

Sermon 4-28-19
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W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter, John 20:19-31

Secrets Revealed

The evening of the first Easter Sunday is so important to the Christian life. The events of that evening are part of today's gospel.

Easter morning a report came from women who had gone to the tomb at daybreak to further anoint Jesus' dead body. They had found the tomb open and empty. Angels told them that Jesus had risen. A further report came from Mary Magdalene. She was the first to behold Jesus in His resurrected, immortal body.

Now, being that these reports came from women, the male disciples doubted it. However, Peter and John ran out to the tomb and found it just as the women had said: empty, containing only the funeral clothing.

That afternoon, Luke's gospel tells us that two male disciples were joined by Jesus as they walked out of Jerusalem to one of its suburbs, Emmaus. Jesus prevented them from recognizing Him. As they walked along they had a long discussion concerning Messiah. We read in Luke 24:26-27, "[Jesus said to them,] 26 'Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." But they still didn't understand the suffering Messiah, and they had no clue it was Jesus they were talking to.

It was only when they had invited Jesus to dinner and Jesus broke bread in their presence that He was revealed to them in His resurrected body. But immediately Jesus disappeared from their sight. We then read in Luke 24:32, "They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'"

As we've said many times, the Old Testament says much about a mortal, suffering Messiah who bears the punishment of His people. And, it also describes a glorious Messiah who will gain victory over all Yahweh's enemies and the enemies of His people. But because the verses that describe a glorious, victorious Messiah are much easier to recognize and understand, the Jews of Jesus' time knew nothing about a suffering Messiah. Indeed, they found the concept quite impossible.

For this reason, when Jesus began to teach His disciples that the Messiah must suffer, they could not accept it. The first time Jesus ever taught the suffering Messiah, we read in Matthew 16:22-23, "22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' 23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'" As a result, Peter learned to shut his mouth when Jesus taught the suffering Messiah, but no one liked it and they all could not believe it.

On the road to Emmaus that Easter afternoon, Jesus taught two of His disciples one last time about the relationship between suffering and victory for Messiah. Scripture specifically teaches that Messiah can only enter His immortal glory after He has suffered for the sins of the world as a mortal human being. But still, these two men could not receive the teaching. Only when Jesus revealed Himself briefly in His resurrected, immortal body did they even begin to understand.

Luke's gospel tells us that immediately these two men ran back to the Upper Room. They joined the others who excitedly told them that Jesus had appeared resurrected to Peter. Then suddenly Jesus stood in the room. There was much consternation and amazement. To prove He wasn't a ghost, Jesus ate a piece of fish in front of them.

Then we read this sequence in Luke 24:44-48, "44 He [Jesus] said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' 45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things.'"

It took the supernatural opening of their minds to understand what Jesus had been teaching them from the very first time He had predicted His death by crucifixion. It took the supernatural opening of their minds in order for them to see the suffering Messiah in the Old Testament. It took the supernatural opening of their minds to understand that the work of Messiah would be preached to all the nations, not just Israel. What is the message they would preach from their newly opened minds? Jesus said, repentance and forgiveness of sins in my Name. Keep all this in mind as we now look at today's gospel lesson.

This lesson also is a record of events in the Upper Room on Easter evening. We read in John 20:21-23, "21 Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'"

Two things here. First, Jesus poured out His Holy Spirit on the disciples. More on this in a bit.

Second, He gave them authority to preach the gospel. That's what the authority to forgive or not forgive sins means. For, when the gospel of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in the Name of Jesus is preached, one of two things will happen. Either people will repent and cry out for forgiveness of their sins, or they will not.

Therefore, Jesus wanted His disciples to absolutely assure the penitent that their sins were forgiven in His Name. Likewise, Jesus wanted His disciples to absolutely assure the impenitent that the guilt of their sins still rested upon them and the judgment of God. In addition, Jesus wanted to absolutely assure His disciples that their preaching of the gospel would absolutely produce one of two situations – sins really would be forgiven by God or not.

So, Jesus' words here indicate that the preaching of the gospel is no small thing. Those who resist repentance and forgiveness of sins until the moment of death will

surely not enter the eternal Kingdom of heaven. While those who call on the Name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins will graciously be granted entry.

Jesus taught this same thing when He said in Matthew 16:18-20, “18 ‘And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’” Notice the similarity with what Jesus said on Easter evening.

So, on the rock of faith in Him, Jesus builds His Church. And notice what Jesus gives His Church – the keys of the kingdom of heaven. What do these keys do? Without the keys the impenitent are bound and prevented from entering the Kingdom of heaven. On the other hand, having the keys unlocks the penitent from their sin and permits them to enter the Kingdom. This is precisely what the preaching of the gospel does. Therefore the keys of the Kingdom are the gospel.

Now, back to Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples. First, can the gospel be properly preached by those who cannot find the suffering Messiah hidden in Scripture and cannot understand a suffering Messiah? No. Therefore, those who preach the gospel must have the Holy Spirit breathed on them and have their minds opened to see Jesus hidden in the Scripture and know that Jesus of Nazareth is both the suffering and victorious Messiah. This was first done to the Apostles and disciples on Easter evening.

Second, can anyone hearing the gospel of the suffering and victorious Messiah, Jesus, believe what they have heard without Lord Holy Spirit being breathed on them? Again No. So both the preachers and hearers of the gospel must have Lord Holy Spirit upon them in order for the keys of the Kingdom to be given and received. Now, a pouring out of Lord Holy Spirit for the hearers of the gospel was not given until fifty days after Easter on the Day of Pentecost, 33A.D. So that will come a number of weeks from now in the liturgical cycle of our remembrance of these events.

Today, however, we’ll investigate if Jesus’ breathing the Holy Spirit on the Apostles had any effect on Easter evening. First, as we’ve just mentioned there’s a fifty-day period between Jesus’ resurrection and the Day of Pentecost. On the fortieth day of that period Jesus ascended into heaven. So, after Jesus’ ascension there was a ten day period until the Day of Pentecost. An event in the first chapter of the book of Acts takes place in this ten-day period. We read in Acts 1:15-20, “15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) 16 and said, ‘Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus – 17 he was one of our number and shared in this ministry....’ 20 ‘For,’ said Peter, ‘it is written in the book of Psalms, “May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,” and, “May another take his place of leadership.””

Peter’s first quotation is an obscure verse – Psalm 69:25. The second is equally obscure – Psalm 109:8. But Lord Holy Spirit brought these two verses to Peter as part of the “everything written about Jesus in Scripture must be fulfilled.” The result was that the disciples chose Matthias to take the place of Judas among the twelve.

A really important thing here is that Jesus didn't instruct anyone to replace Judas before He ascended into heaven. Rather, Lord Holy Spirit brought Peter's attention to obscure verses from the psalms that had been written a thousand years before Jesus. The secret of who those verses referred to had been hidden for all that time. But now that Lord Holy Spirit had been breathed on Peter and his mind had been opened to see Jesus in the entire Old Testament, Peter immediately understood that these verses referred to Judas as soon as Lord Holy Spirit brought them to his attention. As a result, Peter recommended that the disciples find a replacement for Judas, for Scripture declared that it had to happen. When the other disciples heard this, they also immediately knew by Lord Holy Spirit that this was what they had to do. So, they did it. This is proof indeed, that what Jesus had done to the disciples on Easter evening enabled them to fully understand all that had to happen to the Messiah. He had opened their minds and poured out His Holy Spirit upon them.

So what about us? As I mentioned, on the Day of Pentecost 33A.D. God poured out His Holy Spirit upon all of humanity so that the things long hidden in the Old Testament in plain sight might be understood by all people of all time. God did this so that when repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus Name is preached anywhere in the world, people might see and believe in the crucified and resurrected Messiah. He did this so that when people of any time look for themselves in the Scripture to see if these things are true, they will be able to find the suffering and victorious Messiah in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.

Can the gospel be properly preached without Lord Holy Spirit? No. Can repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' Name occur in anyone's heart without hearing of the suffering and victorious Messiah? No. But if someone has heard of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' Name, can they believe and receive the keys of the Kingdom without Lord Holy Spirit? Again. No.

Do you understand what this means for us as we seek to again plant this congregation? Without Lord Holy Spirit, we are quite helpless and all is in vain. We can preach and teach our heads off to no effect.

This is why I propose that here, instead of altar calls, we have Holy Spirit calls. In other words, that we humbly call upon Lord Holy Spirit to enter into all who gather in this sanctuary, so that the Word and the Sacraments can have their full effect in people's lives.

As for myself, a few days ago it was forty years since Carol and I first entered a church sanctuary where people regularly had encounters with the work of Lord Holy Spirit. That was the sanctuary of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Darien, Connecticut in April of 1979. In many ways our pattern of worship here is based on my experience in that sanctuary for eight months in 1979. The only ostentatious Holy Spirit stuff there was that people calmly and joyfully raised their hands to the Lord as they sang.

The preaching and teaching in that place was most excellent. But the amazing thing was that people regularly encountered the Lord in that sanctuary. And the people of that congregation expected that it would happen. That sanctuary was a holy place, holy ground, much like the place where Jacob had the dream of the staircase to heaven with the angels ascending and descending on it.

Now, you might expect that people encountering the Lord would be a plus, plus in a sanctuary. I can assure you that it's not. The first time I went to St. Paul's, I was deeply offended. The 360 people gathered there that Tuesday morning seemed to think that Jesus was real. I was truly offended that they could have such faith. As far as I was concerned, nobody could legitimately have that kind of faith. I tell you this. I never would have gone back if the Lord had not had other ideas. Yes. Hard and impenitent hearts become truly offended on holy ground. They don't easily come back.

As for me the story is too long to tell but suffice it to say that we went back the next week and the next. Finally, about the fifth week, some time in late May or early June, the Lord made His initial move on me in that sanctuary during the prayer of the faithful. As they say, the rest is history.

But I can tell you this. When people by faith expect the Holy One to show up in a certain place, He does. This is why I propose that we regularly have Holy Spirit calls in this place. Only He can open minds so that sinners can see the Way, the Truth and the Life hidden in His precious Word.

On our part, honoring Christ's holy Word and Sacraments by faith is a chief component. Honoring this space as Christ's holy space by faith is a chief component. Expecting God to fulfill His Word in this place is also a chief component. When Lord Holy Spirit comes, He puts all these pieces in place in our hearts in a very genuine fashion. Those who come will know they have been in church.

So, again, what say you, Lord Holy Spirit? Having heard the good news of our Father's will for us, will you indeed, convince us that we are indeed rebels and sinners in great need of Messiah's grace and forgiveness? Will you enable us to understand? Will you bring your gracious deep truth into the hardened places of our hearts at just the right moment? Will you open us up in utter gratitude and thankfulness for our Creator's undying love for us? Come Spirit. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.