

John 20:19-29
Making Sense of the Message
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I want to begin by doing a little exercise with you. I'm going to put a verse up on the screen and I'd like for you to read it back to me. Ready?

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

Researchers at Cambridge University have confirmed that as long as the first letter is first and the last letter is last in a particular word, our minds know how to take the scrambled letters and make them say the right thing.

Jesus Christ does the same thing in our lives. He sees the beginning and he sees the ending of everything. It doesn't matter how jumbled up the stuff in the middle gets, when God looks at our history, it always makes sense. That's what Easter does. Easter is the final letter, the final word, the final note in the chord that brings resolution to our lives.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

The disciples knew the beginning of Jesus' story; they knew the boy born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, the carpenter who came from that nowhere town, Nazareth. They knew and believed Jesus was the Son of God, the Word made flesh who was in the beginning. But the cross really threw them for a loop. Here they are, gathered together behind locked doors for fear that they might suffer as Jesus did.

The same thing that causes fear in us, fear of the unknown, causing them to forget Jesus' words. Words like: **the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.** Words like **Greater love has no other than that someone lay down his life for his friends.** Words like **now I am going to him who sent me... it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.**

This happens to us when we face loss of control in our lives, our minds go into self-preservation mode.

When I was a senior in college, I had the opportunity for my PE credit to take a Scuba diving class. It was an exhilarating time, as we learned the basic skills of Scuba from the safety of the college swimming pool—what bad could come at 10 feet? When it came time for the final however, we would not be diving in the pool; our examination would take place at nearly 30 feet down, in an open water environment.

The final skill I had to demonstrate to pass the exam was removing my mask and O² regulator from my mouth, then return them safely to my face, clearing the water from them when I was done. When I went to clear the water instead of blowing out, which would be the obvious good decision, I inhaled, sucking all that water into my nose, and rendering me panic stricken. In that moment, I was so terrified, being so far below the surface that I forgot what my instructor had said to us prior, that if we were ever without our regulator, there was a backup attached to our tank. That lesson could not have been further from my mind. In that moment of panic, I did the worst thing you could do. I reached for the regulator of my instructor before me, the only one who could help me in that situation.

Author Malcolm Gladwell, in a fascinating article from the New Yorker in 2000, describes the difference between panic and choking. He says that in moments of extreme panic, it is not as if our brains go into over thinking mode, rather they stop thinking all together, forgetting all that we know, and we simply act on instinct—our instinct for survival.

The disciples don't know what to do. They're in between the beginning and the end, and somehow everything has become jumbled and confusing. But we know this too, we know that confusing, disorienting, head scratching events take place in our lives: We lose a bunch of money. Or cancer takes root in our body. Or we miss an important flight because traffic is backed up on the interstate for some dumb reason.

A child we weren't expecting is born into the family. Or the child we *were* expecting doesn't arrive. Or we wrestle, year after year, with addiction. Or the meaningless devastation left behind by a drunk driver.

We all know what this house looks like, we all know what isolation and self-preservation feels like. It feels like the words that define our lives, words like safety, forgiveness, love,

embrace are all jumbled up and confused, and hiding is the only way we know how to cope. It feels like we're out of control.

But then Jesus walks in. Peace be with you. Peace with you. Peace. Jesus – who John describes as the Word who was in the beginning, the Word who was with God at the formation of the cosmos, the Word who speaks, and even sings our lives and existence into being, the Word who gives purpose to our lives – steps into their midst and brings the last letter, brings resolution to their situation. Jesus steps in and makes sense of the jumbled words in their lives.

But why now? Why weren't the disciples able to understand it before? For the same reason that I can't go out there and win the Masters Golf Tournament just because I watched it on television. I don't know what it's really like until I'm actually in the game. Jesus' message only finally makes sense when the disciples are actually living the fear, the uncertainty, and finally, the freedom.

Do you notice what Jesus says to them? **As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.**

Jesus was God's incarnate Son—*In-car-nate*—in the flesh. Jesus was God's love in the flesh. God didn't love his people generally or hypothetically or philosophically. God loves by acting, by sending. Receive the Holy Spirit and forgive sins. Jesus doesn't come to huddle and cuddle with them. Just like Jesus didn't stay in his tomb very long, he's not going to stay in the disciples' fear and uncertainty very long either. He just doesn't have time for it, so neither should we.

And what's the best antidote for fear and doubt? Action. What does Jesus do? He gives them a mission: "forgive sin." So not only does God love by sending, he reveals by sending: "The way I am going to reveal to you what living into new life is all about is by filling you with my power to go and give it to other people. When you see others receiving new life, then you'll come to understand it in your own life. It's going to be scary. You may not know exactly what to do, but that's why I am giving you the Holy Spirit to equip you. When you see lives transformed by forgiveness and love, then you will come to understand God's recreation at work in you."

You're going to know the beginning and you're going to know how it all ends. And because you do, the Holy Spirit will help you make sense of all the jumbled events in between. Are you still in an upper room situation in your own life? Have you allowed fear and doubt to replace faith and action? Take heart, for the Savior is at hand, ready to embrace and send. Ready to turn your bad into good. Amen.