

## Freedom at Last John 20:19-23

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke those infamous words, “free at last, free at last, thank God, Almighty, we’re free at last.” The word “freedom” indicates that judgment has been fulfilled and peace has finally arrived. In the secular world freedom is often associated with the end of oppressive circumstances such as enslavement, imprisonment, a dictating governing authority or anything we believe negatively controls us. A biblical interpretation of freedom also includes a spiritual freedom from fears, anxieties, and mistakes. In both cultures, freedom is partnered with peace of heart, mind, and soul. This peace is often described as comfort, security, and confidence to move forward with excitement about what is yet to be unveiled.

Today, we come to celebrate a day of freedom, not only for a selected group of people, but for all who choose to believe the truth about Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension. As we continue our travels with the Gospel of John, we are presented with a special message of peace that empowers us with hope, confidence, and the opportunity for a fresh start. Before we continue with John’s story, we first need to understand the people to whom John is writing. By the time John puts pen to paper,

many Christians have been martyred for their beliefs and proclamations of Jesus as the Messiah. Even though many of the eyewitnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection have long since died, the danger of what it meant to claim to be a Christian was still prevalent in many communities. John's community was struggling, not only with whether they wanted to continue telling the story, but also with the accuracy of these stories. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? What was the truth? As we study John's account of what happened after Jesus died, we know without a doubt that Jesus continues to live today!

As the story unfolds, Peter and the beloved disciple are summoned to the empty tomb by Mary. They enter the tomb confused and frightened. John informs us that they both leave, but only the beloved disciple sees and believes; Peter simply leaves. While we are not privy to what these men saw in the tomb, we do know later in the evening they, along with the other disciples (except Thomas), return to the upper room. Their fears drive them to seclusion behind a door locked from the inside. They need a private place to ponder what they are to do since Jesus has been crucified and now his body is missing. Their greatest fear was that the Jews would accuse them of stealing Jesus' body. Thievery of any kind would require

the sentence of crucifixion, what would the punishment be for someone who stole Jesus' body? They would surely be beaten within an inch of their lives, and subsequently, hung on the hill of Golgotha.

Suddenly, their fears are erased as they experience Mary's excitement when she comes to them saying, "I have seen the Lord!" Their freedom comes as Jesus appears before them saying, "Peace be with you!" Their eyes recognize Jesus while their hearts, minds, and souls see Jesus transformed into something greater than human matter. Jesus, possessed with a unique mystic spirit, arrears to the disciples without unlocking the door. Jesus identifies himself by showing them his hands and his side again saying, "Peace be with you! As the father has sent me, I am sending you." Jesus wastes no time sending them back out into the world. Jesus, understanding their fear of facing the Jews, invokes the power of the Holy Spirit to be upon them with one breath. This gift of the Holy Spirit clarifies for the disciples the awesome powers of God. Through the receiving of the Holy Spirit, the disciples find the freedom to leave their sequestered lives and rejoin the world.

According to John, there is more to Jesus' appearance that is to shed light on the lives of all Christians past, present, and future. The gift of

Jesus' peace also includes the gift of forgiveness. John quotes Jesus saying, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them they are not forgiven." When Christ died on the cross, his body was broken and his blood was poured out so the sins of the world would be forgiven. The peace of Christ comes with the forgiveness of our past and a fresh slate for the future where all our mistakes have been wiped clean.

Jesus and the writer of John want all Christians to know that the power of forgiveness lies within our own hearts. If we choose to forgive the event is over; there is nothing more to it. However, if we choose not to forgive we will carry this burden, this grudge, forever. The choice is truly ours. Jesus' return could have meant revenge for the Jews. Instead, Jesus focuses on sending the disciples out to tell the world, "HE IS ALIVE!!" In other words, the Sanhedrin's plan failed. Jesus lives forever. This is what Jesus meant by asking us to remember his broken body and his blood poured out for us every time we eat from this communion meal.

We come to the table with hearts ready to receive God's love, grace, and mercy; but we also come to the table with our hearts ready to extend that same grace and forgiveness to others in the world.

Christ's life, death, and resurrection are not meant to be kept locked up in our hearts, minds, and souls. Jesus brought peace to the disciples and then sent them back into the world. Today, as we prepare to receive this meal we will call upon God's Holy Spirit to be poured out upon us so we can be for the world Christ's body – wounded, scarred, and yet still alive!

As Christ sent the disciples into the world, today God sends us to proclaim, "Christ is alive!" Peace be with you on this journey as you become the body of Christ for the world offering hope, freedom, and forgiveness to others in the name of the risen Christ. Amen.