

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“KNOWING JESUS IN *THE GOSPEL OF JOHN*”

7. My Lord and My God

(John 20:19-28)

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Every single one of us, at one time or another, has experienced the “power of personalization.” The power of personalization – experiencing how things change radically when they move from being something that happens “out there” to something that happens “right here”, when things change from objective events and become subjective realities, when something is no longer abstract but incredibly concrete.

- Some of our political views have changed due to the power of personalization. It’s one thing to say, “I’m concerned about the American criminal justice system”, but it’s a whole ‘nother thing to say, “I’m concerned about how the criminal justice system is treating the guy who mugged *me*.”
- Some of our economic views have changed due to the power of personalization. It’s one thing to say that corporate America needs to be competitive in a world-wide market, but it’s a whole ‘nother thing when *my* company decides to downsize *me*.
- Some of our social views have changed due to the power of personalization. It’s one thing to say, “I concerned about teenage sexuality in America”, but it’s a whole ‘nother thing to say, “I’m concerned about *my* teenager’s sexuality”!

All of us have, at one time or another, experienced this power of personalization. Because when things move from the general to the specific, from the abstract to the concrete, from the hypothetical to the existential – we are changed.

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Today we come to the end of our series “Knowing Jesus through the Gospel of John”, and today’s passage comprises what most scholars believe to be the *original* ending of John’s Gospel. There’s one more chapter in *The Gospel of John*, but it reads more like an appendix. Today’s chapter, chapter 20, is clearly written to be the climax, the culmination, of everything that John wants to say about Jesus in his Gospel. Listen to God’s word from *The Gospel of John*, chapter 20, which records an event that happened on the evening of the first Easter Sunday:

That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! Again he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

One of the twelve disciples, Thomas, was not with the others when Jesus came. They told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side."

Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. "Peace be with you," he said. Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!"

"My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed.

This story takes place on Easter Sunday. Two days before, the disciples had all run for their lives as Jesus hung on the cross. Now they are hiding out together, behind locked and bolted doors, scared to death – if their leader has been killed, what did the authorities have planned for them?

And then suddenly, surprisingly, miraculously, Jesus is standing in the middle of the room. And the disciples can't believe their eyes. Where did he come from? And how could he possibly be alive? But he is! And, as John puts it, they are "filled with joy". Filled with joy because the man they had followed, the man they loved – he wasn't dead, but he was still very much (apparently, even more so) alive!

But Thomas – one of the twelve disciples – wasn't there. He missed the big reveal. He was out picking up take-out or something. And when he finally returns with the pizza, the disciples are all giddy. When Thomas finally makes out their babbling, he can't believe what they're saying – he *won't* believe what they're saying. He isn't about to fall for some pitiful, wish-projected hallucination. Because Thomas has witnessed a few crucifixions in his life – he knows that no one gets us up and walks away from a cross. For Thomas, it's much more honest to face the tragedy of a good man's death than to play this pathetic, delusional game.

And so, John takes us to Scene Two, which really reads like "Take Two" – it's the same place, the same locked doors, the same cast except that, this time, it's Bartholomew who's out picking up the Chinese. Again, Jesus suddenly appears out of nowhere. But this time he walks right over to Thomas. And he says, "Thomas – friend – take a good look. Take a really good look. Put your finger in my hands.

Put your hand on my side. Stop refusing to believe what you've heard and believe."

But Thomas doesn't need to check anything out. Instead he blurts out the words that form the climax of John's story about Jesus, the culmination of everything John wants the readers of his Gospel to know about Jesus of Nazareth. Thomas says, "My Lord and my God."

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Of all the things that are said about Jesus in the New Testament, there are no other words that are more succinct and more powerful and more true than Thomas' confession, "My Lord and my God." Because that is precisely who Jesus Christ is – He is our Lord, because He is our God.

This, in fact, was the earliest creed of the Christian church, the very first confession of faith used in the first Christian worship services: "Jesus is Lord." It's also the first vow you made when you joined Liberty: when you were asked, "Who is your Lord and Savior?", your response, just like our new members this morning, was "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior."

What are we saying when we say that "Jesus is Lord"? After all, "Lord" is not a word we use in normal, everyday conversation. Like so many other powerful Biblical metaphors, what was once a completely understandable, secular word has lost its meaning. But for the first 1800 years or so of church history, everyone knew exactly what it meant to say, "Jesus is Lord". Because there used to be lords all over the place.

When we lived in England in the early nineties, one of the standard tourist trips we took was touring manor houses. A manor house is a big house – a mansion, sometimes a castle or palace – that was once the home of the local lord. The local lord was the guy to whom the king had deeded over all the land in the area – literally all of it, from the High Street to all the farm- and grazing-land. In other words, the lord owned *everything*. And the people who lived in the village – the shopkeepers, the tenant farmers, the shepherds – they all lived at the lord's mercy. The lord was "the man" in the fullest sense of the term.

Now, eventually people realized that this was a lousy social-political set-up, and the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries dismantled the feudal system. So, it's hard for us to wrap our modern, democratic minds around the idea of a "lord". For us, power – legitimate power – is something that flows from the bottom up, something that is given with our consent – we *allow* people to rule over us, we *vote* for our authorities. But that's not what it means when we say, "Jesus is Lord" – we're not saying that Jesus gets our "vote". Because Jesus' lordship is God's claim

on us from the top down. Or as Paul puts it, we are Christ's slaves, because he has bought us with the price of his life.

To serve a lord means to recognize the authority of someone and to live under that person's authority in all aspects of our lives. The Bible scholar C.K. Barrett puts it this way:

The true Christian watchword is "Jesus is Lord". [...] It is true not because it is the right or orthodox formula, but because it expresses the proper relation with Jesus: to declare Jesus as one's Lord is to accept his authority, and to proclaim oneself as his servant.¹

You see:

- To say "Jesus is Lord" means that my future doesn't rest in my strategic planning skills, but it lies in the hands of the One who owns the future.
- To say "Jesus is Lord" means my wealth is not wages I've earned but a gift received, of which I am not the owner but the steward.
- To say "Jesus is Lord" means that of all the claims on my life – as an employee, as a husband, as a father, as a citizen – all of these claims take second place to, and receive their meaning from, the first and fundamental claim upon my life: I am a Christian.
- To say "Jesus is Lord" means that my reason for living, my purpose in life, my self-understanding, my highest joy and my most honored privilege is to be a witness to the greatness and graciousness of my Lord.

Because "lord" is an all-or-nothing concept. To say "Jesus is Lord" means that Jesus is Lord of all, or He isn't Lord at all.

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But we still need to go one step further. Thomas didn't simply make a general, abstract, hypothetical statement: "Jesus is Lord and God." No. Because on that evening a week after Easter Sunday, Thomas experienced the power of personalization. We know that Doubting Thomas stopped doubting and began believing because what he said was, "*My* Lord and *my* God". Because it's one thing to say, "Jesus is Lord", but it's a whole 'nother thing to say, "Jesus is *my* Lord".

Usually, when we make a statement that's grammatically identical to this – "Jesus is my Lord. That Honda CRV is my car. 8135 Hillingdon Drive is my house" – we understand the "my" to mean possession: "These things belong to me." But when we say, "Jesus is my Lord", we're not talking about what belongs to us, we're

¹*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 281 (paraphrased).

talking about to whom we belong. When we say, “Jesus is Lord”, we’re saying that we belong to Him.

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Of course, we all wish that Jesus would do for us what He did for Thomas – appear right here, right now, so that we could see and touch for ourselves. Instead, hear what Jesus says to Thomas, and then how John concludes his story about Jesus:

Then Jesus told Thomas, “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.”

The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name. (20:29-31)

Friends, here’s what we’ve come to know about Jesus through reading The Gospel of John:

- Jesus is the one who has made the invisible God known
- Jesus calls us to a new life that’s like being born again
- Jesus is the final answer to our desire to be whole.
- Jesus meets our needs as powerfully and as decisively as He gave sight to the blind man.
- Jesus elicits outrageous acts of devotion
- Jesus calls us to be connected to him like a branch is connected to its trunk so that eternal life flows through us.
- Jesus is, from the beginning to the end, our Lord and our God.

That’s a lot of stuff to know. And it’s all good news. AMEN

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