

Power, Doubt, and Faith: How Jesus Meets You Where You Are – Jn 20:19-29

CBC Ilderton

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Andrew Hall

In 2011, the Winnipeg Free Press ran a story about Church on the Rock and their Easter production. The headline read “Jesus to rise as Batman in church’s Easter play.” The goal of the church was to attract as many people as possible to their services and tell people about the real superhero – Jesus Christ.

(see <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/columnists/jesus-to-rise-as-batman-in-churchs-easter-play-146514375.html>)

But I kept reading until I got to the really important part of the article – the intelligent section called “reader comments.” I don’t usually waste my time reading the drivel there, but I wanted to see what the general thought of the culture was, especially in an area of the country where Christianity is still somewhat predominant. A man by the name of Bob had commented saying “Batman and Jesus have much in common since both are fictitious characters.” And the comments responding to that insight only got more profane/profound.

There is a notion in our day that the only kind of people that believe in miracles and this “superstitious stuff” are non-scientific pre-modern people who like to believe every miracle story that comes their way. Christianity, it is said, is filled with people who check their brains at the door to the church, willingly believing whatever the robed individual at the front says. These are backwards people. They don’t look for natural explanations. They immediately jump to the supernatural to explain everything. If Christians were more honest, the argument goes, they would see that everything has a natural explanation. Christians just need to come into the modern era and abandon the superstitions of their pre-scientific forefathers.

Modern people, you see, have trouble believing in miracles. A friend in college came to me and told me the story of how his leg grew half an inch. He had been in a bike/car accident, and when he was fixed up, his one leg that had been crushed by the car was shorter. When he told me of his leg growing an extra half inch, I thought to myself, “Well, you’re still growing. Your hip has probably adjusted to compensate.” I didn’t automatically assume there had been a miracle.

John 20 actually describes how Jesus meets you where you are – whether you are fearful about going on mission, doubtful about Christ, or ready to embrace him by faith. How does Christ meet you where you are?

Receive Missional Power (vv. 19-23)

The first place Christ meets us is in our fear and uncertainty. The disciples are locked away, protecting themselves from Jewish leaders who would want to do them harm. Suddenly, Christ comes into their midst. Did he slip through walls? Did he sneak in? We aren’t told, but what we know is that Jesus met his disciples in their fear. “Peace to you!” he announces.

This traditional greeting was one that Jews used, and became an important greeting used in the early church. Paul would often begin his letters with “Grace and Peace,” demonstrating that this word is more than just “I hope it’s going well!” Behind this greeting is the Jewish idea of shalom – I desire wholeness and well-being for you.

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But Jesus doesn't merely give a wish-greeting; he shows that he is the resurrected Christ who comes to meet them in their fear and bring them good news. He shows them his nail-scarred hands and wounded side, which caused the disciples great joy. By his very presence, he was showing that death had been defeated and that he had come to give them this peace.

Why bring peace? "Just as the Father has sent me, so also I send you." Fearful disciples are not missional disciples. Fearful disciples gather in their holy huddle and protect themselves from the world. Missional disciples go into the fray. And Jesus makes it clear that the Father sent the Son into the world as a missionary, and now the disciples are to participate in this same mission. As God is a missionary God, so are his disciples to be missionary disciples. And this missionary work is part of abiding in Christ. To abide in Christ is to go with and for Christ.

The only way to go is in the power of Christ. And so Jesus breathes out, telling them to receive the Spirit. Just like God had breathed into the man to create human life in Gen. 2:7, now Jesus breathes out on his disciples so that they might go with the power of the Spirit, taking the word of Christ to people so that they might become new creations.

Because the church has received this mission – to go with the good news that Jesus makes broken people whole and dead people alive, Jesus makes it clear that the message of the gospel is what does this new creation work. When we share the good news that Jesus has conquered sin and death, that he has defeated sin, the good news is that broken people who have been wounded by sin can receive the healing and restorative work of the Spirit; that dead people who have had no sensitivity to God can suddenly be vibrant with spiritual life and enjoyment.

We need spiritual power to do this mission. If this current moment should teach the Western Church anything, it should be that gimmicks, great Sunday morning shows, high-end productions, and super creative services won't win people. No one is looking for an entertaining church that meets all their needs. What they are looking for is a church that knows the power of God by proclaiming forgiveness of sins, releasing them from the bondage of the collective disappointments of their lives. Living in a home with other people during this quarantine confronts us with the reality that we need a power not in and of ourselves to love our family as we love ourselves. No entertaining church will do that. But the power of the Spirit can make it clear that Jesus has sent us to be agents of good news and grace, forgiveness and wholeness. Proclaiming the gospel is what brings the forgiveness of sins. So let's be about our mission!

Question Nagging Doubts (vv. 24-27)

Other people, however, are plagued by doubts and questions. In these two verses, we find out that Jesus appears to 10 of the disciples on that Resurrection Sunday, but Thomas is not there. When the disciples tell Thomas that Jesus has come and shown himself, he

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cannot believe. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and I put my finger in the place of the nails and I put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

For this one moment, this poor disciple has been labelled throughout church history as Doubting Thomas. He doesn't want to take the other disciples' word. He wants evidence. And the Christian faith is a faith that does not demand belief without evidence. Christianity does not demand you make a leap into the dark. Christianity offers consistent, factual evidence.

So eight days later, Jesus appears to Thomas and offers him the same peace that he offered to the other disciples. He wants Thomas to know this wholeness. He wants him to know that he has come to make things new. And John alludes to this new work by telling us that it was 8 days later. In the biblical storyline, the eighth day is the day of new creation work. On the 8th day after the birth of a baby boy, Jews were to mark their sons with the sign of the covenant, the reminder that God had chosen a new people to be a light to the world. And now, on this 8th day, Jesus appears to Thomas, but not to mark Thomas but to show his marks of new creation work. He shows him his hands and side.

In the midst of Thomas's questions, Jesus confronts him with the evidence of the resurrection. In other words, he's saying to Thomas:

- What questions linger in your mind?
- What beliefs underlie your doubts?
- What keeps you from digging deeper to find answers?
- What fears might you need to confront?

And in this moment, Jesus meets Thomas where he is. He demonstrates that he has come to make a new creation, and that new creation must begin in Thomas's heart.

As we go out in mission, we can never forget that people have legitimate questions and doubts. Scarred by sin, people need us to meet them where they are. They need to see the sacrifice of Christ in our lives, loving them enough to come near to them in their uncertainties and fears so that they can doubt their doubts and confront their fears. In the face of doubt and uncertainty, Jesus meets Thomas where he is and shows him the new creation marks of love. And when we show that the new creation is marked with the scars of love, we can call people to...

Embrace Christ by Faith (vv. 28-29)

As Thomas sees the scars of new creation love, he responds, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus tells us that he has seen and believed. Jesus is very God. He is Lord. And here is where the power of God shows up. Thomas believes. His sins are forgiven. His doubts are confronted. And he is blessed. In that little word “Blessed” is packed all of God's good gifts to his children. Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places now belongs to Thomas and to every person who believes. Once alienated from God's promises, now adopted into his family. Once a slave of sin, now purchased out of slavery into a new life

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as an heir. Once guilty for all the wrongs done, now forgiven. Once dead in sin, now alive in Christ. Once an outsider, now brought into the family.

Here is Jesus – meeting us where we are. In our fears and doubts. He doesn't wait for us to come to him – he comes to us. He doesn't put on a spectacular show – he shows us his scars of love. He doesn't wait for us to have it all figured out – he comes to us to meet us in our confusion.

In that place of fear, uncertainty, and doubt, he makes a new creation. He takes weak, fearful people and calls them blessed. And just as he was sent from heaven to earth to meet broken, wounded, fearful, hurting people, he sends us out in the same way so that those who hear this message will see the sacrificial scars of our love, hear the words of Christ, and believe.

Christian, we have a mission. We have a message. We have Christ who has met us where we are. Now let's go and be the same kind of people that the world has always needed, bringing good news of great joy which is for all people!