



**The Fact of the Resurrection**  
**John 20:1-31**  
**April 17, 2022**

**Main Idea:** He is risen, just as he said.

*Note to Group Leaders: The commentary section is longer than usual for this lesson because the text covers 31 verses. The commentary is intended to help you, but is not required for your study. If you are looking for something different to supplement your study, we have provided additional resources to supplement your study or Group time at the end of this Groups Lesson.*

## **Personal Study Guide**

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READ ENTIRE TEXT: JOHN 20:1-31

### **Highlight – What stands out?**

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1. Who sees evidence of the risen Jesus in our text? (4 people/groups)

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

4) \_\_\_\_\_

2. How does each group/person initially respond? How do they feel?

3. What is the outcome for each group/person in their interaction with Jesus?

4. What else in the passage stands out to you?

## **Explain – What does this mean?**

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1. The author uses the first ten verses and much detail to show us the empty tomb. Aside from making sure you know he's faster than Peter (see verses 4 *and* 8), why do the details about the empty tomb matter for ensuring people believe?

Other passages about the tomb that may help:

- Matthew 28:11-15
- Luke 24:10-11
- Luke 24:21-24
- Deuteronomy 19:15

**The John commentary out of St. Helen's Church in London states that in "Jewish law the witness of two men establishes credible evidence (Deut. 19:15). Peter and John provide credibility concerning the empty tomb; John's record of what they saw is highly detailed, suggesting authenticity," especially when coupled with remaining testimony throughout this chapter and the other gospels. "This is important proof that the resurrection of Jesus was a physical, bodily resurrection, not just some kind of 'spiritual experience' or 'imagining' that the disciples were caught up in."**

2. In verse 17, Jesus gives Mary Magdalene a message for the disciples: "go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" How is this different or the same from how Jesus spoke of the Father in John 14:20, 23, and 16:25-27? What is new?
3. Thomas says that he must see Jesus' wounds or he "will never believe" (verse 25). How has the need to see been a stumbling block for listeners throughout Jesus' ministry? On the flip side, where have people believed before seeing?

Stumbling block:

- Mark 8:11-13
- Luke 11:15-17
- John 2:18-21
- John 6:28-30

Faith without sight:

- John 4:46-54
- Matthew 9:20-22
- Luke 7:1-10

4. If seeing signs is insufficient for belief, what is sufficient according to verses 29-31? Has this idea come up before?

## **Apply – How does this change me?**

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1. Based on our discussion from Explain question 2, how does knowing God as *our* Father change us? How shall we now live in light of the hope and assurance we have in Christ?
  
2. When Jesus appears to the disciples in verses 19-21, he offers them his peace and then calls them to action, repeating his prayer from 17:18. How are we, as believers today, also called to this action?

## **Respond – What's my next step?**

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1. Where or how might God be calling you to be sent?

2. Pray for unbelievers in your life, that God would change their hearts to belief even without seeing and that believers around them (including yourself!) would be faithful to speak truth to them.

## Commentary

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### **1. Peter and John at the empty tomb (20:1–9)**

**20:1.** It is remarkable that all four Gospels (*cf.* Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:2; Lk. 24:1) introduce their respective resurrection accounts by specifying *the first day of the week*, rather than ‘the third day’ after the crucifixion (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:3, 4), despite Jesus’ passion predictions (Mk. 8:31 par.). The reason is disputed, but it may have to do with the desire to present the resurrection of Jesus as the beginning of something new.

John says the first approach to the tomb took place *while it was still dark*, *i.e.* early on Sunday morning. Mark specifies dawn; Luke says ‘very early in the morning’, and Matthew uses a complicated construction that probably means much the same (*cf.* Carson, *Matt*, pp. 587–588). If Mary Magdalene first approached the tomb alone, and then with other women (*cf.* discussion below, and notes on vv. 11–12), John’s *darkness* may suggest that she went before dawn. Whether this is so or not, one is tempted to think that John emphasizes the darkness of the dawn because he is still using light/darkness symbolism (*cf.* notes on 3:2; 13:30): the darkness of the hour is the perfect counterpart to the darkness that still shrouds Mary’s understanding.

Mary of Magdala (*cf.* notes on 19:25) is prominent in the first resurrection account of each of the four Gospels, but only here does she appear alone. It is quite uncertain how this report is to be reconciled with those in the Synoptics. Perhaps she went to the tomb alone (John), and then returned with some other women (Synoptics), right on the trail of Peter and the beloved disciple. If so, we are to think of her as becoming separated from the others after their arrival at the empty tomb (vv. 10–18). Many argue that the plural ‘we’ (v. 2) hints that Mary Magdalene was *not* alone on her first trip to the tomb (though other explanations for the ‘we’ are possible: *e.g.* Bultmann [p. 684 n. 1], rightly cites both Aramaic and Greek parallels where the plural is merely a mode of speech, without plural referent). Bernard (2. 262) argues that a Jewish woman in first-

century Jerusalem would not be likely to walk alone, in the dark, to a place of ceremonial dirt, a place of execution; but grief may breed courage as readily as cowardice. Certainly there are Gospel parallels where one Evangelist mentions two or more people while another Evangelist mentions only the most prominent, but on the whole it seems wiser to apply this principle to Mary's second trip to the tomb (assuming there were two trips) than to the first (*cf.* notes on vv. 11–12).

However this matter be resolved, it is worth recalling that the Synoptists, who mention several women at the tomb, agree in naming Mary Magdalene first. This probably reflects the early church's memory of the fact that she was the first person to see the resurrected Jesus. Her witness was not as greatly utilized in the primitive preaching as was that of, say, Peter, doubtless owing to the fact that a woman's evidence was not normally admissible in court (e.g. Mishnah Rosh ha-Shanah 1:8). The Evangelists have nevertheless taken pains to honour her, and thoughtful Christians will remember that God delights to choose what the world deems foolish to shame the wise, so that no-one may boast before him (*cf.* 1 Cor. 1:27–29).

Alone or (less probably) with others, Mary *went to the tomb and saw that the stone* [not actually mentioned before now] *had been removed from the entrance*. The text does not tell us whether she looked inside, but gives the impression she did not. Had she done so, the fact that it was *still dark* would have made the cave a very black hole indeed.

**20:2.** The robbing of graves was a crime sufficiently common that the Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54) eventually ordered capital punishment to be meted out to those convicted of destroying tombs, removing bodies or even displacing the sealing stones. John records no hint of the Jewish allegation that Jesus' disciples were the ones who stole Jesus' body (*cf.* Mt. 28:13–15), but the fact that such a charge could be levelled demonstrates that grave robbery was not uncommon. So it is not surprising that the sight of the removed stone prompted Mary Magdalene to draw the conclusion she did. In distress she ran to report her news to two of the most prominent of Jesus' disciples, to Peter and the beloved disciple.

The form of her report, 'They have taken *the Lord (ton kyrion)* out of the tomb ...', is not yet a Christological confession of any significance (*cf.* further on vv. 11, 18, 28). Readers who have already meditated on v. 28 may nevertheless return to this spot and perceive, once again, how often the people in this Gospel speak better than they know.

**20:3–5.** Luke 24:12 mentions only Peter at the tomb. For that reason many see the mention of the beloved disciple as either inventive special pleading or a creation full of symbolism (briefly discussed below). Yet Luke 24:24 reports that Cleopas and his companion on the Emmaus road said that '*some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said*': the plural should be given its natural force, and taken as confirmation of the witness of the Fourth Gospel.

As for the allegorical interpretations that have attached themselves to these verses, there is too little evidence to support any of them. There is no indication, for instance, that the description of the beloved disciple's fleetness of foot—swifter than Peter!—is a veiled way of insisting that in the 'Johannine church' John must be accorded greater pre-eminence than Peter. In view of 13:12–17, even the suggestion is repulsive. Bultmann (p. 685) holds that Peter represents Jewish Christianity, and the beloved disciple Gentile Christianity: the Jewish church is first on the scene (Peter enters the tomb before John), but that fact gives no precedence since both stand beside the empty grave-clothes. Indeed, the eager faith of the Gentiles is greater than that of the Jews (the beloved disciple ran faster than Peter). There are no reliable indications in the text that John assigned such symbolic value to the two disciples. The ancient explanation for the swiftness of the beloved disciple is probably the correct one: he was younger than Peter, and arrived first. Because the entire narrative is designed to explain just how and when and to what degree faith in the resurrection of Jesus was achieved (*cf.* vv. 29–31), the details of the eyewitness are deemed important.

The beloved disciple *bent over and looked in* (*parakypsas blepei*). The expression is consonant with either a grave dug in the ground, or a cave tomb. That he *did not go in* requires us to think of the latter. He saw *the strips of linen* (*ta othonia*; *cf.* notes on 19:40) *lying there*, evidence enough that no-one had simply moved the body. Nor would thieves have been likely to leave behind expensive linen and even more expensive spices.

**20:6–7.** Peter may arrive second but, true to his nature, he impetuously rushed right into the tomb. He not only saw *the strips of linen lying there*, but also *the burial cloth* (*soudarion*; *cf.* notes on 11:44) *that had been around Jesus' head*. Apparently this could not be seen from the entrance: the flow of the passage from v. 5 to v. 8 suggests that John did not see the latter piece of cloth until he too entered the tomb.

This cloth *was folded up by itself, separate from the linen*. Clearly, John perceives these details to be important, but their exact meaning is disputed. Some have thought that the burial cloth still retained the shape of Jesus' head, and was separated from the strips of linen by a distance equivalent to the length of Jesus' neck. Others have suggested that, owing to the mix of spices separating the layers, even the strips of linen retained the shape they had when Jesus' body filled them out. Both of these suggestions say more than the text requires. What seems clearest is the contrast with the resurrection of Lazarus (11:44). Lazarus came from the tomb wearing his grave-clothes, the additional burial cloth still wrapped around his head. Jesus' resurrection body apparently passed through his grave-clothes, spices and all, in much the same way that he later appeared in a locked room (vv. 19, 26). The description of the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head does not suggest that it still retained the shape of the corpse, but that it had been neatly rolled up and set to one side by the one who no longer had any use for it. The description is

powerful and vivid, not the sort of thing that would have been dreamed up; and the fact that two men saw it (v. 8) makes their evidence admissible in a Jewish court (Dt. 19:15).

**20:8.** Timid at first, the beloved disciple, doubtless emboldened by Peter, entered the tomb and saw the place where the Master lay—now nothing but linen grave-clothes and the additional burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. With sudden intuition he perceived that the only explanation was that the Jesus who had been crucified, the Jesus who had so recently assigned him his mother, the Jesus who had been buried in this new tomb, had risen from the dead. The beloved disciple *saw and believed*—and thus the Evangelist introduces the themes of seeing and believing that reach their climax in v. 29.

Most of the early witnesses came to faith in Jesus as the resurrected Lord not because they could not find his corpse but because they found Christ alive; but John testifies that he came to such faith before he saw Jesus in resurrected form. And he took this step, not simply because the tomb was empty, but because the grave-clothes were still there.

But if the empty tomb did not receive great prominence in the earliest apostolic preaching (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:3–7), New Testament writers nevertheless recognized the strategic importance of the empty tomb for both history and theology. Historically, the preaching and the rapid growth of the early church are alike unexplainable apart from an empty tomb. Even on the doubtful supposition that all the first Christians were dupes or hallucinating enthusiasts, the Jewish authorities, though they had every incentive to do so, could not come up with the body of the man whose execution they had organized. Theologically, the empty tomb rules out any re-interpretation of 'resurrection' that makes it indistinguishable from mere immortality. The empty tomb establishes that there was continuity between Jesus' pre-death body and his post-resurrection body. However transformed the latter was (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:35ff.), its point of continuity with the pre-death Jesus did not lie exclusively at the level of Jesus' *personality*; it lay also at the level of Jesus' *body*. Much that is said in the New Testament about the Christian's ultimate hope (e.g. 1 Thes. 4:13–18; 1 Cor. 15) is incoherent if this point is not absorbed.

It is normally assumed that Peter did *not* at this time come to faith (though Bultmann, p. 684, insists that both disciples believed). Strictly speaking, the Evangelist does not tell us what went on in Peter's mind. The witness of the beloved disciple *may* not be designed to contrast his faith with Peter's unbelief; it *may* simply be the confession of his *own* faith. But the narrative reads more naturally if we assume that Peter did not at this time believe, and this is confirmed by the best text of Luke 24:12, which says that Peter 'went away, wondering to himself what had happened'. To speak of rivalry between the two men, however, not only goes beyond what this passage says, it is to fly in the face of the Fourth Gospel as a whole, where the two are presented as friends, not competitors.

Many have wondered why, if the beloved disciple at this time came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, he did not actively witness to his faith amongst the other disciples. For some, this is sufficient reason for doubting the historicity of the early morning race to the tomb. Strictly speaking, however, the text does not say that the beloved disciple did *not* bear witness. More important, even if we assume he did, such witness was necessarily more tentative than that of the first reports of having actually seen the risen Jesus—and even these reports were at first greeted with generous scepticism (Lk. 24:36). Or perhaps the beloved disciple thought it best to hold his peace until events had confirmed or destroyed his fledgling faith. Perhaps he was not all that far removed from Peter’s pondering (Lk. 24:12).

**20:9.** Neither Peter nor the beloved disciple at this point understood *from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead*. By the time John wrote that was no longer the case: the church had worked out a detailed understanding of the Old Testament by which to understand and explain the life, ministry, death and resurrection of their Lord (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:3–7). At this point, however, the fledgling faith of the beloved disciple was grounded on what he had seen (and not seen!) in the tomb. The singular *Scripture (graphē)* may suggest that a specific Old Testament text is in mind (Sanders, p. 422, n. 3, suggests Ps. 16:10; Bruce, p. 386, thinks of Lv. 23:11 or Ho. 6:2), but it is also possible that it refers to the entire Scripture. The failure of the disciples to grasp the teaching of Scripture at this point is confirmed by similar patterns of belief and misunderstanding reported by Luke (24:25–27, 32, 44–47; *cf.* notes on 2:19–22).

## **2. Jesus appears to Mary (20:10–18)**

**20:10.** This verse is transitional. On the one hand, Peter and the beloved disciple are dismissed: the two disciples *went back to their homes (apēlthon ... pros autous)*; *but Mary*, on the other hand—the mild adversative in v. 11 establishes a contrast—returned to the tomb. The expression rendered *to their homes* is not that of 19:27 (*eis ta idia*); here, the expression is roughly equivalent to the French idiom ‘chez eux’ (‘at their own [place]’).

**20:11–12.** Some have wondered why the beloved disciple did not at least share his faith with Mary, but there is no particular reason to think that their paths crossed after her initial announcement (v. 2). The reason Mary returned to the tomb is not given. Her sense of grief and loss may have driven her back there; or, as the sequel suggests, she may have been hoping to find someone who could enlighten her as to who took the body, and where they put it. Standing *outside* the tomb, she wept, and *bent over* (same verb as in v. 5) *to look into the tomb*—perhaps for the first time (*cf.* notes on v. 1).

Mary saw two angels in white, one at each end of the place where Jesus lay. How the tomb was configured to allow such an arrangement is uncertain. Several structures to accommodate the corpse were commonplace in the first century. Sometimes a kind of stone bench ran around the inside wall;

sometimes a bench-arcosolium was cut out (a flat ledge under a recessed arch cut out of an inner wall); sometimes a *loculus* was cut out of the wall (a tunnel-like burial chamber hollowed out of an inner wall, not unlike the Roman catacombs); a trough-arcosolium was a sarcophagus under a recessed arch. John's account rules out the *loculus*. The fourth-century descriptions of the uncovering of the tomb in the time of Constantine (*cf.* notes on 19:41–42) suggest a trough-arcosolium, but the descriptions are not entirely clear, and some have doubted that this particular structure was used before AD 70.

Whatever the structure, if this approach of Mary is to be collated with the visit of the women reported in the Synoptics, something must be said about these two angels; for they, not the grave-clothes, capture Mary's attention. Mark 16:5 reports a 'young man' dressed in white who appears to the women; Luke 24:4 describes two 'men' dressed in 'clothes that gleamed like lightning' who 'stood beside' the women; Matthew 28:2–3 says that an angel with the appearance of lightning and wearing a garment as white as snow rolled back the stone and frightened the guards, and later talked with the women. Notwithstanding contrary opinion, in all cases, including Mark, we are to think of angels, for the white garments or the shining white garments are a symbol for visitors from the heavenly realms (so, rightly, Beasley-Murray, p. 374). Angels regularly appear as human visitors in the Old Testament. In this case, they are not merely interpretative angels, as so often in apocalyptic literature, but evidence that God himself has been at work. The difference in number (one angel or two) is of a piece with Gospel variations in other narratives (e.g. Mk. 10:46–52 and Mt. 20:29–34). In any case, John's point is that this empty tomb cannot be explained by appealing to grave robbers; this is nothing other than the invasion of God's power.

**20:13.** In all four Gospels, the angels make some reference to the seeking of the women. On *Woman (gynai)*, *cf.* notes on 2:4; 19:26. The question of the angels, *why are you crying?*, is not designed to elicit information. It is gentle reproof: by this time Mary should not have been crying. Her response shows she has still not transcended the explanation to which she had earlier gravitated (v. 2).

**20:14–15.** Probably we are to think that Mary suddenly becomes aware of someone else near the tomb, and turns to that person with the same intent—to find out if anyone knows what has happened to Jesus' body. As so often in the resurrection narratives, Jesus is not immediately recognized. The couple on the Emmaus road were 'kept from recognizing him' (Lk. 24:16), and the long ending of Mark says he appeared to them 'in a different form' (Mk. 16:12); the disciples in the boat on the lake of Tiberias did not recognize the man on the shore (Jn. 21:4); Mary *did not realize that it was Jesus*. In this instance, it is possible that Mary was blinded by tears. Taken as a whole, however, the resurrection accounts provide a certain tension. On the one hand, Jesus' resurrection body can be touched and handled (v. 27; Lk. 24:39), bears the marks of the wounds inflicted on Jesus' pre-death body (Jn. 20:20, 25, 27), and

not only cooks fish (21:9) but eats it (Lk. 24:41–43). On the other hand, Jesus' resurrection body apparently rose through the grave-clothes (Jn. 20:6–8), appears in a locked room (vv. 19, 26), and is sometimes not (at least initially) recognized. The closest we are likely to come to an explanation is 1 Cor. 15:35ff.

The stranger's approach is courteous: for *Woman*, cf. v. 13. Doubtless Mary takes his pair of questions to be the probing concern of a kind stranger. As she pondered them after the fact, she could not help seeing them in a different light (as John's readers must). The first (*why are you crying?*) becomes mild rebuke; the second (*Who is it you are looking for?*) becomes an invitation to reflect on the kind of Messiah she was expecting, and thus to widen her horizons and to recognize that, grand as her devotion to him was, her estimate of him was still far too small. The evangelistic implications for John's readers are transparent.

When first uttered, however, Jesus' words have only the most mundane meaning for Mary. She supposes him to be the gardener (*kēpouros*; cf. notes on 19:41): *kyrie* ('Sir') is a courtesy, not a confession of faith. Perhaps, she told herself, he had seen something—indeed, perhaps he had been involved in the moving of the body himself. If Mary thought him to be the gardener, she may have wondered if he had been under orders from the owner to remove the body of this executed criminal from the new tomb where it had been hurriedly placed. That she should offer to make the arrangements to fetch the body and give it a proper burial suggests she was a woman of some wealth and standing (as Lk. 8:2–3 attests).

**20:16.** Whatever the cause of her blindness, the single word *Mary*, spoken as Jesus had always uttered it, was enough to remove it. The good shepherd 'calls his own sheep by name ... and his sheep follow him because they know his voice' (10:3–4). Anguish and despair are instantly swallowed up by astonishment and delight. Mary addresses him as she always has: *Rabboni!*—an Aramaic word (cf. notes on 5:2) which John dutifully translates for his Greek-speaking readers (cf. notes on 1:38, 41, and Additional Note). It may not be the highest Christological confession (cf. v. 28), but at this point Mary is enthralled by the restored relationship, not contemplating its theological implications.

**20:17.** This verse belongs to a handful of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. The initial prohibition, *mē mou haptou*, can be taken several different ways: compare 'Touch me not' (AV), 'Do not hold on to me' (NIV) and 'Stop clinging to Me' (NASB). What meaning we choose turns on at least three variables: the force of the verb *haptomai* ('to touch', from which *haptou* derives), the significance of a present tense prohibition, and the relation of this prohibition to the succeeding clause. Unfortunately, the meaning of this second clause is even more disputed than the first, and the combination of difficulties breeds numerous interpretative permutations that cannot be canvassed in detail here. Four may be mentioned:

(1) Michael McGehee, supported by Porter (p. 356), has recently proposed that the word rendered *for* (*gar*) should be understood as an anticipatory *gar*,

more or less the equivalent of 'since', and linking its clause not with the one that precedes it but with the one that succeeds it. McGehee re-punctuates the verse and renders it, 'Don't cling to me. Since I have not yet ascended (*anabebēka*) to the Father, go to my brothers and tell them I am ascending (*anabainō*) to my Father and your Father ...' Porter adds that the tenses of the two transliterated verbs, perfect and present respectively, properly understood, may confirm McGehee: 'I have not yet reached a state of ascension ... I am in progress of ascending' (at the risk of over-translation). This cuts the prohibition off from the rest of the sentence, making it quite unnecessary to explain the prohibition in terms of the second clause.

Although this explanation has its attractions, it fails on two grounds. First, although anticipatory *gar* is not uncommon in classical Greek and is not unknown in hellenistic Greek, there is no certain example in the New Testament; and second, it leaves the initial prohibition, *Do not hold on to me* (however it is rendered) so free that one wonders what it is doing there. We are still not told *why* Jesus should insist on this prohibition, especially since it will be reversed in v. 27.

(2) Zerwick (§ 476) recognizes that the *gar* ('for') links the prohibition to something that succeeds it, but suggests that the words immediately after the *gar* are parenthetical—i.e. 'Do not keep hold of me, for (I am not yet ascended to My Father) go rather to My brethren and tell them ...' More briefly, Jesus says, 'Let go of me *because* you must go to my brothers with a message.' This assumes that *gar* ('for') links a prohibition and an imperative, an extremely unusual combination. Moreover, the allegedly parenthetical remark simply does not read like a parenthesis. It would have helped Zerwick's case if it had been introduced by a concessive word like 'although': e.g. 'Do not keep hold of me, *for (although I am not yet ascended) etc.*'; but this is not the case.

(3) Increasingly, recent scholars have opted for a rather complex theological solution. The first step is to observe the difficulties on the very surface of the text. Brown (2. 992–993, 1011–1016), for instance, rightly notes that, at a superficial reading, the *for* clause explains *why* Mary is forbidden to touch or to cling to Jesus, even though Thomas is invited to touch him (v. 27): Jesus had not yet ascended when Mary approached him, but had apparently ascended (and returned?) by the time he had to deal with Thomas. Now either the very physical demonstration of 20:27 argues that Jesus had not yet at that point ascended, or, as Thüsing (pp. 265–266) argues, the appearances to Mary and to Thomas must have been of very different types. But if something as dramatic as the ascension has taken place between v. 17 and v. 27, why is it not mentioned? And why should being ascended make a difference? If Jesus *has* ascended between v. 17 and v. 27, the implication is that the disciples are permitted to touch Jesus after the ascension but not before—exactly the reverse of what might have been expected. If someone were to suggest that it is because of some substantial difference in the resurrection body after the ascension, it must be objected that this is the sheerest speculation.

Brown, then, followed by many others, attempts to resolve the issue by making allowance 'for John's technique. He is fitting a theology of resurrection/ascension that by definition has no dimensions of time and space into a narrative that is necessarily sequential' (2. 1014). He concludes:

Thus, in our opinion, the statement 'I am ascending to my Father' in 17b is not an exact determination of time and has no implication for the state of the risen Jesus previous to that statement. It is a theological statement contrasting the passing nature of Jesus' presence in his post-resurrectional appearances and the permanent nature of his presence in the Spirit. (2. 1014–1015)

This view is sometimes linked with the suggestion of Lagrange (p. 512) that *de* (normally 'but'; rendered 'instead' in NIV) does not apply to *Go* but to *I am returning* (*anabainō*, lit. 'I am ascending'). This has the effect of making *Go instead to my brothers and tell them* parenthetical, yielding the paraphrase: 'Stop touching me (or attempting to do so); it is true (*gar*) that I have not yet ascended to the Father but I am about to do so' (so Barrett, p. 566). The idea is that the resurrection has opened the door to a new, intimate, spiritual relationship between Jesus and his disciples. Physical contact is no longer the appropriate mode of personal contact, even though it is still possible to appeal to touch as proof of the reality of the resurrection and of the continuity between the historical Jesus and the risen Christ.

Despite some strengths, this explanation seems unlikely. It rightly understands that John thinks of the death and exaltation of the Son as, theologically speaking, one event. By his death, Jesus returns to the Father; his being lifted up on the cross is also his being lifted up to heaven. He is glorified in his crucifixion, but this is also the means of his return to the glory he had with the Father before the world began. But it is far from clear that John thinks that Jesus' death and exaltation took place at the same instant—any more than he thinks Jesus' death and resurrection took place at the same instant (*cf.* v. 1). Nor does he think the resurrection and the ascension took place at the same instant, if we are to judge by the Thomas episode. Brown's frank appeal to categories outside space and time raises questions about what John's first readers were to think. More importantly, because John's *not yet* is now made to bear the weight of a contrast between the 'passing nature of Jesus' presence in his post-resurrectional appearances and the permanent nature of his presence in the Spirit', we are forced to think of a concrete time for ascension after all, for the Fourth Gospel has repeatedly insisted that the Spirit will come only *after* Jesus has returned to the Father. Moreover, Lagrange's parenthesis is certainly not the most natural way to read the Greek text, and Barrett's rendering, rather unbelievably, treats that troublesome *gar* (NIV 'for') as a concessive: 'it is true' in his context really means 'although'. Above all, it is entirely unclear why Thomas should still be encouraged to touch, when Mary is so firmly repulsed. If this theological explanation were correct, the order of

the two narratives would have to be reversed. Finally, the natural reading of 20:29, with its contrast between seeing-believing and not-seeing-believing, presupposes that Jesus ascended *subsequently* to v. 28. Attempts to avoid this point are unconvincing.

(4) On balance, it seems best to opt for another fairly common explanation. Although a prohibition using the present imperative form (*mē mou haptou*) does not *necessarily* signal the stopping of something in progress, or the preventing of something being attempted (cf. Porter, ch. 7), it is commonly used in instances where contextual features show that is what is meant. The verb *haptomai* (often 'to touch') can refer to many kinds of physical contact, including clinging, seizing, holding. Probably Mary had fallen to her face and grasped him by the feet (cf. Mt. 28:9, where the verb is *krateo*). Moreover, if the suggestion of Lagrange is set aside, *I am ascending* is part of the message Mary is to convey, not part of the reason Mary should not cling to Jesus. And finally, the present tense *I am ascending* is no more problematic than the present tense in 10:18, 'I lay down [my life] of my own accord': in both cases it rather misses the point to ask with a straight face, 'Right away?'

The thought, then, might be paraphrased this way: 'Stop touching me (or, Stop holding on to me), for (*gar*) I have not yet ascended [NIV's "returned" is too weak] to my Father—i.e. I am not yet in the ascended state (taking the perfect *anabebēka* with Porter), so you do not have to hang on to me as if I were about to disappear permanently. This is a time for joy and sharing the good news, not for clutching me as if I were some jealously guarded private dream-come-true. Stop clinging to me, but (*de*) go and tell my disciples that I am in process of ascending (*anabainō*) to my Father and your Father.'

This makes the contrast between the prohibition to Mary and the invitation to Thomas easier to understand. Mary is told to stop, because her enthusiastic and relieved grasping of Jesus does not really comprehend what is transpiring. She now believes him to be alive, but has understood neither that he is not about to disappear, nor that he soon will. Thomas is told to touch, because he has not yet believed that Jesus has risen from the dead.

That Jesus is in process of ascending to his Father, on the way as it were, is in conformity with the significance of the ascension described in Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9–11. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples many times, but he was not continually with them as in the days before his crucifixion. His abode, his habitat, was no longer this earth; in his 'spiritual body' (to use the language of Paul) he was no longer constrained as in 'the days of his flesh' (Heb. 5:7 AV), but was already glorified. It is a commonplace of the New Testament writers that in the wake of his resurrection Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Majesty on high. But as long as his resurrection appearances continued, the disciples might expect him to show up at any time. His final departure was therefore dramatic and decisive, a kind of acted farewell, so that the finality of what was taking place might be clear. In that sense, in both John and Luke/Acts, Jesus is in process of ascending to the Father until the culminating

ascension. To use John's language, Jesus is not at this point in the state of ascension: he is still in process. But the farewell discourse has made it clear that he must depart to prepare a place for them (14:2), to send the promised Paraclete (16:7), and ultimately to return to take them to be with him (14:3). John 20:17 is not the virtual replacement of the language of resurrection by the language of ascension, as some have thought, but the insistence that the resurrection is so tied to the ascension, to Jesus' return to his Father, that if Mary can accept the one she must be prepared to accept the implications of the other.

The message Mary is to convey to the disciples is more than the mere announcement that Jesus is in process of ascending: 'Go ... to *my brothers* and tell them, "I am ascending (NIV, returning) to my Father *and your Father*, to my God *and your God*.'" Mary (unlike Dodd, *HTFG*, pp. 147, 324; cf. Mt. 28:10, 16) understands that these are not Jesus' physical brothers (as in 7:5), and goes to *the disciples* (v. 18). Because of Jesus' death/resurrection/exaltation, his disciples come to share in his sonship to the Father. The unique features of his sonship are of course presupposed (cf. notes on 1:12–13, 18; 5:19–30): the expressions *my Father and your Father* and *my God and your God* assume distance between Jesus and his followers, even as they establish links. But the emphasis here is on the shared privileges (cf. Rom. 8:15–16; Heb. 2:11–12, citing Ps. 22:22).

**20:18.** Mary of Magdala (cf. 19:25) did as she was told, not only announcing *I have seen the Lord!* but also telling them *that he had said these things to her*. The words *the Lord* still do not constitute a confession akin to that of Thomas (cf. notes on vv. 2, 15, 28). At this point Mary is simply identifying the one she saw in the garden with the Master they all knew, and knew to have been crucified. But she spoke better than she knew.

John does not tell us how the disciples responded, but there is no reason to think that they reacted any better than they did to the women's report of the empty tomb (Lk. 24:9–11).

**20:19.** Verses 19 and 20 have as their closest parallel Luke 24:36–42, also set on the evening of that first Easter day. How large a group is referred to by *the disciples* is not certain, but in the light of the circle at the last supper (made up of Jesus plus the Twelve, and then, after Judas Iscariot left, the Eleven), and in the light of the fact that Thomas is singled out as not having been present (v. 24)—though doubtless there were countless other 'disciples' less tightly connected with the Lord who were also not present—we should probably think of the Ten (*i.e.* the Twelve, less Judas and Thomas).

The *reason* the doors were locked was their *fear of the Jews*: the authorities had seen to it that their leader was executed, so it would have been relatively easy for them to pick off his followers had they decided to do so. But the *function* of the locked doors in John's narrative, both here and in v. 26, is to stress the miraculous nature of Jesus' appearance amongst his followers. As

his resurrection body passed through the grave-clothes (v. 6–8), so it passed through the locked doors and simply ‘materialized’ (cf. notes on vv. 14–15). It is tempting, with Bruce (p. 391), to find in this episode the inspiration for the practice of the early church, when it met together on Sunday evenings, to invoke Christ’s presence with them in the words, *Marana tha!* (‘Come, O Lord!’; 1 Cor. 16:22b).

At one level, the greeting *Peace be with you!* is conventional, representing Hebrew *šālōm ‘ālêkem*, still in use today. Indeed, perhaps when the disciples first heard the risen Lord utter it, they thought little of it, being so astonished and overjoyed that linguistic subtleties would elude them. But the repetition of the greeting (vv. 21, 26) would eventually prompt the reflective amongst them to recall that Jesus before the cross had promised to bequeath to them his peace (14:27; 16:33). Though a common word, *šālōm* was also the embracing term used to denote the unqualified well-being that would characterize the people of God once the eschatological kingdom had dawned. Jesus’ “Shalom!” on Easter evening is the complement of “it is finished” on the cross, for the peace of reconciliation and life from God is now imparted ... Not surprisingly it is included, along with “grace,” in the greeting of every epistle of Paul in the NT’ (Beasley-Murray, p. 379).

**20:20.** The doors might be shut, but Jesus proves that his appearance is that of the crucified Master, now risen from the dead: he shows them *his hands and side* (Lk. 24:39 adds his ‘feet’), the parts of his body where the wounds or scars could be seen. Others who had been crucified, if somehow they had been raised, could have shown their feet and hands (cf. Additional Note); only he could show his side (cf. 19:32–35). Thus the disciples were forced to grasp what became a central confession of the church: the risen Lord is none other than the crucified sacrifice.

Temple (p. 366) reminds us that Jesus’ wounds are his credentials to the suffering race of human beings. He cites the poem of Edward Shillito, ‘Jesus of the Scars’, published shortly after the savage butchery of the First World War:

*If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;  
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;  
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,  
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.*

*The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;  
In all the universe we have no place.  
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?  
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.*

*If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,  
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;  
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,  
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.*

*The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;  
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;  
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.*

*The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. He had come to them and turned their grief to joy, just as he had promised (14:18; 16:20–22).*

**20:21.** On the repetition of *Peace be with you!*, cf. notes on v. 19. Each Gospel includes a commission from the risen Jesus. This one builds on 17:18, 'As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.' Here the verb used in the two clauses is not the same: 'As the Father has sent me (*apestalken*), I am sending (*pempō*) you'; but nothing should be made of the change, as if the clue to the verse lay in two kinds of 'sending'.

In recent years this verse has generated a storm of controversy amongst Christians concerned to think through the mission of the church. On the one side, the argument has gone like this: John 20:21 does more than draw vague parallels between Jesus' mission and ours. Jesus deliberately makes his mission the *model* of ours. Thus the church should define its task in terms of its understanding of *Jesus'* task. Since the latter manifestly included healing the sick, helping the needy and preaching the gospel to the poor (Lk. 4:18, 19; 7:22), our mission must do no less. The church's mission must not be restricted to evangelism and church planting; it embraces everything that we rightly do in imitation of Christ. We are to be both salt (a preservative function) and light (a revelatory function).

The other side objects that this neglects the Johannine context, which immediately introduces the centrality of the forgiveness of sins (v. 23). Jesus came into the world as the unique Lamb of God to take away our sins; he came as the incarnate Word; and such central features intrinsic to the sending of Jesus we cannot precisely emulate. Without wanting to deny the church's obligation to do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith, this side of the discussion finds v. 21 incapable of supporting the weight that is being placed on it.

Methodologically, both approaches to the text are faulty. To appeal to several verses from Luke to establish what is central to John's understanding of mission is indefensible. If this verse has specific content, it must be deduced from the immediate context, and especially from the matrix of themes connected with the 'sending' theme in the Fourth Gospel. Here it is the perfect obedience of the Son that is especially emphasized (e.g. 5:19–30; 8:29), an obedience that has already been made a paradigm for the relation of the believers to Jesus (15:9–10). Jesus was sent by his Father into the world (3:17) by means of the incarnation (1:14) with the end of saving the world (1:29); now that Jesus' disciples no longer belong to the world (15:19), they must also be sent back into the world (20:21) in order to bear witness, along with the Paraclete (15:26–27)—though obviously there is no mention of incarnation along the lines

of 1:14, and any parallel must be entirely derivative. In so far as Jesus was entirely obedient to and dependent upon his Father, who sealed and sanctified him and poured out the Spirit upon him without limit (1:32; 3:34; 4:34; 5:19; 6:27; 10:36; 17:4), so far also does he constitute the definitive model for his disciples: they have become children of God (1:12–13; 3:3, 5; 20:17), the Spirit has been promised to them (chs. 14–16) and will soon be imparted to them (*cf.* notes on v. 22), they have been sanctified by Christ and will be sanctified by God's word (17:17) as they grow in unqualified obedience to and dependence upon their Lord.

From a missiological point of view, such emphases must also be joined with similar study of the commissions reported in the other Gospels. There is sufficient comprehensiveness both here and elsewhere to make Christians aware that they never have an excuse to rest on their laurels, or to define their task too narrowly; perfect obedience to the Son, modelled on Jesus' perfect obedience, is as daunting a challenge as the command to teach others to obey *all* that Jesus has commanded (Mt. 28:20). At the same time, what is central to the Son's mission—that he came as the Father's gift so that those who believe in him might not perish but have eternal life (3:16), experiencing new life as the children of God (1:12–13) and freedom from the slavery of sin because they have been set free by the Son of God (8:34–36)—must never be lost to view as the church defines her mission. The reader is almost immediately reminded of these centralities by the reference to the forgiveness and retention of sins (v. 23), and by the stated purpose of the Gospel (vv. 30–31).

It is probably wrong to think of the disciples simply *replacing* Jesus now that he is returning to his Father. The perfect tense in 'As the Father has sent (*apestalken*) me' suggests, at the risk of pedantry, that Jesus is in an ongoing state of 'sentness'. Just because he ascends to his Father does not mean he is no longer the 'sent one' *par excellence* (*cf.* 9:7). Thus Christ's disciples do not take over Jesus' mission; his mission continues and is effective in their ministry (14:12–14). 'The apostles were commissioned to carry on Christ's work, and not to begin a new one' (Westcott, 2. 349–350; *cf.* Schnackenburg, 3. 324). And if, as has been argued throughout this commentary (*cf.* notes on 20:30–31), John is primarily writing to evangelize Jews and proselytes, the emphases in these verses, by spelling out the privileges and responsibilities of Christians, not only provide readers with an incentive to convert to Christ, but justify the evangelistic work being undertaken even as they read.

**20:22.** *And with that* (*kai touto eipōn*, lit., 'After saying this') links v. 21 with v. 22: the commission is thereby tied to the giving of the Spirit. But what exactly is meant by *Receive the Holy Spirit*? In part, the question is raised by the concern of some scholars to establish an appropriate link with the bestowal of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). But even for those whose views of Scripture do not prompt them to ask how two such diverse accounts have come down to us, let alone to harmonize them, there are, as we shall see, several notable problems within the text of John for those who are simply content to call this John's version of Pentecost.

Many solutions have been proposed, the most important of which are these:

(1) Since *pneuma hagion* ('Holy Spirit') is without the article, it has been suggested that, unlike the Paraclete promises and unlike Acts 2, it is not the personal Holy Spirit who is in view, but the impersonal breath of God, emblematic of power or spiritual gift (e.g. Johnston, p. 11). But it is precarious, not least in John, to distinguish the person from the power by appealing to the article. 'Spirit' is anarthrous in the second half of 7:39 (in the best texts), even though the word clearly refers to the personal Holy Spirit.

(2) Many take this as some sort of actual impartation of the Spirit, but define things in such a way as to allow room for Pentecost. For Calvin (2. 205), the disciples are here *sprinkled* with the grace of the Spirit, but not *saturated* with his full endowment of power until Acts 2. Westcott (2. 350–351) thinks power of new life is bestowed here, and power for ministry in Acts; Bruce (pp. 391–392) seems to favour the reverse. By appealing to the Targums (Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible—both Neofiti and Onkelos) on Genesis 2:7, Wojciechowski proposes that by Jesus' exhalation the disciples received the gift of the word, including the gift of tongues, which was then not manifested until Pentecost. M. M. B. Turner<sup>12</sup> envisions two comings of the Spirit: John 20:22 as the complement and fulfillment of 17:17–19, and Acts 2 as the fulfillment of the Paraclete promises. Many others think of some sort of preliminary endowment in anticipation of Pentecost.

The difficulty with all of these views is threefold. First, although it is right to consider what bearing Acts 2 may have on the interpretation of John 20:22, these interpretations sound as if they are hostage to Acts 2. Second, since in John the promise of the Spirit turns on Jesus' return to his Father, a twofold coming of the Spirit somehow suggests that Jesus returned twice; or, less provocatively put, if Jesus finally returned to the Father only once (upon which the gift of the Spirit depends), what warrant is there for thinking the Spirit was bestowed twice? And third, how realistic is it to admit the proposed divorces between Spirit and Paraclete, power for ministry and power for life, and so forth?

(3) The most frequently espoused view today is that this verse is John's Pentecost, *i.e.* this is the promised endowment of the Spirit, and John knows no other (or if he does, he fails to hint at it). The Fourth Gospel has insisted that the coming of the Spirit is bound up with Jesus' glorification, which is tied to the 'hour' of the cross (7:37–39; 16:7). The hour has come; correspondingly, Jesus breathes on his followers and says, *Receive the Holy Spirit*. In terms of Johannine theology, this, it is argued, is as much as you could ask for. Moreover, that Jesus *breathed on them* is reminiscent of Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:9; this 'insufflation' (as the event is called) is the beginning of the new creation, the awakening of the dead. Further, this interpretation is often tied to the third interpretation of v. 17, discussed above: Jesus has ascended and thereby opened up a new relationship with him through the Spirit.

Those who hold this view, and they are many, divide into two camps. The one says that all attempts at harmonization with Acts are futile—perhaps (as with Barrett) because Acts is given very low marks for historical reliability. The other camp (e.g. Beasley-Murray, pp. 380–382; Burge, pp. 114–149) argues that John knows about Pentecost, but chooses to write it up this way, in close temporal connection with Easter, because of his peculiar theological vision that tightly ties the descent of the Spirit to Jesus’ death/exaltation. Luke himself, of course, connects the gift of the Spirit with the exaltation of Christ (Acts 2:32–33); John’s theological structure demands that he move the gift of the Spirit back from Pentecost to Easter, implicitly ‘*including the story of the Ascension in the Easter narrative*’ (Beasley-Murray, p. 382, emphasis his). John’s account, in other words, is theological but not chronological, and thus there is no question of two bestowals of the Spirit, one at Easter and the other at Pentecost. The fourth Evangelist’s central theological vision, not to mention the fact that, unlike Luke, he wrote only one volume, not two, has determined these choices.

Though attractive in many ways, this interpretation faces more problems than are commonly recognized. Because countervailing evidence is often simultaneously support for the fourth view, it seems best to articulate that view and then marshal the evidence.

(4) Theodore of Mopsuestia, whose exegesis, admittedly, varied from the brilliant to the heretical, argued that v. 22 is to be regarded as a symbolic promise of the gift of the Spirit later to be given (*i.e.* at Pentecost). Although his view was condemned at the fifth ecumenical council at Constantinople in AD 553, and is usually given short shrift today, much can be said in its favour. (*Cf.* further, Carson, pp. 140–144.)

(a) Despite most of our English versions, the text does not say ‘he breathed *on them*’ but simply ‘he breathed’ or, perhaps, ‘he exhaled’ (*enephsēsen*). The lexica give as the meaning of the verb (*emphysaō*) ‘he breathed in’ or ‘he breathed upon’, but actual usage outside the New Testament (this is the only place it occurs within the New Testament) does not encourage the view that the preposition ‘in’ or ‘upon’ was part of the meaning of the verb itself. In its dozen or so uses in the LXX, for instance, there is always some additional syntactical structure to carry this prepositional force wherever it is needed. Thus in Genesis 2:7 LXX, ‘he breathed into his face the breath of life’ is the verb + accusative substantive (*enephsēsen eis to prosōpon autou pnōn zōēs*). The structures may vary: e.g. verb + dative object; verb + preposition *epi* + accusative substantive. Even in the one passage where no such structure is found in the clause itself, it is understood from the parallelism with the previous clause: in *Wisdom* 15:11, the idolator fails to know the one who formed him

and inspired *him* with an active soul  
and breathed [*into him*] a living spirit.

*kai ton empneusanta autō psychēn energousan  
kai emphysēsanta pneuma zōtikon.*

There is but one passage in the LXX where there is no such structure, *viz.* *Ecclesiasticus* 43:4, and it is in only one part of the manuscript tradition. There, the writer praises God for creating the heavenly bodies, including the sun which ‘breathes out fiery vapours’ (*atmidas pyrōdeis emphysōn*). Here there is no question of ‘breathing in’ or ‘breathing into’ or ‘breathing upon’ someone. The direct object, ‘fiery vapours’, is what is breathed *out*. This fact is doubtless what has caused the other parts of the textual tradition at this point to use the verb *ekphysōn*, where the introductory *ek* (‘of’ or ‘out of’) more clearly emphasizes the point. What cannot be in dispute, however, is that the verb *emphysaō* itself, when not encumbered by some auxiliary expression specifying the person or thing on whom or into whom the breath is breathed, simply means ‘to breathe’. Similar results arise out of the study of other relevant bodies of Greek literature.

The point of this rather technical background is that the verb *emphysaō* is absolute in John 20:22—*i.e.* it has no auxiliary structure, not even a direct object. Apart from other compelling considerations, therefore, the verse should be translated, ‘And with that he breathed, and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”’ Referring to the episode as the ‘insufflation’ is already begging the issue. There is no single English word to sum up taking a deep breath and exhaling; ‘exhalation’ describes only the latter half, but it is closer to what is said than ‘insufflation’. Schonfield’s periphrastic ‘he expelled a deep breath’ goes too far, but it probably has the right idea. In short, it is only the words *Receive the Holy Spirit* that have fostered the view that Jesus was somehow breathing *in* or *into* his disciples, thereby imparting the Spirit.

Although the matter is little discussed, virtually all sides would probably agree that Jesus’ action was symbolic in some sense. Unless one adopts a literalistic and mechanical view of the action, understanding the Holy Spirit to be nothing less than Jesus’ expelled air, one is forced to say that the ‘breathing’ was symbolic—an appropriate symbolism not only because ‘wind’ and ‘breath’ and ‘air’ could all be denoted by the same word (*cf.* notes on 3:8), but also because the gift of the Holy Spirit is certainly dependent on Jesus, on Jesus’ glorification. Granted that Jesus’ action is symbolic, the question becomes, What, precisely, is being symbolized? Is it the gift of the Spirit that is being imparted even as Jesus speaks, or is it the gift of the Spirit that has long been promised and that is now imminent? In short, are there contextual reasons for thinking that this is a symbolic act that anticipates the future imminent bestowal?

(b) Perhaps it is worth recalling the similar sense of ‘imminence’ generated by the approach of the Greeks (12:20ff.). From that time on, Jesus speaks of his ‘hour’ as having arrived (e.g. 12:23, 31; 13:31; 17:1, 5). Indeed, John 17:5 is cast in the form of an imperative: ‘And now, Father, glorify me in your presence ...’; but that does not mean the glorification takes place even as Jesus speaks. Similarly,

John 13:31 ('Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him') is followed by the new commandment, which in the nature of the case was unlikely to be the lodestar of the earliest disciples until after the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. So there is no intrinsic reason for thinking that the imperative of 20:22, *Receive the Holy Spirit*, must be experienced immediately.

(c) There is too slight a demonstration within the Gospel of John that this alleged bestowal of the Spirit made the slightest bit of difference in the lives of Jesus' followers. The disciples still meet behind locked doors (v. 26) and the natural inference is that they are still afraid of the Jewish authorities (v. 19). When Thomas comes to faith, it is not because of the promised witness of the Spirit (15:26–27), but because he sees the risen Jesus for himself. Those who accept John 21 as part of the Gospel, even if it is cast as an epilogue, cannot fail to observe that the disciples are sidling back to their old employment (21:1–3), sorting out elementary reconciliation with the Master (21:15–19), and still playing 'let's-compare-service-record' games (21:20–22). All this is not only a far cry from the power, joy, exuberant witness, courageous preaching and delight in suffering displayed by the early Christians after Pentecost in Acts, it is no less distant from the same virtues *foretold in John's farewell discourse, where the promise of the Spirit receives such emphasis*. If John 20:22 is understood to be the Johannine Pentecost, it must be frankly admitted that the results are desperately disappointing, and the promises of John 14–16 vastly inflated. The alternative is surely preferable. The episode in 20:22, which most will agree is in some sense symbolic, is best understood as symbolic of the enduement *that is still to come*.

(d) Granted that John is deeply interested in the *theological* unity of Christ's cross, resurrection, ascension, exaltation and bestowal of the Spirit—a point on which all sides agree—that fact remains that he specifies that the episode of 20:22 takes place on the first Easter day (20:19). If this is a free creation, there is no reason why he should not stipulate that first Sunday, and every theological reason for doing so. But if, as Beasley-Murray argues, he knows that the enduement of the Spirit really took place at Pentecost, as Acts 2 reports, and decided to make a theological statement that connected the gift of the Spirit more dramatically with the cross and glorification of Christ than Luke attempted, why should he make the temporal specification at all? Indeed, if John knows about Pentecost, others do as well: therefore would not some of his readers simply be confused?

(e) In Beasley-Murray's reconstruction, the cost of this 're-telling' of the Pentecost story is very high. John has not only managed to bring the gift of the Spirit into close connection with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, he has managed to exclude Thomas from the gift. And strangely, when Thomas does come to faith, there is no mention of the Spirit. That is one reason why Beasley-Murray can entertain partition theories of ch. 20 that originally depicted only *one* resurrection appearance to the disciples. If we add to this that Beasley-Murray's primary reason for insisting that ch. 21 *could not* have

originally followed ch. 20 as part of the Gospel, not even as 'postscript' or 'epilogue', turns on his interpretation of 20:17, 22 (p. 395), it begins to appear that a doubtful interpretation of these two verses is wielding too much influence on still more doubtful judgments of a critical nature. Conversely, regardless of the provenance of John 21, Beasley-Murray's judgment that John 21 'would not be in place after the Thomas incident, and still less immediately after 20:19–23' (p. 395), is tantamount to admitting that *in their present form* chs. 20–21 cannot be made to support his interpretation of 20:22. It is surely wiser to adopt an interpretation of 20:22, if one is available, that makes sense of chs. 20–21, than to indulge in the more speculative forms of source-criticism, especially if such analysis assumes that the alleged final editor was incompetent. The symbolic interpretation admirably meets these constraints.

(f) So far the argument has focused on reasons *in the Fourth Gospel* for thinking this action points ahead. If Acts 2 be admitted as useful *historical* data, the case advanced here is considerably strengthened. This is not simply because an awkward discrepancy has been eliminated and an elementary harmonization achieved (though for historians, Christians or otherwise, those are surely not unworthy goals), but because Acts 2, if historical, would be part of the common heritage of the church and therefore a point of reference.

An analogy may clarify this point. It is doubtful if today a single leader of the American Pentecostal/charismatic renewal movement would be ignorant of the Azusa Street meetings in 1906. For them and for many charismatic leaders worldwide, not to mention many charismatics who do not aspire to leadership, Azusa Street is a primary point of reference, even though it appears rarely in contemporary charismatic writings. Granted that Acts 2 is historical, Pentecost must become for Christians world-wide a point of reference—a point supported by the fact that Pentecost became a Christian feast, unlike any other of the Jewish feasts. When John writes, by any reckoning less removed by at least twenty years from Pentecost than modern charismatics are from Azusa Street, he expects his readers to share this reference point with him. Thus, John 20:22 is not mere symbolism anticipating an endowment of the Spirit that is nowhere mentioned, it is symbolism anticipating the endowment of the Spirit that the church at the time of writing has already experienced, and of which outsiders are inevitably aware.

(g) Thus it appears that John has preserved the theological unity of the death/exaltation of Jesus, and of the eschatological Spirit-blessings Jesus secured, *not* by sacrificing historical authenticity, but by drawing attention through this episode to what was already known amongst his readers. Jesus' 'exhalation' and command *Receive the Holy Spirit* are best understood as a kind of acted parable pointing forward to the full endowment still to come (though in the past for John's readers). A suitable Johannine analogy might be the washing of the disciples' feet: 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me' (13:8). That can be read at a simplistic level as exhausted in the footwashing. Readers with more insight understand that the footwashing itself points

forward to the spiritual washing achieved by the Lamb of God whose death takes away the sin of the world. John has repeatedly developed these anticipating steps in his narrative; it is not surprising if he uses one more to show that the story does not end with his book.

**20:23.** The reception of the Spirit is here linked with the forgiveness and retention of sins. To read this verse is to be reminded of Matthew 16:19; 18:18, and indeed many have argued that one saying stands behind all three passages. That conclusion is too quickly drawn: one thing that an itinerant preacher inevitably does is repeat himself, often with minor variations.

The passive perfects *they are forgiven* (*aphēontai*) and *they are not forgiven* (*kekratēntai*) need not detain us. The construction is not as difficult as in Matthew (on which *cf.* Carson, *Matt*, pp. 370–374). If these perfects are not temporally construed, but are read aspectually, they will be rendered ‘they are in a state of forgiveness’, *i.e.* ‘they stand forgiven’ and ‘they do not stand forgiven’; but even so, the passive voice implies it is God who is acting. In the parallel statements in Matthew, the context suggest church discipline; in this verse, where the context is the mission of Jesus’ disciples (v. 21) and the Spirit who empowers them (v. 22), the focus is on evangelism.

There is no doubt from the context that the reference is to forgiving sins, or withholding forgiveness. But though this sounds stern and harsh, it is simply the result of the preaching of the gospel, which either brings men to repent as they hear of the ready and costly forgiveness of God, or leaves them unresponsive to the offer of forgiveness which is the gospel, and so they are left in their sins. (Marsh, pp. 641–642)

The Christian witnesses proclaim and declare, and, empowered by the Spirit, live by the message of their own proclamation; it is God who *effectively* forgives or retains the sin. Thus Christian ministry is a continuation of Jesus’ ministry (*cf.* notes on v. 21): through the gift of the Spirit the authority that Jesus exercises in, say, John 9, is repeated in their lives. Jesus there gave both sight and faith to the one who knew he was blind; to those who claimed to see, he declared, ‘Your guilt remains’ (9:41). Thus the retention of their sin was both description and condemnation. And the Paraclete who is given as a gift to Jesus’ followers (v. 22) continues the same two-edged work through them (*cf.* notes on 15:26–27; 16:7–11).

### **Additional note**

**20:20.** When the Romans crucified someone, they either tied or nailed the victim to the cross. If the latter, they drove the nails through his wrists; the hands would not have supported the weight. But both the Hebrew word for hand (*yāḏ*) and the Greek word (*cheir*) can include the wrist and forearm. Nails

were commonly driven through the feet, one spike through both feet, one foot placed on top of the other.

#### **4. Jesus again appears to his disciples—including Thomas (20:24–29)**

**20:24–25.** Thomas (both his Aramaic and his Greek names are given: *cf.* notes on 11:16) appears only as a name in the Synoptics, but is fleshed out a little in John. In his previous appearances (11:16; 14:5) he has been less a doubter than a loyal but pessimistic and perhaps somewhat obtuse disciple. The rubric ‘doubting Thomas’ is not entirely fair: had he been present when the risen Christ first manifested himself to the disciples, doubtless he too would have believed. Why he was not present that first Easter day is not told us, but in the providence of God his absence and subsequent coming to faith have generated one of the great Christological confessions in the New Testament. That he is designated *one of the Twelve* (*cf.* notes on 6:71) argues that ‘disciples’ in v. 19 most probably refers to the Ten (the apostles less Judas Iscariot and Thomas).

Informed as to what his colleagues in the apostolic band have seen, Thomas remains unconvinced, and demands not only a palpable sign but the most personal and concrete evidence that the person whom he knew had been killed in a specific fashion had indeed been raised from the dead. The risen Jesus must have some sort of *physical* continuity with the Jesus who was crucified. Although it is possible to paint him in romantic shades, picturing him as a common-sense disciple all too aware of how imagination can play tricks, it is hard not to perceive in this attitude at least a little of what Jesus had earlier condemned (4:48).

**20:26.** *A week later* is an idiomatic rendering of (lit.) ‘After eight days’; the inclusive reckoning brings the action back to Sunday, one week after Easter. The chronology is not sacrificed to theology (*cf.* notes on v. 22). This emphasis on the Lord’s day (*cf.* Rev. 1:10) may reflect peculiar theological interests of the writer. If the readers are Jews and proselytes interested in the Christian faith, it may be a subtle allusion to the origins of Christian worship on this particular day.

This meeting, with Thomas present, again takes place behind locked doors, the natural inference being that the disciples are still frightened of the Jewish authorities (v. 19). On Jesus’ sudden appearance and greeting, *cf.* notes on v. 19.

**20:27.** By taking up Thomas’ challenge in this way, Jesus simultaneously proves that he hears his disciples even when he is not physically present, and removes all possible grounds for unbelief, even the most unreasonable. The last clause, *Stop doubting and believe* (*mē ginou apistos alla pistos*), could be rendered several ways. If both *apistos* and *pistos* are taken adjectivally, and the verb *ginou* is understood at its simplest, the clause reads (lit.), ‘Do not be unbelieving but believing.’ Unfortunately, neither *apistos* nor *pistos* occur elsewhere in John, but elsewhere in the New Testament they often function

substantively: 'Do not be an unbeliever, but a believer.' Since the verb often means 'to show oneself [to be something]' (e.g. Jn. 15:8), many have taken the clause in a softer way: 'Stop being unbelieving, but show yourself a believer.' That is possible, but perhaps too mild. Up to this point, Thomas has shown himself a loyal disciple of the Jesus who went to the cross, so far as he understood him; he has not been a believer in any distinctly Christian sense.

Whether Thomas actually took Jesus up on his challenge and touched the marks of the wounds in his 'hands' (cf. Additional Note on v. 20) and side we are not told. The impression given is that the sight itself proved sufficient (v. 29), that Thomas was so overcome with awe and reverence that he immediately uttered his confession.

**20:28.** The historicity of both the confession itself and the incident as a whole has come under grave suspicion. The issues are too complex to be addressed in detail here, but a few observations should be made. Are we to think that the church made up a story that pictures one of the Twelve as incredulous to the point of unreasonable obstinacy (v. 25), and that reports the Lord's public reproof of that apostle (vv. 27, 29)? Even if the narrative has an apologetic purpose, that is scant reason for assessing it as unhistorical: it is surely as justifiable to conclude that the account was chosen precisely because it was so suitable. At least one part of the story (v. 25) finds a parallel elsewhere (Lk. 24:39); and the portrait of Thomas is in thorough agreement with what we learn of him from 11:16 and 14:5. The speed with which Thomas' pessimistic unbelief was transformed into joyful faith is surely consistent with the experience of the other witnesses (e.g. vv. 16, 20).

If it be objected that this Christological confession is too 'high' or 'developed' at this early date, several points must be observed: (1) The view which insists on this point does so on the basis of a slow evolutionary development of the rise of Christological titles, and this reconstruction, so far as the sources go, is not unassailable (cf. Introduction, § III). (2) Thomas, like most Jews, was doubtless familiar with Old Testament accounts of believers who conversed with what appeared to be men, only to learn, with terror, that they were heavenly visitors, possibly Yahweh himself. Moreover it is arguable that as Judaism developed after the Exile, the reaction against idolatry and the punishments it attracted generated a view of God that made him more and more transcendent, but correspondingly less personal; and into the vacuum left by this shift rushed a mounting number of intermediaries, angels and other ill-defined beings (Carson, esp. pp. 41-121). Within two hundred years of this Thomas episode, and probably much earlier, one of these could actually be referred to as 'little Yahweh'. This is not to suggest that Johannine Christology is indistinguishable from the angelology of Judaism. Christianity, by definition, is *messianic*. But it does suggest that Thomas was not devoid of categories to begin to make sense of the resurrection of Jesus. (3) The use of *kyrios* ('lord') for both common courtesy (e.g. v. 15) and in addressing God himself facilitated the development of Christological understanding. (4) In any case, *kyrios* is an *early* post-

resurrection title (e.g. Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:9–11), and because it is used of God himself in the LXX, in many of its occurrences it cannot be considered less elevated than *theos* ('God'). (5) It is hard to see why *my Lord*, an exceedingly rare pairing of words, should be ruled out of court, when the Aramaic *marana* ('our Lord') was early used as an invocation even in Greek-speaking churches (1 Cor. 16:22; cf. notes on Jn. 16:20).

Finally, if the Evangelist is none other than the apostle John, or even if the Evangelist is someone else who derives his information from the apostle John, then we are dealing with eyewitness testimony.

Thomas' utterance cannot possibly be taken as shocked profanity addressed to God (if to anyone), a kind of blasphemous version of a stunned 'My word!' Despite its popularity with some modern Arians, such profanity would not have been found in first-century Palestine on the lips of a devout Jew. In any case, Thomas' confession is addressed to *him*, i.e. to Jesus; and Jesus immediately (if implicitly) praises him for his faith, even if it is not as notable as the faith of those who believe without demanding the kind of evidence accorded Thomas. Nor are Thomas' words most easily read as a predicative statement addressed to Jesus: 'My Lord is also my God.' The overwhelming majority of grammarians rightly take the utterance as vocative address to Jesus: *My Lord and my God!*—the nouns being put not in the vocative case but in the nominative (as sometimes happens in vocative address) to add a certain sonorous weight.

The repeated pronoun *my* does not diminish the universality of Jesus' lordship and deity, but it ensures that Thomas' words are a *personal* confession of faith. Thomas thereby not only displays his faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but points to its deepest meaning; it is nothing less than the revelation of who Jesus Christ is. The most unyielding sceptic has bequeathed to us the most profound confession.

The thoughtful reader of this Gospel immediately recognizes certain connections: (1) Thomas' confession is the climactic exemplification of what it means to honour the Son as the Father is honoured (5:23). It is the crowning display of how human faith has come to recognize the truth set out in the Prologue: 'The Word was God ...; the Word became flesh' (1:1, 14). (2) At the same time, Jesus' deity does not exhaust deity; Jesus can still talk about his God and Father in the third person. After all, this confession is set within a chapter where the resurrected Jesus himself refers to 'my Father ... my God' (v. 17). This is entirely in accord with the careful way he delineates the nature of his unique sonship (5:16–30). (3) The reader is expected to articulate the same confession, as the next verse implies. John's readers, like Thomas, need to come to faith; and this is what coming to faith looks like. Clearly this has critical bearing on how vv. 30–31 are interpreted.

**20:29.** The editors of the Greek text (NA<sup>26</sup>) take the first part of Jesus' response to Thomas as rebuke cast as a question: 'Because you have seen me, you have believed?' So also Lindars (p. 646), who compares 1:50 and 16:31. But

the point of the latter passages is that the people involved do *not* really believe, whereas here Thomas has truly come to faith. It is better to understand the first part of Jesus' response as a statement (and to that extent a confirmation of Thomas's faith)—one that prepares the way for the beatitude that follows: *blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*.

The Fourth Gospel reports only one other beatitude (13:17), and, like most beatitudes (e.g. Mt. 5:3–12), both strike a note of admonition. The word *makarios* ('blessed') does not simply declare 'happy' those who meet the conditions, but pronounces them accepted by God. Thomas, like all the witnesses of the resurrection, 'saw and believed', to use the language applied to the beloved disciple (v. 8)—though all the latter saw, at least until the Sunday evening (vv. 19–20), were the grave-clothes, not the resurrected Lord. But Jesus here foresees a time when he will not provide the kind of tangible evidence afforded the beloved disciple and Thomas; in short, he will ascend to his Father permanently, and all those who believe will do so without the benefit of having seen their resurrected Lord. That is as true today as it was for those who first believed after the ascension. This does not (or should not) mean that our faith is diminished or our joy truncated: 'Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls' (1 Pet. 1:8–9).

The major commentaries cite the saying of Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish (c. AD 250), who reportedly said (*Tanḥuma* § 6 [32 a]: cf. SB 2. 586):

The proselyte is dearer to God than all the Israelites who stood by Mount Sinai. For if all the Israelites had not seen the thunder and the flames and the lightnings and the quaking mountain and the sound of the trumpet they would not have accepted the law and taken upon themselves the kingdom of God. Yet this man has seen none of all these things yet comes and gives himself to God and takes on himself the yoke of the kingdom of God. Is there any who is dearer than this man? (tr. Barrett, p. 574)

Yet for Rabbi Simeon the contrast is stark, while Jesus' words in v. 29 are cautious and balanced. Thomas' faith is not depreciated: rather, it is as if the step of faith Thomas has taken, displayed in his unrestrained confession, triggers in Jesus' mind the next step, the coming-to-faith of those who cannot see but who will believe—and so he pronounces a blessing on them. Within the context of the Fourth Gospel as a whole, however, 'but for the fact that Thomas and the other apostles saw the incarnate Christ there would have been no Christian faith at all. Cf. 1:18, 50f.; 2:11; 4:45; 6:2; 9:37; 14:7, 9; 19:35' (Barrett, p. 573). The witness theme in the book has not been lost to view; later believers come to faith through the word of the earlier believers (17:20). Blessed, then, are those who cannot share Thomas' experience of sight, but who, in part because they read of Thomas' experience, come to share Thomas' faith. For us,

faith comes not by sight, but from what is heard (or read!), and what is heard comes by the word (*i.e.* the declaration) of Christ (Rom. 10:17). Indeed, that is why John himself has written, as he proceeds to make explicit.

### **5. Conclusion: the purpose of the Fourth Gospel**

**20:30.** The particles *men oun* connect vv. 30–31 with what precedes. The most common meaning of the second is ‘therefore’. The flow of thought seems to be: Those who have not seen the risen Christ and yet have believed are blessed; *therefore* this book has been composed, to the end that you may believe. The first of two particles (*men*) is paired with *de* introducing v. 31. Together, they frame the thought of these two verses: *On the one hand*, there are, doubtless, many more signs Jesus did that could have been reported; but, *on the other*, these have been committed to writing so that you may believe.

Those who believe that John incorporated a ‘Signs Source’ (*cf.* Introduction, §§ II, III) think that these two verses constitute the conclusion of that hypothetical document. Those who think there is insufficient evidence to justify such a source find no difficulty in believing that the Evangelist composed his own conclusion.

It is possible that *miraculous signs* (*sēmeia*; *cf.* notes on 2:11) refers only to the miracles reported in chs. 2–12. Most of these have discourses or dialogues connected with them that are designed to unpack what the miracles *signify*. But to place this conclusion here suggests that the greatest sign of them all is the death, resurrection and exaltation of the incarnate Word, the *significance* of which has been carefully set forth in the farewell discourse. This also goes some way to explaining why, when John writes down in one sentence the purpose of his book, he singles out the ‘signs’ (and, in the nature of the case, what they mean, what readers should see in them). As Morris (*JC*, p. 2 n. 2) puts it, ‘... on Johannine premises I do not see how the purpose of the Fourth Gospel is to be understood without reckoning with the signs.’ But however far *miraculous signs* extends, clearly John, like the other Evangelists, selected only a small portion of the miracles he knew about (*cf.* the hint in 12:37).

**20:31.** What he chose to write, John tells his readers, was written *that you may believe*. This not only expresses the purpose of the book, but is ‘the shortest summary of Johannine theology’ (Blank, p. 191). To expound in detail each word and phrase would be to expound the book. For *believe*, *cf.* notes on 1:12–13; for *Christ*, on 1:41; for *Son of God* (an expression which for Jews functioned in many ways, including, as here, rough synonymy with ‘Christ’ or ‘Messiah’), on 1:49; for *life*, on 1:4; 3:15, 16. In recent years, most commentators have adopted the view, based primarily on their reconstruction of the setting of the Fourth Gospel as a whole rather than on particular details in this verse, that this Gospel was written to be read by Christians, by the Johannine community (*e.g.* Whitacre, pp. 6ff.). The stated goal, *that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, is interpreted to mean that the Evangelist

intends by his book to *establish* the faith of Christians, rather than to bring non-Christians to faith. Some commentaries, including this one, argue that John's primary purpose is evangelism (*cf.* Introduction, § VI). The turning points in this passage are three (for documentation and more detailed arguments, *cf.* Carson, 'Purpose'):

(1) The words *that you may believe* hide a controversial variant. The textual evidence (*cf.* Metzger, p. 256) is fairly evenly divided between *hina pisteuēte* (present subjunctive) and *hina pisteusēte* (aorist subjunctive), the latter marginally favoured. It is often assumed that the former, strictly interpreted, must be taken to mean 'in order that you may continue to believe', and the latter 'that you may decisively believe' (compare NEB text, 'that you may hold the faith', and NEB margin, 'that you may come to believe'). Quite apart from the fact that this is a reductionistic analysis of what a 'strict interpretation' of the present and aorist tenses requires, it can easily be shown that John elsewhere in his Gospel can use *either* tense to refer to *both* coming to faith and continuing in the faith.

(2) In a much-cited essay, H. Riesenfeld has argued that John commonly uses the present tense after *hina* ('in order that'). But most of his examples are drawn from 1 John, where demonstrably the readers *are* Christians. Within the Fourth Gospel itself, the aorist subjunctive follows *hina* approximately 88 times ('approximately' because of textual variants), the present subjunctive approximately 47 times (*cf.* Carson, 'Purpose', p. 641 n. 6). That Riesenfeld has had to resort to 1 John for so much of his evidence might even be taken as *prima facie* evidence against his thesis; that so many commentators cite his work uncritically suggests an enormous commitment to the view that the Fourth Gospel was composed with believers in mind.

(3) Above all, it can be shown that, with very high probability, the *hina*-clause must on syntactical grounds be rendered 'that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus'. That means that the fundamental question being addressed by the Evangelist is not 'Who is Jesus?', which might be asked by either Christians or non-Christians, if with slightly different emphases; but 'Who is the Messiah?' If that is understood as an identity question, as it must be, *Christians would not ask it because they already knew the answer*. Those who would ask it would be unconverted Jews, along with proselytes and God-fearers, for the category 'Messiah' was important to them, and the concern to identify him would be of great interest. This particular coalescence of Jews and Gentiles, of course, is entirely in line with the church's evangelistic thrusts in the early decades of the church: e.g. 'Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles ...' (Acts 13:26); 'many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas' (Acts 13:43)—even if it is also true that in many circumstances the animus this aroused forced Paul and his team, at least, to turn to Gentiles. But there is no reason to think that other pillars in the church, including John (Gal. 2:9), quickly turned to Gentiles unconnected with the synagogue.

Even if John's purpose is primarily evangelistic, it must be admitted that throughout the history of the church this Gospel has served not only as a means for reaching unbelievers but as a means for instructing, edifying and comforting believers. Still, one must not confuse purpose with result. A modern evangelist aiming at the conversion of hearers may still find that Christians who attend his ministry are greatly edified. John's *purpose* in writing was to evangelize; the impact of his Gospel, *i.e.* the *result* of his writing, has far exceeded any hope he could have entertained.

One of the reasons some have given for thinking that vv. 30–31 originally served as the conclusion of the hypothetical 'Signs Source' is that the Christology expressed here is somewhat 'lower' than what is articulated in the preceding two verses (vv. 28–29). This is a serious misunderstanding of the Fourth Gospel. In John, the nature of Jesus' deity is profoundly and repeatedly tied to the exposition of his sonship (*cf.* esp. notes on 5:16–30), which is linked with his messiahship. If one must use the somewhat question-begging categories 'higher' and 'lower', it is not that 'Son of God' has been dragged lower by its connection with 'Messiah', but that 'Messiah' has been raised higher by its connection with 'Son of God' (*cf.* de Jonge, pp. 49–76). 'The content of Christological faith in v. 31 is not to be viewed as a lower Christology than that of Thomas' confession, but must be understood in its light and filled out by it' (Beasley-Murray, p. 388).

John's purpose is not academic. He writes in order that men and women may believe certain propositional truth, the truth that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus, the Jesus whose portrait is drawn in this Gospel. But such faith is not an end in itself. It is directed toward the goal of personal, eschatological salvation: *that by believing you may have life in his name*. That is still the purpose of this book today, and at the heart of the Christian mission (v. 21).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 631–663). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.



## Group Study Guide

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\*This lesson is for the Sunday School teacher to use to teach the lesson and facilitate the discussion. It is not intended that you will use every question in this guide during your group time. You will likely only be able to cover 4-5 questions, depending on how discussion goes. This guide is longer than what you will need but provides the freedom and flexibility to pull questions out for discussion that will best serve your group time.

**Tip:** You may want to pull one question from each section for discussion or spend more time on a particular section than another on. It's totally up to your discretion.

*Note to Leaders: Suggested answers for the Highlight and Explain section are given, but you will likely have more answers than what is given. This is just a guide.*

# Introduction

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## Icebreaker Question:

The book of John was written so that those who read or hear it would believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. What brought you to belief in Christ as the risen Messiah?

READ ENTIRE TEXT: JOHN 20:1-31

## Highlight – What stands out?

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1. What stood out to you in the passage?
  - *The focus on the woman who appeared.*
  - *Verse 1. It was the first day of the week.*
  - *Verse 9: the still didn't believe because they didn't understand.*
  - *The emphasis on belief in who Jesus is, not in his signs.*
  - *When Jesus says Mary's name, she sees clearly.*
2. How did the people who saw Christ resurrected respond to him?
  - *Peter and John – ran to the tomb, but didn't fully understand what was happening.*
  - *Mary Magdalene – she runs to tell that Jesus is gone, she goes back to weep at the tomb, she doesn't know it's Jesus at first, but when he says her name she responds to him. She goes to announce the resurrection.*
  - *Thomas and the Disciples – they are still confused and Thomas needs proof. He believes when he sees for himself.*

## Explain – What does this mean?

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1. Why do the details of the empty tomb matter for belief?
  - *It's proof of the resurrection and that it really happened.*
  - *Jesus said he would rise again, so in order for his life to lead to belief for people, his words must come true.*
2. Thomas says that he must see Jesus' wounds or he "will never believe" (verse 25). Seeing has been, at times, a stumbling block for Jesus' audiences, and Jesus makes clear in verse 29 that "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Is this concept new, or have we seen it foreshadowed in John before?

**Have your Group look up these verses and ask the above question:**

- JOHN 1:12
- JOHN 3:18
- JOHN 5:24
- JOHN 6:47

**It might be a good time as a Group to remember the purpose statement in John 20:31.**

## Apply – How do I live this out?

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1. In verse 17, Jesus gives Mary Magdalene a message for the disciples: "go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" How does this differ or the same from Jesus discussing the Father in John 14:20, 23, and 16:25-27? How should this certainty change how we live?
  - *He is calling his Father their Father, but he is leaving them.*
  - *They are loved by the Father because the Father loves him. What is true of Jesus' relationship with the Father is true of us.*

- *He used to speak to them in figures of speech, but now he is clearly speaking to them about where he's going and what his relationship and their relationship with the Father is going forward.*
  - *What he promised would happen is coming true.*
  - *This is all true of us. We are loved by him. We will go and live with him. God is our Father.*
2. When Jesus appears to the disciples in verses 19-21, he offers them his peace and then calls them to action, repeating his prayer from 17:18. How are we, as believers today, also called to this action?

**JESUS IS ASSURING AND COMMISSIONING HIS DISCIPLES. IS THERE A TIME YOU FELT CLEARLY CALLED TO GO OR REACH OUT TO SOMEONE WITH THE GOSPEL? SHARE WITH YOUR GROUP TO GET THE BALL ROLLING.**

## **Respond – What's my next step?**

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1. Where or how might God be calling you to be sent?
2. Pray for unbelievers in your life, that God would change their hearts to belief even without seeing and that believers around them (including yourself!) would be faithful to speak truth to them.

## **Additional Resources:**

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### **Video:**

[God's Wonderful Surprise from the Jesus Storybook Bible](#). (This is a children's Bible, but it's a beautiful and short retelling of Jesus appearing to Mary.)

**Songs:**

[His Heart Beats](#) by Andrew Peterson

[Risen Indeed](#) by Andrew Peterson

**Sermons:**

Encountering the Risen King – Tim Keller

<https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/encountering-the-risen-king-9185/>

He Saw and Believed – Alistair Begg

<https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/he-saw-and-believed/>