

THE NEW COMMISSION

by Ray C. Stedman

There has recently been a rash of new movies about ghosts. Among the more popular are Poltergeist, Ghost Story, and Ghostbusters. This seems to indicate renewed interest in the occult and in the question of whether the dead can return to life and appear again before the living. Many people reading the Gospels for the first time wonder if the accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus are not ghost stories. For that reason I would like to examine very carefully the account of Jesus' appearances to his disciples, found in the 20th chapter of John's gospel.

We pick up the narrative on the evening of Easter Sunday. The disciples are already puzzled and excited by the rumors sweeping through Jerusalem that something has happened to the body of Jesus. Four different individuals or groups have already claimed to have seen our Lord risen from the dead: First, there was Mary Magdalene. She had come running from the tomb to tell Peter and John that the body was gone. Returning later, she met Jesus outside the door of the tomb. Other women who had also been at the tomb saw him, and worshipped him. Two people traveling down the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and probably his wife, had come back in breathless excitement, saying that Jesus had appeared to them on the way and ministered to them from the Scriptures. Then the word had gone out that Peter had seen Jesus. So it is no wonder the disciples gather together in the evening in the Upper Room to discuss what had happened.

John, who was there, gives us this account, beginning with Verse 19:

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. {John 20:19-20 RSV}

No doubt John's statement that they were glad is true, but other gospel accounts say their first reaction was not gladness but fear. Luke reports that when Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst they were frightened. We would too be if someone who had died suddenly appeared again in our midst. Notice the emphasis on the time and the day when this happened: It was the evening of the day of the resurrection -- Sunday. But John goes on to stress that it was the "first day of the week."

It is significant that he does this, because from here on in the gospels and in the book of Acts we find again and again that the disciples begin to gather on the first day of the week. This marks the transition from the worship of the Lord on the Sabbath day, Saturday, to Sunday. Some say that the day of worship was not changed to Sunday until the middle of the third or fourth century, when it was done by Catholic Church. It is clear from this account, however, that, because of the importance of the resurrection, right from the beginning the disciples began to meet on the first day of the week, on Sunday.

John reports they were startled by this sudden appearance of Jesus, even though the doors were locked. Most of us have grown up with the imagery of Jesus somehow passing through these doors. I have even seen scientific studies on how a body could pass through doors if it were changed so as to react somehow to another dimension. But I wonder if Jesus was not there all along from the moment of the resurrection and that suddenly he made himself visible to them. This would surely be in line with what he had promised when he said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there will I be in the midst of them," {Matt 18:20}. This is true today. We have that assurance that Jesus is present here with us this morning. This may be the explanation of why he seems to have gone through the very doors to be present with the disciples.

John intends to emphasize the words with which our Lord greeted them: "Peace be with you." While it is true that this word, "Shalom," was the standard greeting in that day in the Middle East, as it is yet today, notice that in this brief account Jesus greets these disciples three times with those words. In the early part of the Upper

Room discourse he frequently talked about peace. "My peace I leave with you," he said. "My peace I give unto you. Not as the world gives give I unto you," {John 14:27}. Peace, inner calmness, is our inheritance. I sometimes wonder if that is not the most desirable trait possible in this hurly-burly, restless age in which we live. It is very hard to find somebody who has the gift of inner calm. Yet I believe with all my heart that this is the right of every believer. You do not have to be harried, hurried and pushed out of your calm. You have the right to claim this inner peace which our Lord speaks of here. That is his resurrection gift to us.

Then Jesus identifies himself by showing the disciples his hands and his side, those precious wounds of crucifixion still visible on his body. Surely that answers the charge that this is merely a ghost story, that the disciples were hallucinating. This body in which Jesus appeared still bore the marks of crucifixion. It was the same body that had been put in the grave. Luke says that when he appeared this way and they were obviously frightened, our Lord said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see," {Luke 24:39a}.

Then, to make it even clearer, he asked for a piece of fish that he might eat in their presence. I have never heard any story of a ghost doing that. Luke also records that he said, "Handle me and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." {Luke 24:39b}. This was no vision, no mere hallucination. This was a real body, the same body that had been crucified. Our Lord is making crystal clear that he is alive, and risen, and that this is a bodily resurrection. It is not merely the survival of his spirit after death, as some preachers try to convince us. It is a body restored from the dead in a new dimension of existence, bearing upon it the marks of crucifixion.

Why did he appear before these disciples? Was it to reassure and comfort them? No. John tells us his purpose:

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." {John 20:21-23 RSV}

There has been much debate over what this means. Many have asked, "If Jesus is giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples here, what happened on the day of Pentecost, forty days later? Why did Jesus tell them to wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit came upon them on the day of Pentecost?" Others wonder about these strange words on forgiving and retaining sins. There is admittedly mystery here in this account.

We cannot answer these questions unless we carefully observe all that Scripture, especially the New Testament, says about the ministries of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes for various purposes and, according to the Scriptures, we must distinguish those purposes. I do not have time to go through all the passages that deal with this, but I commend this to you: This is what is meant by "properly handling the word of truth." Do not merely take a single text, but look at all that the Bible says about the ministry of the Spirit.

What was happening on the exciting day when the disciples were gathered in the temple courts and suddenly there was a mighty rushing wind, tongues of fire appeared on their heads, and they all began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance? According to the account, two things were occurring: they were being baptized by the Spirit, and they were being filled with the Spirit. Jesus had said at his ascension just ten days earlier that they were to wait until they were imbued with power from on high. "For you shall be baptized with the Spirit not many days hence" {Acts 1:5}, he said. That surely was fulfilled at Pentecost. They were filled with the Spirit and began to speak in other tongues. Later on in the book of Acts we are told they were filled again with the Spirit, however this time not tongues but rather a powerful witness was given. Thus we see that that baptism with the Spirit has to do with identifying us with the Lord Jesus himself, making us part of him.

In Romans 6, for instance, we are told that we by baptism have entered into his death and resurrection, and, thus, we share his life. In First Corinthians 12, Paul says, "For we all by one Spirit have been baptized into one body" {1 Cor 12:13a}, i.e., we are made members one of another. Believers all over the earth share the life of Jesus.

Bishop Festo Kivingere of Uganda was telling us just last night about the wonderful times the believers in Uganda have had in the Spirit of God in recent days. It is clear that it is the same Spirit. We all belong to one body, by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Do not mistake that with the filling of the Spirit. Many confuse these two occurrences. Two things took place on Pentecost, and one of them the disciples did not feel at all. You do not feel it when you are baptized with the Spirit, when you are added to the body of Christ. As far as your feelings are concerned, the only way by which you know this is that you suddenly have a sense of belonging to God and belonging to other believers. You feel at home, you feel you are part of a family. But there is no tingle, no flash of lights or special manifestation when you are baptized with the Spirit. You are joined to the body of Christ.

But the filling of the Spirit is often accompanied by various manifestations. Acts 2 tells us that, as the disciples were filled with the Spirit, they began to speak in tongues. But as I have pointed out, a little later when they were again filled with the Spirit they did not speak in tongues, rather they gave a powerful witness. Later, again in Acts, they were filled with the Spirit, and there again there is a word concerning effectiveness of their witness. So we learn from this that the filling of the Spirit has to do with the effectiveness of our ministry. This is why the Apostle Paul in Ephesians urges us to be continually filled with the Spirit. "Do not be drunk with wine," he says, "but be continually filled with the Spirit," {cf, Eph 5:18}. The Spirit does in our inner life what wine does to the outer life -- it takes over, it controls. So we are to be filled with the Spirit, and that has to do with effectiveness. Sometimes it is called the anointing of the Spirit, the Spirit coming upon someone. But, and this is important, neither of these is referring to the indwelling of the Spirit, the Spirit himself coming to live within.

Jesus had earlier predicted that these men, who up to this point only had the Spirit dwelling with them, would have him come within them. I believe this is what is taking place here. When Jesus breathed upon them he imparted to them the gift of the Person of the Spirit himself coming within, no longer without but within. There is no doubt that this is a parallel to the opening chapter of Genesis where the Lord God formed the body of man from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life. Thus life, new life, came into man. Here, new life, the Spirit's life, comes into these disciples. They had been kept by Jesus' power up to now, and from this time on they are to be kept by the power of the Spirit resident within them. Paul wrote to Timothy, "The foundation of the Lord stands sure, having this seal, the Lord knows them that are his," {cf, 2 Tim 2:19a}. Therefore, this indwelling is often called the sealing of the Spirit. It is a mark of ownership. Just as in the ancient world people sealed their letters by stamping them with a seal, so this is the sealing of the Spirit. It is a sign we belong to him.

All of this happens when we believe in Jesus. This is what John is going to stress throughout the rest of this account. But this marks the moment of the indwelling of the Spirit and, therefore, the beginning of a Spirit-led ministry. Just as the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism by John marked the beginning of his ministry, so this breathing of the Spirit marks the beginning of the ministry of these disciples, although other aspects of the ministry are to follow later on the day of Pentecost.

What is this ministry? Jesus tells us in these words, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." What a beautiful phrase that is! Just as he drew his very life from the Father, so we are to draw our life from the Son. Just as he was sent into a lost world to touch the broken lives of people -- to heal, to recover, to open eyes and to set free -- so we are to go with the word of the gospel, doing the same work that Jesus was sent to do. This is what the Apostle Paul says in Second Corinthians: "We are ambassadors for Christ," {2 Cor 5:20a}. "We pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled unto God," {2 Cor 5:20c KJV}. Jesus himself is the model of our ministry. Just as he went, so are we to go. Just as he was empowered by the Spirit, so we will be empowered by the Spirit. Just as he reached out to the broken lives around him, so we are to do this.

The message is the same, too. Jesus preached the good news that God had found a way, not to have to treat people in justice, but in love. He had forgiven their sins, which had all been placed on Jesus. Thus forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all the nations. In fact, Luke says that on this occasion Jesus said to them, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached among all the nations," {cf, 24:47}. That is our task -- dealing with the problem of guilt.

Psychologists say that half the sick in the hospitals are there because they have a deep sense of unforgiven guilt. We have all done things which we now regret. We have all seen the terrible results that have followed some of the wrong choices we have made. We feel wretched and shameful, and we try to hide it. But God has provided a way by which that guilt can be relieved. This is one of the greatest blessings in the message of Christianity.

Every morning when I take a shower I not only wash my body, I wash my spirit, I wash my soul. John tells us in his letter, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness," {1 Jn 1:9 KJV}. What do you do about the things you did yesterday that you are sorry for? What do you do about that sharp word, that loveless deed, that selfish attitude, that malicious lie you told? These things stack up in our lives and build a residue of guilt that haunts us from the subconscious. How do you relieve this guilt? Here is the good news: There is forgiveness of sins. Every morning, every day, a dozen times a day you can claim again this wonderful sense of the forgiveness of sin.

Not only can we claim it, but we can offer it to people. That is why Jesus said to these men, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." I have done this many times. This does not mean that we are given authority to say to one, "You are forgiven," and to another. You are not.

Some have interpreted it that way, saying that priests are empowered to forgive or retain sins. But Jesus is not saying that. What he is saying is, we are empowered to declare the forgiveness of sin when people believe in Jesus. If any man, woman or child who is conscious of sin and failure, confess it, and acknowledges their need before Jesus, and receives him, we have the authority to say to them, "Your sins are forgiven." I have done that.

I have said to people who were deeply troubled over their past, and who prayed, and asked the Lord into their lives, "Rejoice, your sins are forgiven."

On the other hand, if someone refuses to believe, or merely pretends to believe, and his life shows no sign of any change, we are authorized to say to him, "You have not yet been forgiven of your sins. Much of the trouble you are facing is because you are still wrestling with guilt which has never been lifted because you have not believed." That is why John stresses this so strongly here.

Some claim that Peter was the first pope. In that case, if anybody had the power to forgive or retain sin, it would have been him. But in the 10th chapter of Acts we find Peter in the house of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, saying to him, "To Him [to Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name," {Acts 10:43 RSV}. These men did exactly what Jesus told them to do.

John now turns to the well known account of doubting Thomas:

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." {John 20:24-25 RSV}

That text, by the way, is a preacher's dream because it reveals the tremendous importance of not missing the Sunday evening service! That is what Thomas did. He was not there at the Sunday evening service and had to go through a week of pain and heartache before he believed that Jesus was risen from the dead. Dr. Earl Palmer, pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, preached a great message on this text a year ago at our Easter Sunrise Service. I've pointed out that we ought to be grateful to Thomas for his doubting, because he voiced the doubts we all feel at times about the stories of the resurrection. Thomas only wanted to be sure that the Jesus of history and the risen Jesus were the same person. When he was convinced he also became a convincing element to all who would later doubt.

Thomas is more than a doubter, however. He is determined not to believe. Notice how he puts it, "Unless I

see in his hands the prints of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not [not, I cannot] believe." He is stubbornly saying, in effect, "The evidence has to be what I decide it has to be, or I will not believe." This is characteristic of Thomas. He is a born pessimist, the type who would look at a glass half-filled with water and say it was half-empty. Later, when Jesus does appear, he rebukes Thomas for being faithless. By deliberate choice Thomas rejects the evidence. All his trusted brothers and sisters in the Lord tell him they have seen Jesus face to face -- they have even touched him and felt him -- but Thomas rejects this and refuses to believe until he personally examines the evidence.

Now the sequel.

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." {John 20:26-29 RSV}

I believe Thomas actually felt of Jesus. How gracious of the Lord to invite him to do so! He does not scold Thomas, or punish him because of his unbelief and stubbornness. Graciously he invites him to do what Thomas had asked. But one touch is enough. There comes flooding into the heart of this doubting disciple a realization of how foolish and stubborn he has been not to believe solid evidence. He confesses it immediately with these words, recognizing both the sovereignty and the deity of Jesus, "My Lord and my God." He not only believes Jesus is alive, he believes he is God. Immediately Jesus looks beyond the people in that room down through all the centuries and says, "Thomas, you believe because you saw, but a whole host of people who will never see what you have seen are going to believe because they will hear solid, eyewitness accounts, trustworthy in every respect. Blessed are they who do not see and believe." Here, this morning, is a blessing upon us from our risen Lord. He is present in our midst, blessing us because we believe, on the basis of the evidence, without seeing.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. {John 20:30-31 RSV}

John says, "That is why I wrote my book -- that you may believe. Here is ample evidence, carefully selected from a host of things that our Lord did, recorded for you. Anybody who will believe it, and ask him to enter his life, will receive life -- life that masters sin, life that issues in peace, life that produces the beauty of holiness." What a marvelous invitation!

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