



## THE TRANSFORMATION OF THOMAS



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John 20:19-35  
39th Message  
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The 20th chapter of John concludes with language suggesting that the book has reached an end point (though the events of chapter 21, set in Galilee, contain important truth). In John 20:19-31 Jesus commissions his followers to a ministry of forgiving sins, answers the doubts of a missing apostle, and describes his reason for writing this book. Three times in these verses we will hear the Lord declare, *Peace (shalom) be with you.*

The Hebrew word *shalom* is a bigger, richer term than the English word 'peace.' It goes beyond the cessation of conflict. Shalom means profound well-being. It implies a warm welcome and the conferring of blessing. Consider the difference between a formal handshake and a warm embrace. The Lord's repeated offer of shalom will help us connect with the themes in this text.

John 20:19-20—

**On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."<sup>20</sup>When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.**

We should recall that John's double use of the phrase *first day of the week* (verses 1, 19) indicates that Jesus' resurrection signals the beginning of a new creation (recalling Genesis 1:5).

It had been a long day, a day filled with wonders. Mary approached the empty tomb before daybreak and now it was evening. Despite having heard testimony of the Lord's appearance to Mary and others, and despite receiving the witness of angels, the disciples were gathered together in fearful uncertainty. They knew full well the cruel determination of their enemies. It was likely that this gathering was composed of the ten apostles who had been present at the Last Supper, absent Judas and, as we shall see, Thomas.

The Lord's sudden appearance was both shocking and wonderful. *Peace be with you.* John recalls that Jesus' wounds were shown to him and the others who were present and in that moment their fear was turned to joy.

The Lord's appearance that evening put to rest two false explanations of the day's discoveries. First, Jesus was not a bodiless ghost (Luke 24:37). A ghost (should one exist) points to victory for the forces of darkness. A ghost is subject to the reign of death.

Second, having passed through grave clothes and now through locked doors Jesus was clearly alive in a new way, not merely resuscitated as Lazarus had been. Jesus' resurrection emphatically declared the defeat of death and the presence of a form of life which can never again be touched by death.

As we consider the evening of the first Easter, we can well understand the disciples' state of mind. The unexpected arrival of Jesus, powerfully alive, might make us tremble rather than rejoice. Perhaps he has come with reprimands for our failure. And so his words ministered powerfully then and now, *Peace be with you.*

John 20:21-23—

**Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."<sup>22</sup>And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."**

Jesus repeats his shalom blessing a second time in the context of a call to ministry. The Lord directs his disciples to go beyond being recipients of his favor, forgiveness, and protection. Jesus' followers are also to be agents of grace (*I am sending you*) proclaiming a message of forgiveness.

Proclaimers need to depend on the peace that God gives. Being sent as Jesus was sent means entering the lives of

men and women who are suffering. It means encountering strongholds of wickedness. On our own we are no match for such things. The promise of his presence in the midst of turmoil is especially welcome. *I have said these things to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world* (John 16:33).

Further, the message of sins forgiven has shalom at its center. *Therefore, since we have been justified with Christ we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ* (Romans 5:1). Because of Jesus' sacrifice sin no longer presents a barrier that cuts us off from God. And peace with God changes everything. It opens the door for peace between warring nations, for reconciliation in families, even for the end of the self-destructive combat in our own hearts. *Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.* As God's servants we are recipients of his peace and bearers of a message of peace.

Verse 23 is sometimes misunderstood. Jesus did not give the disciples authority to accomplish forgiveness of sins or to withhold it. Rather, they were told to announce that sins were forgiven (or not) based on how the message of Jesus' sacrifice was received. Recipients of this message who believe the gospel, or who want to believe it; those who wrestle with doubts or don't yet quite understand; all of these should hear (explained from every angle with patience and hope) that they stand forgiven and have peace with God.

However, the second half of verse 23 contains an important warning. Those who understand what they are doing and still reject Jesus' offer of forgiveness have nowhere else to turn. Ministers of the gospel must be clear about how much is at stake. Sometimes the most needed word is a warning to a scoffer—'You are making a terrible mistake.'

We also note that in the context of commissioning disciples for ministry that Jesus breathed his Spirit on them. And surely no one can experience the peace of God or truthfully declare a message of peace with God apart from the presence of the Spirit. But how should this breathing event be understood given Jesus' directive that his followers should wait for a baptism of the Spirit (Acts 1:5)—an event that we know occurred weeks later in Jerusalem during Pentecost?

The fearful apostles who gathered that first Easter evening were not ready yet to lead a Spirit empowered

community. They needed a period of time to absorb the new reality that Christ was no longer dead and would soon ascend to the Father. They (perhaps Peter especially) needed to confront the fact that they abandoned Jesus during his trial and execution. They needed to learn to trust one another. An interim period back in Galilee was arranged to help the process of self-discovery and renewal.

However, none of them could survive the interim without the Lord's provision. He promised that he wouldn't leave them as orphans (John 14:18). So during the waiting period (having breathed on them) he ministered to his followers by means of the Holy Spirit. Then, on Pentecost the Spirit baptized the disciples with a dramatic display of power, bound them together as the body of Christ, and sent forth these men and women to change the world.

John 20 ends with another of Jesus' intimate portraits—the account of doubting Thomas.

John 20:24-29—

**Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." <sup>26</sup>Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

We observe, first, that Jesus acts to end the skepticism of his friend. It is not uncommon among our contemporaries to view the conflicted outsider as brave and noble, but Thomas' doubts are not applauded. There are a good many books and blogs which chronicle a journey away from faith. These are sometimes admired for their snarky ridicule of the 'naïve ones' who believe without complaint. But we should recall the words of the apostle Paul, *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I*

*reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways* (1 Corinthians 13:11). Loss of faith is all too often a form of childishness. Proud, ‘look at me,’ skepticism is a form of immaturity (if not something worse).

However, Thomas did not doubt because he was immature. His bravery stands out on the journey to Bethany after Lazarus had died when he called on the other disciples to stay with Jesus even if it cost them their lives (John 11:16). During Jesus’ farewell discourse Thomas asked a clarifying question (John 14:5), articulating confusion that all of the disciples felt. Thomas was a realist who did assent to the majority opinion in order to get along. With reference to Jesus, he knew that wishful thinking and good memories were not enough. Thomas loved Jesus too much to speak of him in terms that he could not believe.

We can speculate about the reason for Thomas’s absence from the gathering of disciples on that first Easter evening. However, absent for whatever reason, we should also take note of his refusal to believe what he heard later: the witness of his brother apostles and the women who had gone to the tomb. It may well be that Thomas’s strengths—courage and a willingness to be different—were also a weakness.

I think Thomas should have been with the other disciples that night. And when he failed to show up his friends should have gone to find him. Jesus said that love for one another would characterize his followers (John 13:34-35). Love was not much in evidence as that evening began—the doors [were] locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews. Fear destroys community.

We can rejoice therefore that Thomas was present one week later. He refused to believe the testimony of his friends (John 20:25) but he needed their fellowship and they did not ostracize him. Then we hear Jesus’ blessing for a third time, *Peace be with you*. Shalom overcame any tension that might have remained among the small band of Jesus’ followers.

Though he was invited to do so, it is not clear that Thomas ever touched Jesus. I think that seeing and hearing him was enough. Thomas was a realist and that (mostly) served him well. But the Lord of the universe had come that night primarily to pull him close. Such love both

answers doubts and silences them. And Thomas uttered extraordinary words of faith, *My Lord and my God!*. No other declaration in the Bible surpasses this.

John 20:30-31—

**Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup>but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

Thomas made the journey from unbelief to belief and others should follow him. John has written this book to challenge falsehood (imaginary versions of Jesus) and to bring about faith, *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16). You can’t make up your own version of Jesus. But given that life in abundance is offered to those who *believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, why would we choose any other path?