear; it is the result of Jesus’ work on the cross and a gift of the Kingdom.

John 20:19-31 NLT That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," He said. (20) As He spoke, He showed them the wounds in His hands and His side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! (21) Again He said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, so I am sending you." (22) Then He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. (23) If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (24) One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came. (25) They told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he replied, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in His hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in His side." (26) Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. "Peace be with you," He said. (27) Then He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at My hands. Put your hand into the wound in My side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!" (28) "My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed. (29) Then Jesus told him, "You believe because you have seen Me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing Me." (30) The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. (31) But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in Him you will have life by the power of His name.

DISCUSSION Why do you think the doors were locked? How do you think Jesus got in?

Jesus commissions the disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” How we understand our mission is directly connected to how we understand God’s mission through Jesus. For John, Jesus’ primary mission is to reveal God, to open people’s eyes, hearts and lives to believing in God’s presence and work in the world. This focus is shaped by what Jesus says and does next. First, he gives the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit (this is John’s Pentecost). John gives us his perspective on the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ high priestly prayer (especially chapter 16), and it focuses primarily on illumination of the truth.

DISCUSSION What do you believe is Jesus’ commission to his disciples? Do you think they understood it? Why or why not? How does this commission apply to us today?

But the real shape of the disciples’ mission, and ours, comes from what Jesus says next about “forgiving” sins. Matt Skinner, professor at Luther Seminary, fleshes out the meaning of these words beautifully:*The things mentioned in verse 23 (“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”) sound at first hearing like responsibilities that few of us would choose for ourselves. Maybe fewer of us would trust an institutionalized church to wield them. What is Jesus talking about? It is imperative that we make sense of this verse in light of all that has come before it. Too many mistakes have been made in the past by those who have read John 20:23 in isolation or with a sloppy connection to the unrelated words of Matthew 16:19. We must attend to how the Johannine Jesus has already characterized the problem of “sin,” the role of the Holy Spirit, and the nature of his ministry. If not, we risk perpetuating a legacy of misuse and polemic that has muddied this verse across the history of its interpretation. Jesus is not appointing the church as his moral watchdog; nor does he commission it to arbitrate people’s assets and liabilities on a heavenly balance sheet. In John’s Gospel, Jesus talks about sin as unbelief, the unwillingness or incapacity to grasp the truth of God manifested in him. To have sin abide, therefore, is to remain estranged from God. The consequence of such a condition is ongoing resistance. Sin in John is not about moral failings; primarily it is an inability or refusal to recognize God’s revelation when confronted by it, in Jesus. (from http://www.workingpreacher.org).*

DISCUSSION Do you resonate with this understanding of sin? Why or why not? What are some specific ways we refuse to recognize God’s revelation?

GOING DEEPER: DOUBTING THOMAS

The second portion of today’s text is the story of “doubting Thomas.” Interestingly, the Greek word for “doubt” (Distazo) never appears in the text. This is a story about “unbelieving” as yet another response to Jesus’ resurrection.

Thomas was not present the week before, when Jesus revealed himself and gave the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thomas does not so much meet the news of Jesus’ resurrection with doubt, but with specific conditions for believing. There’s a lot of “if…then” language in the text. That should sound familiar to many of us who have struggled with the reality of Jesus’ resurrection.

DISCUSSION If it had been you, what would you have said to Jesus? Do you think Thomas deserves the rap of “doubting?” Why or why not?

On the surface, it appears as if Jesus acquiesces to Thomas’ conditions. He commands him to touch the scars on his hands and side, but a careful reading of the text shows that Thomas never does physically examine Jesus. Instead, Jesus commands Thomas, “Don’t be unbelieving. Believe.” Thomas responds with a complete confession of faith, “My Lord and my God.”

Believing, it would seem, is a response to Jesus’ word, or command, more than to some physical evidence. Jesus goes on to say that all will be blessed who believe without seeing. The implication is that future generations will believe through the proclamation, the witness of the faith community. This is the commission that Jesus gives the disciples.

DISCUSSION In what ways are we asked to believe without seeing? What is the proclamation we are called to witness to?

The result of believing, of living in trust that Jesus is Lord and God, leads to life (zoe). John told us in the beginning of his Gospel that in Jesus is life (John 1:4), life that moves people from darkness (unbelief) to light (believing). Throughout his Gospel, John shows us just how true his opening statement was, and is, and will be for all people.

Application

This week, how can we embrace this co-mission and step into the work of God in the world every day?

Brainstorm ideas and pick one thing to do as a group.

PRAY TOGETHER

*God, your dream for the world is that everything would be redeemed, and that all things would be reconciled to one another. We admit that sometimes our dream for the world and your dream for the world are two very different things. Our heart may yearn for success and wealth, while your heart yearns for justice and equity. We might crave abundance and prosperity, while your heart craves satisfaction and contentment. We may dream of doing it on our own, while you dream of us doing this together. Help us to envision the world that you dream of, and step into that dream in Jesus’ name. Amen.*