

Exposition of the Gospel of John CHAPTER 68

CHRIST APPEARING TO HIS OWN

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Transcript

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John 20:11-23

Below is an Analysis of our present passage:— 1. Mary at the sepulcher, verses 11-13. 2. Christ revealing Himself to Mary, verses 14-16. 3. Christ commissioning Mary, verses 17-18. 4. The apostles in the upper room, verse 19. 5. Christ revealing Himself to the apostles, verse 20. 6. Christ commissioning the apostles, verse 21. 7. Christ enduing the apostles, verses 22, 23. Our Lord had triumphed o'er the grave, "as he said." Before the sun of this world had risen upon the third day since the crucifixion, the Son of righteousness had already risen; the Bridegroom had gone forth from His chamber (Ps. 19:4). The One whose heel was bruised by the serpent had, through death, become the destroyer of him who had the power of death. The eye of no earthly watcher had beheld the actual resurrection of the body, the rising, and the going forth. That He had risen was evident by the stone rolled away, the empty sepulcher, and the condition of the grave-clothes which He had left behind; corroborated, too, by the witness of the angels. But now He was to appear in person unto His own: the manner in which He did so is very striking. "Although the impulse of His love urged Him at once to the company of His own upon earth, who are still in the sorrow of death; yet He does not overwhelm them with sudden surprise at His glorious reappearance, but restrains Himself, yields Himself to their view by degrees, regulated by the highest wisdom of love. Their minds are gradually prepared, each one according to its temperament and need" (Stier). So far as our present light reveals, the Savior made eleven appearances between His resurrection and ascension. First, to Mary Magdalene alone (John 20:14). Second, to certain women returning from the sepulcher (Matthew 28:9, 10). Third, to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34). Fourth, to the two disciples going to Emmaus (Luke 24:13). Fifth, to the ten apostles in the upper room (John 20:19). Sixth, to the eleven apostles in the upper room (John 20:26-29). Seventh, to seven disciples fishing at the sea of Tiberias (John 21). Eighth, to the eleven apostles and possibly other disciples with them (Matthew 28:16). Ninth, to above five hundred brethren at once (1 Cor. 15:7). Tenth, to James (1 Cor. 15:7). Eleventh, to the eleven apostles, and possibly other disciples on the mount of Olives at His ascension (Acts 1). His twelfth appearance, after His ascension, was to Stephen (Acts 7). His thirteenth, to Saul on the way to Damascus (Acts 9). His

fourteenth, to John on Patmos (Rev. 1). And this was the last—how profoundly significant. The final appearing was His fourteenth! The factors of fourteen are seven and two, seven being the number of perfection, and two of witness. Thus we have His own perfect witness to His triumph over the tomb! His next appearing will be unto His blood-bought saints all together, when He shall descend into the air with a shout, and catch us up to be with Himself for evermore (1 Thess. 4:16). This will be His fifteenth appearance. The factors of fifteen are three and five, three being the number of full manifestation, and five of grace. Thus, at His coming for us, His grace, His wondrous grace, will be fully manifested!! It is with the first and the fifth of these appearings of the risen Savior that our present lesson is concerned. And here, too, the significance of these numerals holds good. One is the number of God in the unity of His essence. It speaks of His absolute sovereignty. The sovereignty of God comes out here most vividly and blessedly in the character of the one selected to have the high honor of being the first to gaze upon the triumphant Redeemer. It was not to the Eleven, not even to John, that Christ first showed Himself; it was to a woman, and she the one out of whom He had cast seven demons—one who had been the complete slave of Satan. And to her He revealed Himself as God the Son (see verse 17). And to whom was His fifth appearance made? To His mother? No. To Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus? No. It was to the unbelieving apostles, to those who had regarded as idle tales the testimony of the women who had seen Him. His fifth appearance was made to those who had least reason to expect Him, whose faith was the weakest. Wondrous grace indeed was this! "But Mary stood without at the sepulcher weeping" (John 20:11). This is the sequel to what was before us in the last lesson. At the beginning of the 20th chapter, we read, "The first of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulcher, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulcher. Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulcher, and we know not where they have laid him." In the interval, the two apostles had been to the sepulcher, inspected the clothes within, and then returned to their home, to acquaint the Savior's mother that He was risen from the dead. Meanwhile Mary, not knowing of this, had returned to the sepulcher, desolate and sorrowful. But soon her grief was to be turned into gladness: in but a little while the One who had taken captive her heart and who now occupied her every thought would be manifested to her. Strikingly does this illustrate Proverbs 8:17: "I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me." Mary, and the other women, were the first to seek the sepulcher on the resurrection morning, and they were the first to whom the Victor of death showed Himself (Matthew 28:9). Alas that so many put off the seeking of Christ till the last hour of life, and then never find Him! "But Mary stood without at the sepulcher weeping." Here, once more, the Holy Spirit shows us that love needs to be regulated by faith. It was love for Christ that caused her to weep: she was weeping because the sepulcher was empty, yet in fact that was the very thing which should have made her rejoice. Had the Lord's body been still there, she might have wept indeed, for then His promise had failed, His work on the cross had been in vain, and she (and all others) yet in her sins. The weeping manifested her affection, but it also showed her unbelief. "How often are the fears and sorrows of saints quite needless! Mary stood at the sepulcher weeping, and wept as if nothing could comfort her. She wept when the angels spoke to her: 'Woman,' they said, 'why weepest thou'? She was weeping still when our Lord spoke to her: 'Woman,' He said, 'why weepest thou'? And the burden of her complaint was always the same: 'They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him'! Yet all this time her risen Master was close to her! Her tears were needless. Like Hagar in the wilderness (Gen. 21:19), she had a well of water by her side, but she had not eyes to see it! "What thoughtful Christian can fail to see that we have here a faithful picture of many a believer's experience? How often we mourn over the absence of things which in reality are within our grasp, and even at our right hand! Two-thirds of the things we fear in life never happen at all, and two-thirds of the

tears we shed are thrown away, and shed in vain. Let us pray for more faith and patience, and allow more time for the development of God's purposes: let us believe that things are often working together for our peace and joy, which seem at one time to contain nothing but bitterness and sorrow. Old Jacob said at one time in his life 'all these things are against me' (Gen. 42:36), yet he lived to see Joseph again, rich and prosperous, and to thank God for all that had happened" (Bishop Ryle). "And as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulcher" (John 20:11). Such is ever the effect of uncontrolled grief. When we sorrow, even as others who have no hope, when we walk by sight instead of faith, when we are moved by the flesh instead of the spirit, we stoop down, and are occupied with things below. "Unto thee lift I mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens" (Ps. 123:1) should ever be the believer's attitude. Mary points a timely warning for us. We are living in days when "men's hearts are failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth" (Luke 21:26), and the more we are occupied with the evil around us, the more will our hearts fail. Heed then the Savior's admonition, "When these things begin to come to pass, then look up and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28). Let us, instead of looking down like Mary, say with the Psalmist, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:1, 2). "And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain" (John 20:12). How long-suffering is our God! How patiently He deals with our dulness! Where the heart is really engaged with Christ, even though faith be weak and intelligence small, God will bear with us. Here were two messengers from Heaven ready to re-assure Mary! Their presence in the sepulcher was proof positive that God had not suffered it to be rifled by wicked hands. Their very posture signified that all was well. Their number indicated a testimony from on High, if only this sorrowing woman had eyes to see and ears to hear. "And seeth two angels in white sitting." The sepulcher was not so deserted as it seemed. Luke tells us of two angels appearing to the other women a little earlier, and it is instructive to note the several points of difference. "And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments" (Luke 24:4). Luke calls them "two men"—from their appearance, we suppose. John is more explicit: "two angels." When these other women saw the two angels, they were on the outside of the sepulcher; but when Mary looked down they were now within. In Luke 24 the angels were "standing," here in John 20 they are "seated"! Nowhere are we told the names of the two angels, but some have thought that they were Michael and Gabriel, arguing that the supreme importance of our Lord's resurrection would call for the presence of the highest angels. Probably the same two appeared to the disciples at Christ's ascension (Acts 1:10). "And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet." This is the only place in Scripture where we see angels sitting. The fact that they were sitting in the place where "the body of Jesus had lain" was God's witness unto the rest which was secured by and proceeds from the finished work of the Lord Jesus. It is in striking accord with the character of this fourth Gospel that it was reserved for John to mention this beautiful incident. Who can doubt that the Holy Spirit would have us link up this verse with Exodus 25:17-19—"And thou shalt make a mercy-seat of pure gold . . . and thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy-seat." More remarkable still is the final word which Jehovah spake unto Moses concerning the mercy-seat: "And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy-seat from between the two cherubims" (Ex. 25:22). Here, then, in John's Gospel, do we learn once more that Christ is the true meeting-place between God and man! The question has often been asked, Why did not Peter and John see these two angels when they entered the sepulcher? It seems clear that they must have been there, though invisible. In view of Psalm 91:11 we are satisfied that they had been about that sepulcher from the first moment that the sacred body was deposited there: "For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy

ways"—this was God's promise to Christ. From the general teaching of the Scripture we learn that the angels of God are visible and invisible, appear and disappear, instantaneously and supernaturally, according as God commissions them. Most probably they are near to each believer every moment of his existence (Heb. 1:14), though we are unaware of their presence. Yet, while they are of a higher order of beings than humans, not the smallest particle of worship is to be given them; for, like ourselves, they are but the creatures of God. That the angels were "in white" denotes purity and freedom from defilement, which is the character of all the inhabitants of heaven. White was the color of our Lord's raiment in the transfiguration; it is the color in which the angels ever appeared; it will be the color of our garments in glory (Rev. 3:4). The late Bishop Andrews drew a timely moral from the positions occupied by the two angels in the sepulcher. "We learn that between the angels there was no striving for places. He that sat at the feet was as well content with his place as he that sat at the head. We should learn from their example. With us, both angels would have been at the head, and never one at the feet! With us, none would be at the feet; we must be head-angels all!" "And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou?" (John 20:13). We have no reason for supposing that the angels were ignorant of the occasion of Mary's lamentation, therefore, we understand their words here as a gentle inquiry, made for the purpose of stirring her mind. Why weepest thou? Have you any just cause for those tears? Search your heart! Does not the fact that Christ is not here afford ground for rejoicing! It is to be noted that the angels used precisely the same language as the Savior does in John 20:15, thereby intimating that their words are ever spoken by the command of God. Observe that their words to the disciples at the ascension of Christ also began with a "Why?" No doubt our unbelief, our fears, our repinings, our lack of obedience and zeal, afford much ground of surprise to these unfallen beings. "She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him" (John 20:13). Before the angels had time to add the comforting assurance, "He is not here; he is risen, as he said," Mary interrupts by explaining why she was so heart-broken—How can I do anything else but weep, when He is not here, and I know not where they have taken His body! A strange mingling of faith and unbelief, of intelligence and ignorance, of affection and fear, was hers. "Lord," she owned Jesus of Nazareth to be, and yet imagined that some one had taken Him away! It is indeed striking that she replied so promptly and naturally to the angels: instead of being awe-struck at their presence, she answered as though they were nothing more than men. She was so swallowed up with her grief, so occupied with her thoughts about Christ, that she paused not to gaze upon these Heavenly visitors. Mark the change of her language here: to Peter and John she had appropriately said, "They have taken away the Lord"; but to the angels she (now alone) says "my Lord," thus expressing the depths of her affections. And how blessed that each individual believer may speak of Him as "my Lord." "The Lord is my Shepherd" said David (Ps. 23:1). "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (Song 2:16). "Who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20) said the apostle Paul. "And when she had thus said she turned herself back" (John 20:14). Very, very, striking is this. Christ meant so much to her that she turned her back on the angels to seek His body! He was the One her affections were set upon, and therefore, even these angels held no attraction for her! How searching is this: if Christ really occupied the throne of our hearts, the poor things of this world would make no appeal to us. It is because we are so little absorbed with Him, and therefore so little acquainted with His soul-satisfying perfection, that the things of time and sense are so highly esteemed. O that writer and reader may be able to say with the Psalmist, and say with ever-increasing fervor and reality, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee." "And when she had thus said she turned herself back and saw Jesus standing" (John 20:14). Such devotion as Mary's could not pass unrewarded: to her who loved Him so deeply does the Savior first appear. "Those who love Christ most diligently and perseveringly, are those who receive most privileges at His hands. It is a touching fact, and one to be carefully noted, that Mary would not leave the sepulcher,

even when Peter and John had gone to their own home. Love to her gracious Master would not let her leave the place where He had lain. Where He was now she did not know, but love made her linger about the empty tomb; love made her honor the last place where His precious body had been seen by mortal eyes. And here love reaped a rich reward. She saw the angels whom Peter and John had not observed. She heard them speak. She was the first to see our Lord after He had risen from the dead, the first to hear His voice. Can any one doubt that this was written for our learning? Wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the world, this little incident testifies that those who honor Christ will be honored by Christ" (Bishop Ryle). "And saw Jesus standing." Very blessed is this. Why was the Savior standing there, beside His own sepulcher? Ah, was it not the response of His heart to one who loved Him! He was there for the purpose of meeting and comforting this sorely-wounded soul! "And saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus" (John 20:14). It is strange how many of the commentators have erred on this point. The popular idea is that Mary failed to recognize Christ because her eyes were dimmed with tears. But how comes it, we ask, that when she looked into the sepulcher she saw the two angels and the respective positions which they occupied? No; we believe there is far more reason for us to conclude that her eyes were "holden" supernaturally, like the two disciples walking to Emmaus, so that she did not distinguish the figure before her to be that of our Lord. The condition of His resurrection body was very different from that of His body before the crucifixion. Moreover, He was to be known no more "after the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16), but, as the head of the new creation. Yet, as others have pointed out, this incident was a striking emblem of the spiritual experience of many Christians. "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee" is His promise; yet how often are we unconscious of His presence with us! "Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou?" (John 20:15). These were the first words of our risen Savior, and how like Him! He came here to bind up the brokenhearted (Isa. 61:1), and in the end He will wipe away tears from off the faces of all His people (Isa. 25:8; Revelation 21:4). This was His evident design here: He would arouse Mary from the stupefying effects of her sorrow. His first question was a gentle reproof: Ought you not to be rejoicing, instead of repining? His second question was still more searching; Who is it you are seeking among the dead? Hast thou forgotten that the crucified One is the Lord of life, the resurrection and the life, the One who laid down His life that He might take it again! Devoted and affectionate as she was, had she not forgotten those words of His which had so often been spoken in her hearing! "Whom seekest thou?"—it was only in really finding Him that the ever-flowing fountain of her grief could be stayed. "She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away" (John 20:15). Notice, first, her artless simplicity. Three times over in these few words did Mary speak of "him" without stopping to define or mention His name. She was so wholly absorbed with Christ that she supposed every one would know whom she sought—like the Shulamite crying to the watchman, "Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?" (Song 3:3). Note also her, "I will take him away." He was all her own; what depth of affection! What a sense of her title to Him! But mark how there may be much ignorance even in a devoted believer—she supposed Him to be the "gardener"! And yet, as one has said, "Devout Mary, thou art not much mistaken. As it was the trade of the first Adam to dress the Garden of Eden, so is it the trade of the last Adam to tend the Garden of His Church: He digs up the soil by reasonable affliction; He sows in it the seeds of grace; He waters it with His Word" (Bishop Hall). "Jesus saith unto her, Mary" (John 20:16). This was the second utterance of the risen Christ to this devoted soul, and it is important to note that it was the second. Before He addressed her by name, He first called her "woman"! In addressing her as "woman" He spoke as God to His creature; in calling her "Mary" He spoke as Savior to one of His redeemed. The former gave her to know that He was exalted high above every human relationship; the latter intimated His love for one of His own. "I know thee by name, and thou hast found grace in my sight" (Ex. 33:12), said Jehovah in the Mount. So here, Jehovah, now incarnate,

knows this woman by name, for she, too, had "found grace" in His sight. In Christ addressing Mary by name we have a beautiful illustration of His own words in John 10:3, "And he calleth his own sheep by name." It was the seal of redemption: "But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine" (Isa. 43:1)! "She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master" (John 20:16). This shows that Mary now recognized Him. "The sheep follow him, for they know his voice" (John 10:4), and here was one of the sheep responding to the call of the Good Shepherd. One word only did He utter, "Mary"! But that was sufficient to transform the weeper into a worshipper. It shows us, once more, the power of the Word! "Rabboni," she exclaimed, as she fell at His feet—a Hebrew term signifying "my Master." Here was the rich reward for her devotion, her faithfulness, her perseverance. The One who had before cast the demons from her, now addressed Himself to her heart. She knew now that the fairest among ten thousand to her soul had triumphed over the tomb: her sorrow was ended, her cup of joy overflowing. There is one little detail in the picture here, most lovely, which is usually overlooked. As soon as Christ addressed her by name, she "turned herself," and saith unto Him, "Rabboni." After His first word, when she supposed Him to be the gardener, she had turned away from Him, her attitude still toward the tomb; but now that He called her by name, she turns her back on the tomb and falls at His feet—it is only as He is known that we are delivered, experimentally, from the power of death! "Jesus said unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father" (John 20:17). We believe that these words have a double significance and application. First, the "Touch me not," in its direct force, is clearly explained by Christ Himself—"for I am not yet ascended." Mary had, we think, fallen at His feet, and was on the point of embracing them—remembering, perhaps, the words of the Shulamite, "I found him whom my soul loveth: I held him, and would not let him go" (Song 3:4). But the Lord instantly checked her: "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended." "On this very day, the morrow after the Sabbath, the high priest waved the sheaf of the first fruits before the Lord while He, the First-fruits from the dead (1 Cor. 15:23), would be fulfilling the type by presenting Himself before the Father" (Companion Bible). This we are satisfied supplies the key to the primary meaning of our Lord's words to Mary, for He who was so jealous of the types would not neglect this one in Leviticus 23:10, 11. Yet, we do not think that this exhausts the scope of what Christ said here. Everywhere in this Gospel there is a fullness about the Lord's utterances which it is impossible for us to fathom; and beyond their force to those immediately addressed is ever a wider application. So here. "Touch me not." These words are not found in the Synoptics and therein lies the key to their deeper meaning and wider application. In Matthew 28:9 we read, "As they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet." How sharp the contrast here, yet how perfectly in keeping with the particular scope of each Gospel! Matthew presents Christ as the Son of David, in Jewish relationships. But John portrays Him as the Son of God, connected with the sons, as head of the new creation, the members of which know Him not "after the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16). Therefore in His "Touch me not" to Mary, the Lord was giving plain intimation that the Christian would know Him only in spirit, as the One with the Father on high; hence His "for I am not yet ascended"! It was the first hint—abundantly amplified in the sequel of the new relationship into which the resurrection of Christ has brought us, linking us with Himself as the Son of God in the Father's House! How significant that this was His third word to Mary—the number which speaks of resurrection! "But go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend [the proper present "I am ascending"] unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John 20:17). Mary was to be the first witness of Christ's resurrection. This illustrates a truth of great practical importance. A woman—more devoted, perhaps, than any of the Twelve—had anointed Him for His burial (John 12), and now a woman is the first to whom Christ revealed Himself in resurrection glory. How this tells us that the heart leads the mind in the apprehension of God's truth. The

men were quicker to grasp, intellectually, the meaning of the empty tomb, but Mary was the more devoted, and this Christ rewarded. Mary exemplifies the case of those whose hearts seek Christ, but whose minds are ill-informed. It is the heart God ever looks at. We may know much truth intellectually, but unless the heart is absorbed with Christ, He will not reveal Himself to such an one in the intimacies of love and communion. "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend." This is the first time that the Lord Jesus addressed the disciples as "brethren." How blessed! It is on resurrection-ground that we are thus related to Christ. "Except the corn of wheat fell into the ground and died, it had abode alone" (John 12:24), but now that He has emerged from the grave, He is "the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29). Of old had the Spirit of prophecy expressed the language of the Messiah thus: "I will declare thy name unto my brethren" (Ps. 22:22). Like Joseph after he was delivered from the prison and raised to a position of dignity and honor (Gen. 45:16), so Christ "is not ashamed to call us brethren" (Heb. 2:11). The blessedness of this comes out in the closing words of John 20:17: "I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." 'Believers are, by amazing grace, brought into the same position with Himself before God His Father. It was in view of this that the Lord said to Mary, "Touch [Greek 'cling to'] me not"—we are detached from Him by all earthly contact, and instead commune with Him by faith, in spirit, on High. "Go to my brethren and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and my God and your God." The terms of this message to His brethren deserve the closest notice. He did not bid Mary say to them "I have risen," but "I ascend." True, the one necessarily presupposed the other, but it is clear He would have them understand that His resurrection was only a step toward His return unto the Father. That which the Savior would impress upon His beloved disciples was the fact that He had not left the grave simply to remain with them here on earth, but in order to enter Heaven as their Representative and Forerunner. In saying, "I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God, and your God," He was conveying a message of real comfort. He is your Father and God, as well as Mine; all that He is to Me, the Head, He is also to you, the members. But mark His precision: He did not say "Our Father, and our God." He still maintains His pre-eminency, His uniqueness, for God is His Father and God in a singular and incommunicable manner. Finally, note the contrast between Mary's commission here and the one given to the other women in Matthew 28:10: there the message was for the disciples to meet Him in Galilee, and accordingly they did so; here, He names no place on earth, but simply tells them that He is going to Heaven, there in spirit to meet them before the Father. "Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and that he had spoken these things unto her" (John 20:18). "As by a woman came the first message of death, so by a woman came also the first notice of the resurrection from the dead. And the place also fits well, for in a garden they came, both" (Bishop Andrews). Observe that Mary told the disciples that she had "seen the Lord," not simply "Jesus"! Mark records the immediate effect of her message: "She went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not" (Mark 16:10,11). What a tragic forecast of the general reception which the Christian evangelist meets with! How few he finds that promptly receive the glad tidings of which he is the bearer! Often the ones he deems most likely to welcome the good news, are the very ones whose unbelief will be the most outspoken. "Then the same day at evening, being the first of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst" (John 20:19). Observe in the first place how the Holy Spirit here emphasizes the fact that what follows is a first-day scene. On this first Christian Sabbath the disciples were assembled" in separation from the world, and from this point on to the end of the New Testament the first day of the week is stamped with this characteristic: Sunday, not Saturday, was henceforth to be the day set apart for rest from the work and concerns of the world, and for occupation with the things of God. Note in the next place, that from the beginning non-Christians have manifested

their opposition to and hatred of these holy exercises. Observe that those gathered together are here called "disciples," not "apostles." It is striking that never once are they termed "apostles" in John's Gospel. The reason for this is not far distant: the word "apostle" means "one sent forth"; but here, where it is the family which is in view, they are always seen with Christ! "Then the same day at evening, being the first of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst and saith unto them, Peace be unto you" (John 20:19). Very striking is this. John is the only one who mentions the doors being "shut" (Greek signifies "barred"). But no closed doors could keep out the Conqueror of death. There was no need for Him to knock for admission, nor for an angel to open to Him as for Peter (Acts 12:10); nor do we consider what a miracle was wrought, in the ordinary meaning of that term. Our resurrection-body will not be subject to the limitations of the mortal body: sown in weakness it will be raised in power (1 Cor. 15:43). Most blessed is it to ponder our Lord's greeting to the Ten—Thomas was absent. Very touching and humbling was the Lord's gracious salutation. Peter had denied Him, and the others had forsaken Him. How, then, does He approach them? Does He demand an explanation of their conduct? Does He tell them that all is now over, that henceforth He will have no more to do with such unfaithful followers? No, indeed. Well might He have said, "Shame upon you!" But, instead He says, "Peace be unto you." He would remove from their hearts all fear which His sudden and unannounced appearance might have occasioned. He would quiet each uneasy conscience. Having put away their sins He could now remove their fears. Be not afraid: I come not as judge, to reckon with your perfidy and unbelief; nor do I enter as One who has been injured by you, to utter reproaches. No; I bring from My sepulcher something very different from upbraidings: "Peace be unto you" was the blessed greeting of the Prince of peace, and none but He can speak peace to any. "Peace" was the subject of the angel's carol in the night of the Lord's nativity; so "Peace" is the first word He pronounced in the ears of His disciples now that He is risen from the dead. So will it be when we meet Him face to face—we, with all our miserable failures, both individual and corporate; we with all our sins of omission and commission; we, with all our bitter controversies, and deplorable divisions. Not "Shame! shame!" but "Peace! peace!" will be His greeting. How do we know this? Because He is "The same yesterday and to-day and forever." Almost His last words to the disciples on the "yesterday" were "these things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace" (John 16:33); so here His first word to them in the "to-day" was peace; and this is the pledge that "Peace" will be His word to us at the beginning of the great "forever." "And when he had so said, he showed unto them his hands and his side" (John 20:20). This was, first, to assure the astonished disciples that it was really their Savior who stood before them. He bade them see with their own eyes that He had a real material body, that it was no ghost now appearing to them. He would have them recognize that He was indeed the same person whom they had known before the crucifixion, that He had risen in His incorruptible humanity. Significant is the omission here: Luke tells us that He said, "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see" (Luke 24:39). It was most appropriate that this word should be recorded in the third Gospel, which portrays Him as the Son of man; and it was most suitable to omit this detail in the Gospel which speaks of His Divine dignity and glory. Observe here, "He showed unto them his hands and his side." Luke says "his hands and his feet." This variation is also significant. Here His word in John would presuppose His "feet," for they, in common with His hands, bore me imprint of the nails. But there was a special reason for mentioning His "side" here—see John 19:34: through His pierced side a way was opened to His heart, the seat of the affections! In John we see Him as the Son of God, and God is love. "And when he had so said, he showed unto them his hands and his side." The "so" indicates there is a close connection between this act of Christ's and His words at the end of the preceding verse. The marks in His hands and side were shown to the disciples not only to establish His identity, not only as the trophies of His victorious fight, but principally to teach them, and us, that the basis of the "peace" He

has made, and which He gives, is His death upon the cross. In saying "Peace be unto you" He announced that enmity had been removed, God placated, reconciliation effected; in pointing to the signs of His crucifixion, He showed what had accomplished these. These marks are still upon His holy body—Revelation 5:6. These marks our great High Priest shows to God as He intercedes. In a coming day the sight of them will bring Israel to repentance—Zechariah 12:10. In the Day of Judgment they will confront and condemn His enemies. "Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord" (John 20:20). What must have been their feelings! Their fears all gone; their hopes fulfilled; their hearts satisfied. Now indeed had the Lord made good His promise: "And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your hearts shall rejoice" (John 16:22). But observe an important distinction here: First, Christ said, "Peace be unto you, and when he had so said, he showed unto them his hands and his side." Second: "Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord." Peace comes through His perfect work; joy is the result of being occupied with His blessed person. This is a precious secret for our hearts. There are many Christians who suppose that they cannot rejoice while they remain in circumstances of sorrow. What a mistake! Observe here that Christ did not change the circumstances of these disciples; they were still "shut in for fear of the Jews," but He drew out their hearts unto Himself, and thus raised them above their circumstances! We see the same principle exemplified in 1 Peter 1. There we read of saints of God enduring a great fight of afflictions: they were persecuted, scattered abroad, homeless. But what of their spiritual condition? This—"Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations." And then, having mentioned the person of the Savior, he at once adds, "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable" (verse 8). Their circumstances had not been changed, but their hearts were lifted above them. This then is the great secret of joy—occupation and fellowship with Christ. "Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21). This was no mere repetition. Just as the first "Peace be unto you" is interpreted by the Lord's act which at once followed, so this second "Peace" is explained by the next words. The first peace was for the conscience; the second for the heart. The first had to do with their position before God; the second with their condition in the world. The first was "peace with God" (Rom. 5:1); the second was "the peace of God" (Phil. 4:7). The first is the consequence of the atonement: the second is that which issues from communion. These disciples were not going to Heaven with Christ, but were to remain behind in a hostile world, in a world which provides no peace. He therefore communicates to them the secret of His peace, which was that of communion with the Father in separation from the world. "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." He now does formally what He contemplated in that wondrous address to the Father: "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world" (John 17:18). Let it be remembered that it was in immediate connection with this that He said "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word" (John 17:20). The mission He announced there was not peculiar to the company He then addressed: it defined the mission of all His people in that world which has rejected Him. And what a marvellous mission it is—to represent our Lord here below, as He represented the Father. What a wondrous dignity to show in our life and by our words how He would speak and walk. This is the standard of practical holiness—nothing lower, "He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked" (1 John 2:6). But how unspeakably blessed to observe that the Lord first said "Peace be unto you" before "I send you." We are constantly disposed to look for peace as the earned reward of service: what a travesty! and how worthless! Such "Peace" is but a transient self-complacency which cannot deceive any one but the self-deluded hypocrite. The truth is that peace is the preparation for service: "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). The order in John 20:21 is most significant: "Peace . . . send I you." "The sons of peace are not to retain it for

themselves; its possession makes them also messengers of peace" (Stier). Note the Son is a "Sender" in equal authority with the Father. "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." Christ was sent to manifest the Father, and with a message of grace to this sinful world; we are sent to manifest the Son, and with a similar message. Yet observe how carefully He guarded His glory; two different words are here used for "send"—Christ was God, we men; He came to atone, we to proclaim His atonement: He did his work perfectly, we very imperfectly! "And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). The first key to the Receive ye the Holy Spirit, lies in the "And when he had said this"—"even so send I you." Christ had entered upon His ministry as One anointed by the Holy Spirit, so should His beloved apostles. This was the final analogy pointed by the "as... so." The second key is found in the "He breathed on them and saith, Receive ye the Holy Spirit": the Greek word here used is employed nowhere else in the New Testament, but is the very one used by the Septuagint translators of Genesis 2:7: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." There, man's original creation was completed by this act of God; who, then, can fail to see that here in John 20, on the day of the Savior's resurrection, the new creation had begun, begun by the Head of the new creation, the last Adam acting as "a quickening spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45)! The impartation of the Holy Spirit to the disciples was the "firstfruits" of the resurrection, as well as a proof that the Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father—wonderful demonstration of the Savior's Godhead! In Genesis 2:7 we have Jehovah "breathing" into Adam; in John 20:22 the Savior "breathing" upon the apostles; in Ezekiel 37:9 the Spirit "breathing" upon Israel. Finally, it is solemn to contrast Isaiah 11:4: "With the breath of His lips shall he slay the wicked." "Receive ye the Holy Spirit." This was supplementary to "Go tell my brethren." They were, before this, born from above; but the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all. But the time appointed by the Father had now come. He who came to redeem them that were under the law, that they might receive the adoption of sons, had accomplished His undertaking. They were no more servants but sons; yet it was only by the Spirit of adoption that they could be made conscious of it or enter into the joy of it. From this moment the Spirit dwelt within them. We have been accustomed to look upon the change which is so apparent in apostles as dating from the day of pentecost, but the great change had occurred before then. Read the closing chapter of each Gospel and the first of Acts, and the proofs of this are conclusive. Their irresolution, their unbelief, their misapprehensions, were all gone. When the cloud finally received the Savior from their sight, instead of being dispersed in consternation "they worshipped him" and "returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:52)—this was "joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17): Moreover, they continued "with one accord in prayer and supplication" (Acts 1:14)—this was "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Peter has a clear understanding of Old Testament prophecy (Acts 1:20)—this was the Spirit guiding into the truth (John 16:13). And these things were before pentecost. What happened at pentecost was the baptism of power, not the coming of the Spirit to indwell them! "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:23). Upon this controverted verse we cannot do better than quote from the excellent remarks of the late Bishop Ryle: "In this verse our Lord continues and concludes the commission for the office of ministers, which He now gives to the Apostles after rising from the dead. His work as a public teacher was ended: the Apostles henceforth were to carry it on. The words which formed this commission are very peculiar and demand close attention. The meaning of these words, I believe, may be paraphrased thus: 'I confer on you the power of declaring and pronouncing authoritatively whose sins are forgiven, and whose sins are not forgiven. I bestow on you the office of pronouncing who are pardoned, and who are not, just as the Jewish high priest pronounced who were clean and who were unclean in cases of leprosy. I believe that nothing more than this authority to declare can be got out of the words, and

I entirely repudiate and reject the strange notion maintained by some that our Lord meant to depute to the Apostles, or any others, the power of absolutely pardoning or not pardoning, absolving, or not absolving, any one's soul.' "(a) The power of forgiving sins, in Scripture, is always spoken of as the special prerogative of God. The Jews themselves admitted this when they said, 'Who can forgive sins but God only?' (Mark 2:7). It is monstrous to suppose that our Lord meant to overthrow and alter this great principle when He commissioned His disciples. "(b) The language of the Old Testament shows conclusively that the Prophets were said to do certain things when they declared them to be done. Thus Jeremiah's commission runs in these words, 'I have this day set thee over the nation and over the kingdom, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant' (Jer. 1:10). This can only mean to declare the rooting out and pulling down, etc. So also Ezekiel says I came to destroy the city' (Ezek. 43:3). "(c) There is not a single instance in the Acts or Epistles of an Apostle taking on himself to absolve, or pardon, any one. When Peter said to Cornelius. 'Whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins' (Acts 10:43), and when Paul said, Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins' (Acts 13:38), they pointed to Christ alone as the Remitter." So Calvin: "When Christ enjoins the apostles to forgive sins, He does not convey to them what is peculiar to Himself. It belongs to Him to forgive sins—He only enjoins them, in His name, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins." Add to these the fact that Peter and John were sent down to Samaria to inspect and authorize the work done through Philip (Acts 8:14), that Peter said to Simon Magus, "I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:23), and that Paul wrote "To whom ye forgive anything, I also: for if I forgave anything, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ" (2 Cor. 2:10), we have clear evidence of the unique authority and power of the apostles. The question has been asked, Was this ministerial office and commission conferred on the apostles by Christ transferred by them to others? Again we quote Bishop Ryle, "I answer, without hesitation, that in the strictest sense the commission of the apostles was not transmitted, but was confined to them and St. Paul. I challenge any one to deny that the Apostles possessed certain ministerial qualifications which were quite peculiar to them, and which they could not, and did not, transmit to others. (1) They had the gift of declaring the Gospel without error, and with infallible accuracy, to an extent that no one after them did. (2) They confirmed their teachings by miracles. (3) They had the power of discerning spirits. In the strictest sense there is no such thing as apostolic succession." In closing let us admire together the lovely typical picture which our passage contains. Here we have a wondrous portrayal of the essential features of Christianity: 1. Christ is known in a new way, no longer "after the flesh," but in spirit, on High. "Touch me not... ascended" (John 20:17). 2. Believers are given a new title—"brethren" (John 20:17). 3. Believers are told of a new position—Christ's position before the Father (John 20:17). 4. Believers occupy a new place—apart from the world (John 20:19). 5. Believers are assured of a new blessing—"peace" made and imparted (John 20:19, 21). 6. Believers are given a new privilege—the Lord Jesus in their midst (John 20:19). 7. Believers have a new joy—through a vision of the risen Lord (John 20:20). 8. Believers receive a new commission—sent into the world by the Son as He was sent by the Father (John 20:21). 9. Believers are a new creation—indicated by the "breathing" (John 20:22). 10. Believers have a new Indweller—even the Holy Spirit (John 20:22); How Divinely meet that all this was on the "first of the week—indication of a new beginning, i.e., Christianity supplanting Judaism!! The following questions are to aid the student on the closing section of John 20:— 1. What does the absence of Thomas teach us, verse 24? 2. What do his words in verse 25 prove? 3. What is the difference between the "Peace" of verse 26 and verses 19, 21? 4. Why the great similarity between verses 19 and 26? 5. What practical lesson does verse 28 teach? 6. What is the meaning of verse 29?

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