

Session 14

May 31, 2020 (Pentecost)

Unit 2: Jesus Encounters . . .

Fear and Doubt

The Holy Spirit is God's promised presence during times of fear and doubt.

The Word

John 20:19-29

Session Outcome

To open ourselves up to the peace the Holy Spirit offers.

Discover:

Illustrated Bible Life examines the life of the apostle Thomas, and provides verse-by-verse commentary on the Scripture passage.

Last Week:

We looked at the ways Jesus fulfills the role as the Good Shepherd and the Gate through which we find salvation.

This Week:

We will look at how Jesus responds to our fear and doubt.

Listen:

The apostle Thomas and his legacy is the focus of this week's Illustrated Bible Life podcast on FoundryLeader.com.

Discover:

It is odd how nicknames, even demeaning and unwarranted nicknames, can become firmly attached to a person and their legacy. Probably no one in history has been more consistently

saddled with a more misleading nickname than Thomas the apostle, or, as he is more commonly known, “Doubting Thomas.” This week’s Illustrated Bible Life article, “Believing Thomas,” takes a discerning look at the apostle and his legacy.

Engage the Word

Chapters 14—17 are a rich source of teachings, especially Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit (the “Advocate,” one called alongside to help). Following an extended prayer, Jesus and the disciples moved to the Garden of Gethsemane where soldiers and officials took Jesus into custody (John 18). In chapter 19, Jesus is tried, crucified, and placed in a nearby tomb. John 13—19 provides important context for today’s session in John 20. At this point the followers of Jesus were devastated, their dreams shattered, and they were grieving deeply. Fear and doubt were all they knew.

JESUS COMES TO ADDRESS THE DISCIPLES FEAR **John 20:19-20**

On the “first day of the week” (20:1) Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb, found that the large stone at the entrance was moved, and ran to report Jesus’ absence to the disciples. Peter and John ran to the tomb, examined what was left of the burial items and in their confusion, fear, and doubt, returned to the house where they were staying (20:10), meeting behind locked doors, still fearful. Mary remained near the tomb and had a close encounter with the risen Jesus. She returned to tell the disciples “I have seen the Lord!” (20:18).

In the evening, perhaps 12 hours after 20:1, Jesus had appeared and was very much alive! This “first day” became the celebrated “resurrection day,” or “Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10), as the early Christians began to gather at a different time for worship of the living Lord, Jesus. (For the phrase “first day of the week” as a developing Christian time of worship see Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2.) The Greek word *sabbaton*, which can mean “week,” provides us with the word “sabbath.” On that day fear still plagued the disciples. They gathered behind locked doors. The tense of the verb has the sense of “had been locked previously and remained locked.” ? Despite the locked doors, out of fear of the Jews (the NIV translation “Jewish leaders” captures the intent), Jesus suddenly appeared in the middle of their gathering. Compare Revelation 5, where the resurrected Lord comes to quiet tears and fears, bringing assurance of His victory over death. Into a Jerusalem house laden with fears, Jesus appeared that “first day” and spoke peace to them (Hebrew “shalom”). In this passage, Jesus speaks peace to the disciples three times. His appearing brought great joy. But still the disciples needed more reassurance and empowerment.

JESUS COMMISSIONS **John 20:21-23**

Jesus’ words of peace and His resurrection life powerfully testified to them. The impact would lead to a lifelong mission for the original disciples, and all who believe their testimony. Jesus had

been sent by the Father. The tense of the verb “sent” carries the idea of a past event, with continuing effect. Jesus was saying that His mission, something received in the past, yet still held. He will continue ever and on as the sent one from the Father. Jesus remains the agent of the Father, speaking for the Father, representing the Father. The disciples find they too are sent ones, by Jesus’ clarion words “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” This sending includes an equipping of the disciples for the task ahead. Jesus conveyed the mission to the locked-in-by-fear disciples and promised the ministry of the Holy Spirit to empower them. Jesus would continue working through the Spirit. When Jesus breathed on that gathered group, this “breath” or “spirit” somewhat foreshadows the coming of the Holy Spirit as powerful “wind” that will be characteristic of the Christian mission. In Acts 1:8, the coming of the Holy Spirit is closely related to the advance of the gospel message by “power” so the disciples might be effective “witnesses.” In Acts, and in later Christian history, Jesus’ disciples would be closely and deeply involved in the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of those forgiven. Faithful preaching and teaching by them would herald the pardon, and the purity, that faith in Jesus would deliver to believing hearers. Jesus’ commission by the Spirit also no doubt intends the reader to recall the Genesis 2:7 creation language, where God’s breath infused life into the first man. In the resurrection appearance before us we find original creation imagery, also new creation to come (in the creation of a community based on belief in Jesus).

John 20:24-29

Thomas (the “twin,” Didymus), was absent when Jesus appeared previously. Ever the realist, Thomas insisted he would need more “hands on” evidence before he believed in a resurrected Jesus. Even in the face of Mary Magdalene’s “I have seen the Lord” (20:18), and the disciples “We have seen the Lord!” (20:25), Thomas waited to be convinced. Even with the previous appearances Jesus had made to them, the gathered disciples still met behind locked doors. As before, Jesus wasn’t there, and then seemingly the next moment He was! Jesus extended “peace” to all of them, as before. Then He turned His attention to Thomas, inviting Him to see and touch, and to move from doubt to faith. At that moment Thomas embraced the truth of Jesus as the living one, with no indication in the text that Thomas needed to see more, or to touch Jesus. Thomas declared his full faith in Jesus as “My Lord and my God!” The bestowal of God’s Spirit, and the unmistakable presence of Jesus, with the clear commission from the Father, settled the matter. Fear and doubt gave way to faith.

Reflect

In what ways do you need to experience the filling of God’s Spirit in your life this week?

Rick Williamson

Discussion Guide

Insight

Jesus' greeting "Peace be with you" was a typical greeting in the Jewish community. However, in this context, the phrase takes on new meaning as Jesus' appearances parallels Old Testament theophanies—revelatory divine encounters with humankind. Jesus speaks peace to the disciples not only to quell their already pulsing fears, but to ensure them that He does not come in judgment but to reveal himself as Lord and God.

Connect to My Experience

Begin by asking your group,

Are you a natural born cynic or optimistic believer? Why?

Do you tend to take experiences, people, information, and so on at face value or do you tend to question and raise doubts? Why?

How has this natural tendency evolved over the course of your life?

Transition:

The disciples were consumed by fear and doubt, unable and perhaps unwilling to believe the testimony of the witnesses of the resurrection. Jesus comes to them in their state in compassion not judgment, and extends His peace as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit. The presence of Jesus transforms doubt and fear into trusting obedience.

Connect to the Word

Invite someone to read John 20:19-20, then discuss the following,

The disciples huddle together in fear, behind locked doors. Jesus comes to them in their fear and doubt and immediately extends peace to them. He then extends His hands, and exposes His wounds to offer the disciples the evidence they need. The disciples respond to His presence and His gifts of peace and proof with joy.

In spite of Mary Magdalene's testimony, the disciples are bound by fear. What does this reveal about the disciples?

Jesus comes to the disciples as they are: afraid and cowering from the Jewish leaders. In what ways does Jesus' coming to them demonstrate His compassion and mercy?

Jesus immediately offers peace to His frightened followers, but immediately shows them His wounds. Why does Jesus choose to put His body on display? How is this act another expression of compassion?

After bearing witness to Jesus' wounds, the disciples finally "see" the Lord and are overjoyed. How does their slowness to see Jesus as the resurrected Lord parallel other stories of blindness and healing in John's gospel?

Invite someone to read John 20:21-23, then discuss the following,

Jesus extends peace to the disciples a second time and, as He has done many times throughout John's gospel, invites the disciples to join Him in doing the work of God by commissioning them. However, this time His commission will be accompanied by the gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift will empower them to do the task at hand, to communicate and mediate God's forgiving and redeeming work to the world.

Jesus extends peace to the disciples a second time. Why this repeated greeting?

Jesus immediately moves from extending peace to commissioning the disciples. How are the gifts of peace and the call to join God's redemptive work related?

The disciples are sent out, but will be empowered by the Spirit within and among them. (See John 14:15-17; 14:23-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-11; 16:12-15; Acts 1:8; Acts 2:2.)

How will the gift of the Holy Spirit enable the disciples both to be and do what Jesus is calling them to be and to do?

The disciples' partnership with God's redemptive work is genuine and meaningful, not superficial.

How do we, as disciples of Jesus, join God in God's forgiving work? (Jesus is saying to them, and to us, that as His disciples we have the privilege of sharing with others the assurance of forgiveness by God for those who repent of their sins and place their faith in Christ. We as believers have the opportunity to model forgiveness to those who cannot imagine God could ever forgive them. By doing so, we point the way to God's loving forgiveness.)

Invite someone to read John 20:24-29, then discuss the following,

Thomas expresses a desire to experience what Mary and the disciples experienced: a first-hand encounter with the risen Lord. Jesus graciously responds to Thomas' need, standing in the midst of the disciples once again, bearing His wounds to Thomas in particular, inviting him to leave doubt behind and believe. Thomas' response surpasses that of his fellow disciples as he declares Jesus to be "Lord and God."

History has been harsh with Thomas, giving him the name "Doubting Thomas." But, in what ways does Thomas express the desire of every human heart?

Notice the disciples are still gathered behind locked doors. Why might that be? What fears might linger?

Jesus meets Thomas' need, which results in one of the clearest affirmations of Jesus' lordship in John's gospel. How does Thomas' response differ from the other disciples?

Once again, Jesus reminds His disciples that signs-based belief is only the first step. True belief need not see to believe (v. 29).

How might this statement have been of particular comfort to the early church as it grew?

Connect to My Life and the World

Believers are not left alone. The Spirit has been poured out and is present with us today, so many generations after the disciples. These gifts of peace and of the eternally present Spirit empower us to partner with God in God's work of redemption, reconciliation, and forgiveness. As Jesus was sent to us, we are sent to the world.

Like the disciples, we can become paralyzed by fear and doubt. How does this impact our participation in the work of God's kingdom?

How might we posture ourselves both to receive the peace of Christ and to develop awareness of the Spirit's continual presence in our lives? How might this posture set us free from fear and doubt?

While Jesus does not come to us in the flesh, the Spirit does come to us exactly as we are, even mired in fear and doubt. In love and compassion, the Spirit comes both to heal us and to invite us into a new way of being.

How could this perspective change your experience of fear and doubt away from condemnation and toward hope?

Jesus declares us "blessed" as those who have not seen and yet believe. How can we faithfully steward this gift of blessing?

Close in prayer, inviting God to calm the doubt and fear you may be experiencing through the power of His Spirit.