

JOHN 20-21

With Chapters 20-21, the gospel turns to the beginning of the rest of the story ('early on the first day of the week'). With Jesus' resurrection everything changes for followers of Jesus even if the world hasn't changed. Now they are living in the resurrection with death being a mere sleep or transition within a larger eternity in communion with God.

20: 1-10 - THE EMPTY TOMB

As in all the gospels, Mary Magdalene is the first to arrive at the tomb. Unlike the other gospels, however, here she comes alone.

Unlike Lazarus who comes out of the grave wrapped in burial clothes, the empty tomb contains the clothes already removed, indicating some divine action in removing them. As in the other gospels, the empty tomb itself is a reason for at least some to believe. In this case, the beloved disciple believes on the basis of the empty tomb alone without having yet seen Jesus. Moreover, unlike the other gospels in which Jesus had spoken of his resurrection from the dead before his crucifixion, in John's gospel, he never tells them this will happen, and hence, the surprise.

20: 11-18 - MARY IN THE GARDEN

Mary's weeping and lack of expectation indicates her ignorance and lack of faith, even after the angels have addressed her. Jesus' encounter with her indicates the importance of Mary as the first witness to the risen Christ. Also significant is his request that she not touch him (indicating that perhaps she had already touched him). Why Jesus makes this request is difficult to know. Is it perhaps the need to distinguish the earthly and heavenly dimensions of reality? Or perhaps, the few who are permitted to touch Jesus (like Thomas) would not represent the many who will be called to believe without seeing or touching the risen Christ.

20: 19-29 - THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THOMAS

Unlike Luke in which the Holy Spirit descends upon believers at Pentecost, here Jesus bestows the Holy Spirit on the disciples immediately. Also, Jesus himself gives the Holy Spirit further identifying the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus as much as it is the Spirit of God. With the giving of the Spirit also comes the giving of a peace not of this world (John 14), and the commission to service (as the Father has sent me, so I send you). The word apostle means one who is 'sent.' From this time forth, the disciples are also 'apostles.' Forgiving and retaining sins has been used in the Catholic church as a justification for the doctrine that the church alone can forgive sins (through the pope). A Protestant reading would see this as a call for Christians to be ready to forgive, but also call people and society to account (justice) when they promote hate and indifference however that happens. The world God so loves that is broken by sin requires people challenged to repentance as much as forgiven.

Thomas is one of those who needs physical evidence to believe Jesus is raised from the dead. Jesus gives him what he wants, and this giving of Jesus provides all of us who are reading the gospel, a clear indication that it is, indeed, none other than the crucified Jesus who is resurrected (he still has the marks of the nails and the spear). But Jesus also speaks of those who will be called to believe without seeing or touching.

20: 30-31 - THE FIRST ENDING

All that is given us in the gospel is meant to be signs and testimony to Jesus as the beloved Word of God made flesh. And the Word was made flesh because God so loved the world.

21: 1-14 - THE FISH MIRACLE

Peter and the beloved disciple are key characters in the gospel as opposed to James and John who are key players, along with Peter, in the other gospels. The miracle of the multiplication of fish and the breakfast Jesus shares with the disciples reminds us of the feeding of the 5,000. The fact that Jesus eats with them also provides a further sign of the physicality of the risen Christ.

The sons of Zebedee are also mentioned here for the first time in the gospel (James and John) why? Is it to indicate that the beloved disciple may be none other than John? Probably.

21: 15-19 - JESUS AND SIMON PETER

Jesus' questions to Peter allow Peter and he to be reconciled and for Peter to find his way again. The 3-fold nature of the questioning indicates the need to undo the 3-fold denial of Jesus by Peter. The question as to whether Peter loves him, reveals again the mark of discipleship as love. Loving Jesus is loving the Father and loving God is the same movement that moves toward love for each other and love of neighbour. Finally, the reference to lambs and sheep indicate that Peter would be that earthly shepherd of the flock as Jesus is the divine shepherd (John 10).

Jesus also predicts that Peter will indeed fulfil the call to follow Jesus to the death (as he claimed he would before he denied him), and legend has it that Peter was crucified, but crucified upside down by request, as he felt unworthy to die as Jesus died.

21: 20-24 - THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

The beloved disciple is identified as the author of the gospel. It is also indicated that he will live a long life, and hence, write the gospel later in life. Also significant is the clue that the choice of what was included in the gospel of Jesus' life and testimony was intentional to guide the reader toward faith in him as God's love made flesh to redeem humanity.