

MARCH 14, 2021

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”

BIBLE STUDY John 19

Stopping last week at the end of chapter 18 works out well as we head into 19. Jesus' experience before Pontius Pilate spans these two chapters, and so it seems better to handle it at once rather than piecing it out between two sessions.

While there are details in the exchange between Jesus and Pilate that might be intriguing, for our purposes I think it's more helpful to see the trial in the big picture. The whole of it highlights critical elements of Jesus' person, the connection between Pilate and the Jewish leadership, and John's theological purpose in how he writes the narrative.

The first thing to note is how the conversation escalates between the Jewish leadership and Pilate. Though it may seem like Pilate really wants to release Jesus, this doesn't match with the historical Pilate. Inflection as we read becomes important. A more faithful tone to questions like "what is truth?" and "are you the king of the Jews?" would be one of contempt or disdain. Remember, Pilate's reputation was cruelty. His presence in Jerusalem was to make sure the Jewish population ballooning there for the Passover wouldn't become disruptive. On top of that, here they came to his door early in the morning, rousing him with accusations and demands of a crucifixion.

In this spirit, coming in this fashion gives Pilate more control over how this will go than otherwise. Desperation and emotional elevation don't serve to enhance our reasoning. As such, the Jewish leaders present themselves much more vulnerable to manipulation.

The jockeying back and forth is almost a game between the two parties. Pilate has the ability to repeatedly flex his authoritative muscles by refusing to give into their demands over and over again. The Jews remind him that in his role he has a responsibility to help them observe their customs and cultural laws, as was the case throughout the Roman Empire when a governor had authority over a region with a more indigenous culture. Both are looking for something. Both groups are looking for political advantage. Pilate wants to keep the peace to ensure his reputation, future, and authority. The Jewish leadership are looking to protect their own position, power, and reputation.

We know for the leadership that to be the ones who physically order the death, they risk the anger of the people. They've been plotting in secret and multiple times John notes this is because of fear of those following Jesus. From a theological point of view, John notes that in order for Jesus' words to be fulfilled, stoning isn't the way he had to die. Over and over again the phrase "lifted up" is used surrounding how Jesus would die. Lifted up on the cross. Lifted up as the King of Kings whose identity would be fulfilled in the work of the cross.

As we watch it unfold, notice how things get more and more intense. It starts out with a general accusation. "If He hadn't done anything wrong would we be here?" Pilate questions Jesus and comes out with a refusal to punish. When asked about releasing a prisoner he offers Jesus, King of the Jews. As John notes earlier in the gospel, Jesus is also the Good Shepherd. The alternative is Barabbas, the bandit. Who comes to seek, destroy, and deceive in the story of the Good Shepherd? The bandit. In choosing Barabbas, the enemies of Jesus once again engage in denial of Jesus by selecting the bandit over the Good Shepherd.

Then comes the mockery. In robing Jesus and making light of Him, Pilate both demonstrates a dismissal of Jesus' authority, and should anyone be imparting a kingly title to Jesus demonstrates just how "helpless" their king is.

Jesus is led out again with Pilate "wanting" to release Him. Now the response is a fevered "Crucify!!!" Then they add that Jesus claims to be the Son of God. For the Jews this is blasphemy, for Pilate this is treason. In fact, to claim to be the Son of God is an insult to Caesar. In Rome, Caesar and Caesar alone bears this title. Claims of divinity or kingship are perceived as a threat and punishable by death.

As Pilate continues to toy with the Jewish leaders, refusing to release Jesus, they become more incensed, accusing Pilate of being "no friend of Caesar's". The final straw is what becomes most significant and lends itself to seeing this back and forth less as Pilate's compassion and more as a grand manipulation of the Jewish leadership. He says "here is your king." They say "we have no king but Caesar!"

It's no coincidence that it is here that Pilate turns Jesus over to be crucified. The way they make the statement, they have just denied their allegiance to God. This statement, made in a froth, puts Caesar above God. The ones accusing Jesus of blasphemy have just themselves committed blasphemy. Pilate has also received what he wanted from them. The ones charged with keeping the masses in check have just sworn allegiance to Rome in a bold statement to which he can hold them to account.

The Jewish leaders have also received what they wanted, the death of Jesus which they don't have to execute. This is in keeping with their secrecy through the gospel, and likely why John paints the scene a bit differently than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There are no crowds here, just the leadership and Jesus.

While Pilate and the leadership are jockeying and playing on one another's ambitions and emotions, John shows Jesus to be very different, and this carries throughout the crucifixion. The trials and Jesus' death are relatively brief in John's gospel. Through the entirety Jesus remains calm and collected. His answers before Pilate are relatively brief and to the point. He displays resolve and poise. John throughout his gospel has one constant, that Jesus is the incarnate, divine Son of God. Leaving out some of the "grier" details that may highlight Jesus' humanity isn't by accident. The theology of John is central to His divinity, and this isn't lost even at the end of Jesus life.

Something else that is in keeping with John's constant use of double meanings is the scene where Jesus is robed and put up as a "pretend king." It's something that often happens on purpose or by accident even today. In mocking Him, at the same time they are actually affirming His true identity. They dress Him as a king. Though they refuse to recognize it, nevertheless they are dressing Him accordingly because He is the King. Placing Jesus on the judgment seat intended to show His powerlessness, at the same time places Him in his rightful place as judge above all. John tells the scene with irony showing both the ignorance of the players involved yet still nodding to us the genuine identity of Jesus.,

As we discussed this in study, a very good observation was made. Political pressure was at the root of both Pilate's and the Jewish leaders' unfair, dishonest, and harsh treatment of Jesus. This isn't a there and then issue. Even today we see political pressure get in the way of true justice and fair treatment. Standing up for those treated unjustly becomes significant to a life of faith if we understand that whatever we do to one in need we do to Jesus.

The crucifixion, death, and burial are all recorded in rapid succession. Once again, John treats these gruesome events with dignity, expressing more than the events, but a greater depth to their meaning. Jesus is composed. He has the presence of mind to pass care of His mother to another, to ask for a drink, and when He dies it is with a dignified bow of the head. No loud cry, but a simple "it is finished" acknowledges that the fullness of His mission is complete.

There is thought that this insertion of handing over the care of Jesus mother has dual significance. "Woman" is the term used for Mary in the only two instances she appears in the gospel. Knowing John's intentionality, this is no mistake. Her first appearance is at the very beginning of Jesus ministry, the miracle at Cana. Here she is again at the close of His ministry. Perhaps this is intended to throw our minds back to the beginning even at the end, and John is representing the fullness of Jesus' ministry and teaching.

Who is now responsible for caring for that teaching and mission to spread it to the world? The disciples. A nameless disciple may be John's way of referring to the whole of the group of followers. The care of Jesus ministry is passed to them, they claim it, and care for it for the remainder of their days. They then too pass it on and so on even until our present day where you and I are now responsible for caring for Jesus' story and teaching. It's our turn to keep the message not only being told, but being inspiring to invite others into the story as well.

The appearance of four women at the cross, as well as Joseph and Nicodemus caring for the body is also telling. The disciples of Jesus were not just the twelve. There were many. In fact here, at Jesus' most dire hour, where were the twelve? Scattered.

Who had the courage to stay with Him until the end? The women. The most unlikely of the group had the guts to stick it out with Jesus. Joseph and Nicodemus, both part of the Jewish leadership who were believing in secret, finally found their courage. As they lavishly take care of Jesus' body they've come out from the shadows in faith and show their deference and reverence by perfuming the body obscenely above and beyond what is required, laying Him in a brand new tomb.

The most unlikely people can, and often do, display some of the greatest growth and strength. For those of us who have been long in the faith, we do well to pay attention to them. It is humbling for us when we realize how much compromise has crept into our own hearts. It is a grand opportunity to invite people who might otherwise be overlooked into positions of ministry.

John highlights a few more items in the narrative.

First, John uses more scripture in the other gospels during the crucifixion scene. Once again, affirming Jesus identity and driving home the solemnity of the occasion, he cites scripture as the prophetic confirmation that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. The details listed were common occurrences at a crucifixion, breaking legs and taking clothing. What did, and did, not happen John points to as being foretold. Rather than a picture painted as gruesome, it is painted as a grand fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.

The sign on the cross is one final slap in the face of the Jewish leaders by Pilate. It's written in the three main languages spoken in that area so everyone could read it. Seeing it boldly displayed is a concern to the leadership that it would mean somehow Jesus claims even in death have been acknowledged and might cause trouble within the Jewish people. On the other hand from Pilate's perspective, it is a message to anyone who believed in Jesus or might aspire to themselves attain a "kingly" status that no matter how powerful you might claim to be, in Rome, you'll end up on a cross as well.

This sign was not uncommon by the way. Often the charge against the crucified was displayed as a deterrent. It's of little use to tamp down criminal attitudes if no one knows what's been punished. Here John adds meaning to it by showing how it's used to thumb the nose of Roman authority at the Jewish people, demonstrate the continued anxiety of the Jewish leadership, and at the same time for us once again ironically use a mocking label to accurately label Jesus. Not just the King of the Jews, but for us the King of Kings.

Finally, it's worth noting the thoroughness of John's details. Those reading this gospel are decades after the event. There are always detractors looking for reasons to disbelieve. Knowing this, John includes some details to ensure that he addresses this possibility.

The one gory detail is the piercing of the side. It's well noted that piercing the side in the right place would cause both blood and some clear fluid to come out. What the piercing does in a larger sense is affirm that Jesus is, in fact, dead. The speculation that perhaps He wasn't "really" dead, and so the resurrection wasn't an actual resurrection is debunked.

The new tomb is also relevant. Tombs then were often family tombs. Many bodies would be in one tomb. That it was unused and empty also debunks the question of "if someone walked out, was it really Jesus?" It also affirms the resurrection as if there was no one in it before, someone was put in it, and now it's empty, the missing person must be Jesus and Jesus alone.

As you know, I often strive to see the practical application of what we read in scripture. Here, however, I see this portion of John's gospel as far more theological, conveying it through the telling of the events of the trial and crucifixion. We see the misunderstanding of Jesus true identity by both Roman and Jew alike, and yet John uses that misunderstanding to affirm for us Jesus' true identity. Jesus' divinity is highlighted in calm dignity throughout and by using prophetic scripture to affirm it. He takes care to once again demonstrate our responsibility to carry on the gospel. Finally, John prepares us for the authenticity and truth of the resurrection by incorporating details to cast aside any doubt.

SERMON: "The Golden Rule" Mark 12:28-31, Philippians 2:1-4

Every now and again when you think you know what your going to preach through the week, a shift happens somewhere and another theme comes into the picture. Sometimes you might stick with the initial plan, but others you change gears and go with the flow, even if it's happened later in the week. This morning since we're in the midst of a series that is very heavy on authenticity, I believe it would be hypocritical to not go with the flow. So what is in the bulletin for this week we'll tackle next week.

This week I've had conversations with quite a few people and there's suspicion that the stars are in weird alignment because it seems like a lot of folks have had a rough week. I myself have had a rough week. If you didn't, I congratulate you and caution at the same time that there will at some point be a rough week in your future.

Difficult weeks are draining. They are exhausting. Exhausting for all the reasons that make it tough, but as people of faith there's an additional effort that occurs. If we are trying to deal with whatever experiences and emotions pop up in a way that reflects Jesus, it means we have to do the work to find our way from giving into the baser side of our humanity, to find what the Holy Spirit would have us do. This takes time and energy. In my own experience I've come to understand that in difficult moments, when there are harder feelings that come up, it's important to do more than just own what is going on. The next step is to ask "why" I'm experiencing what I'm experiencing. If that can be sorted out, then comes the question of "what now?" What can be done to work through the moment and come out the other side?

As I was doing my own reflection, what I realized is that what was hitting me is rooted in these two commands of Jesus. Love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Contemplating this I was reminded that given Jesus' words to His disciples at the last supper, this is both two commands as well as one. The two I think are obvious, but according to Jesus we don't just love God and love our neighbor. We love God BY LOVING our neighbor. Paul gives us some additional tone to what that looks like by instructing us to put others before ourselves.

Over the last years it just seems that people have become harsher with one another. We lament this frequently. The mix of political divisiveness and isolation through the pandemic has led to a breakdown in ability to tolerate differing views. I believe this is often the result of consuming more information and media that is conveniently in agreement with the individual and having less interaction with those who tend to stretch us and temper us when we begin to go too far.

The result is this command gets treated more like a suggestion. Or changed to love my neighbors who are like me. Love can become less our default attitude towards the world and more a commodity that is dispensed stingily at our convenience.

In a reactive culture, love can become merely one of any number of responses to a situation.

What we have to remember is that there is a benefit to having something laid out for us as a directive. Jesus doesn't give us a qualifier for who we should and should not love. The story of the Good Samaritan makes this abundantly clear. Why did the Samaritan help the man on the road? Because the man was in need. I would offer that the Samaritan had already set his compass that day that he would meet every circumstance with love. We can do the same.

Rather than love being a reaction, it becomes THE guiding force in who we are and how we handle whatever life throws at us. The decision is made before any other decision comes our way. With each moment, how do I meet it in a way that is the most loving.

Now, this is not easy. It's been noted in Bible study that this idea of loving our neighbor is good, and correct, but it's not easy to love a mean neighbor. Or an aggravating neighbor or destructive neighbor. Nevertheless, that is what we are called to do and who we are called to be.

As we admit that it can be hard to put into practice, it may also be helpful to at least name something else that gets in the way of following this command. It involves the tail end of the second one. "As yourself." The culture of division that gets in the way of this kind of unconditional love, also affects this sense of self. And that's the way this command reads love as we love ourselves.

Of course this isn't providing a loophole that if I'm having trouble with how I feel about myself I can then take it out on others. It is, however, nodding to a reality that we can't give what we don't have. If I've got issues in my heart with myself, it makes it infinitely more difficult to love someone else the way they deserve to be loved.

This culture of division creates tension and anger. It's been heartbreaking through this last year seeing so many people that on the outside seem very put together and collected, yet on the inside are seething and all it takes is one wrong comment to set off an explosion. There are even churches where on more than a few Sundays the message of the gospel has been replaced with angry political rhetoric. Why does this matter though?

Well, I don't know anyone who likes to be angry and tense most of the time. We innately know that when tension, stress, anger, frustration and so on are running through us most of the time, the person in the mirror then is not our best self. There's something inside that we don't like, and without resolving it, we can have a hard time truly loving ourselves. Be extension is makes it harder to truly love others.

So what now? Part of the problem in the world is that people have forgotten these two basic commands. What can I do about it? How can I handle my own darker moments and make more Christlike decisions?

I have three suggestions.

Remember that the impact of our love is both like a spear that pierces immediately and we see immediate results. It is also cumulative. In other words there are times when what we do doesn't have an immediate effect. Yet if we don't lose heart and keep loving over time that consistency and constancy will make a mark on the individual person or circumstance.

Sometimes we get frustrated or discouraged if we don't see results on our timetable. Maybe God's timetable looks different. Maybe if we can learn to hang in there a little longer we'll see the fruit of that love.

Spend more time focusing on where we see God working and doing and less time on the things that are going wrong. And be grateful for what God is doing.

An example of what this may look like is something that every Sunday makes my heart smile. Every Sunday when I look at the comments on the live stream and see greetings to one another this screams to loving God and neighbor.

If you're watching at home right now among the reasons I know are two ends of a spectrum. Some of you are sacrificing your presence because your health is such that it still doesn't feel quite safe. Yet here you are, still supporting your congregation, our ministry together, and connecting how you can until you do feel safe. It's a sacrifice. It's love. On the other hand some of you have difficulty tolerating a mask particularly for an hour straight. Yet here you are with us. Still supporting your congregation, our ministry together, and connecting how you can.

We've acknowledged repeatedly how difficult this past year has been. Yet together we have continued in ministry. Everyone has made sacrifices and so many of us have continued to stay in touch in favor of our mutual end goal. To get back together and continue reaching our community for Christ.

We do it by looking out for one another. Preferring others before ourselves. Loving God by loving our neighbor.

You often hear me encourage us to do this kind of thing to look at others through God's eyes. Today I'm asking us to turn this inward. When we hit those times when we're being hard on ourselves, take a break and look at ourselves through God's eyes.

I believe that God has sufficient grace for everyone else, God has that same grace for me. If God has sacrificed on the cross for everyone else, God has done it for me. If God sees something in everyone worth saving and redeeming, God sees it in me as well. If I can accept that God loves you, I can accept that God loves me. Accepting this is incredibly powerful to help us overcome and move on from those moments where we make mistakes and get down on ourselves. If God loves us, with God's help we can love ourselves humbly and honestly, and pass that love along.

This morning we celebrate one of the ultimate expressions of that love as we participate in communion, remembering the love poured out on the cross for our redemption.

BIBLE STUDY John 20

John 20 follows the same rapid sequence of events as John 19. We continue to see the focus on Jesus as divine, and John reinforces this at the very end of the chapter by quite literally stating the purpose of the gospel. The purpose is that the reader may come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, and to have life in His name. This has been the driving force, the constant theme from the opening verses of chapter 1.

Here we come to the familiar scene of the empty tomb. John paints the picture quite differently than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The details are different as is the dialogue. As a result, we continually need to remember that John is intentionally telling theology along with events. Indeed he uses the placement of the events, the people in the story, the pace, and the dialogue to give a theological picture sometimes over and above a historical one. Everything, as has been stated, comes to the same focal point. Jesus is who He says He is.

At the tomb, Mary and Mary alone arrives to find it empty. We'll focus on her first as John is intentional about telling her story separate from that of the disciples. As at the cross, who is the first to visit? Perhaps even who is given the position of honor in the moment? Mary, the woman. We see as well that Mary is the first to report the resurrection, not the other disciples. John reminds us that strength of faith isn't relegated to the men, nor to the central twelve disciples.

Mary is crying outside the tomb when she sees the angels. The angels in John's telling have a tiny, minor role. They ask one question. "Why are you crying?" No announcement of the resurrection. Just acknowledging her grief. Jesus shows up and asks the same question. She doesn't recognize Him.

This is a question consistently. How could she not recognize Him? She knew Him, she clearly loved Him, how could she not know Him? As we've seen in John regularly, there are two answers to this question.

The first answer is logical and we've all experienced it. Most of us have had the experience of knowing someone in a very specific context. A teacher, a doctor, a coach all have a "uniform" we're accustomed to and a surrounding. We run into them outside of that context, and we scratch our head. "I know this person from somewhere, but who is it?" Sometimes someone has moved far away years ago. We see a car driving down the street with a driver who looks just like that individual. Even if it is that person, we dismiss it because in our mind they are no longer here, they are there.

Maybe even more poignant, in this case because He was presumed dead, she just wasn't looking for Him. How often does this happen to us? God is giving us an answer to prayer, or a blessing waiting for us and we miss it entirely. We miss it not because of its absence, but simply because we aren't actually looking for what we think we want.

The other answer is theological. When does Mary "see" Him? When He speaks. He says her name and she recognizes Jesus. John is the one who focuses in well on the Good Shepherd. How do we know we are one of His sheep? The sheep know His voice and follow Him. Mary is clearly defined as one of Jesus' sheep.

In a brief exchange Jesus does something in John we don't see in the other gospels. He connects very directly the resurrection and the ascension. The fullness of Jesus exaltation hasn't occurred yet. Everything will take its turn when this happens and it doesn't happen until He returns to the Father.

"Don't hold onto me". Maybe this is a physical request for her to take a physical step back. More importantly Jesus is asking her to allow Him to do what He must, which is leave. "Don't try to keep me here, I have to go."

This makes perfect sense. Jesus earlier on has told the disciples He will "prepare a place" for them and that the Holy Spirit would be sent once He's returned to the Father. These things can't happen if Jesus remains.

He also reaffirms the gift of intimacy with God. "My Father and yours", "My God and yours". Jesus followers have a share in that nearness and access to God just as He does.

In this same scene, we see two disciples, Peter and the one Jesus loved. Peter is the disciple that really represents the fullness of the human experience following Christ. He has been courageous and afraid, impetuous and passionate, dead on correct and grossly mistaken, a pillar of faith and unfortunate in compromise. The nameless disciple has only one identifying mark through John. He is beloved. He is intimate with Jesus. He is also the one who begins to "get it" with the empty tomb. John tells us that he, like Peter, doesn't fully grasp the resurrection. Still he has an inkling that Jesus has somehow, in some way, conquered the grave.

One of the gifts of this disciple being unnamed is that it can be understood through the ages as any disciple. While of course Jesus loves very disciple, intimacy and proximity to Jesus is often determined by our individual willingness to believe, surrender, and make the choices that close the gap between us.

The linens being left behind are also telling. Once again we see a dual purpose in the detail. This detail foils and sense that the body was stolen, a not uncommon suggestion. Grave robbers wouldn't undress the body before taking it. Theft is sneaky and swift. They would leave it wrapped to make away with it fast.

We also see John reminding us of Jesus words that if He lays down His life He can take it up again. While we've taken 9 weeks to cover the last 9 chapters, keep in mind that these chapters cover the span of just a little over a week of real time. Meaning that just over a week ago Lazarus was raised from the dead. When he emerges from the tomb, he is still wrapped in his linens. I'd imagine he was quite confused at his condition, understandably so. Part of the confusion is that the resurrection was unexpected, and performed by someone else.

Jesus on the other hand leaves the linens behind. Why the presence of mind? Why the indication that he's gone from the tomb? Because it wasn't a shock to Jesus. He was responsible for His return.

After the scene at the tomb, we get two scenes with the disciples that are parallel. Jesus pops into a locked room unexpected. The first scene is with a group of disciples and the group is the focus. "Peace be with you!" which is a kind of "what's up dudes?" Imagine the shock and terror they must have experienced. Likely they didn't believe Mary when she told them He was back. How did He get in here? Is this a ghost? Is this really Him? Are we seeing this or dreaming it?

Jesus eases their fear and anxiety by showing them His wounds. After the shock is gone, he uses the same greeting offering peace, but as a comfort and jumps directly to John's equivalent of a Great Commission. His mission passes from Himself to them. God sent Him into the world to minister a message of love and redemption, now it's their turn to carry the torch.

Then we have an odd moment where Jesus "breathes" on them. To be honest, on the surface the image is a bit creepy. I picture something like blowing out birthday candles where the disciples are the candles. But it's much deeper than that. The word "breathe" is the same is the term used in the Old Testament where God breathes life into the body He'd fashioned. There is a life and a holiness indicated here.

What seems out of place is that Jesus says "receive the Holy Spirit". What? I thought this was something that happened later at Pentecost. Now John has it here? What gives?

There are a few explanations I've read in preparation for the study on this chapter. First, however, I point out again that John is compacting the telling of the story and in so doing communicating direct theology. Jesus in two verses commissions and equips the disciples. The theology here? Whomever Jesus sends, Jesus will equip.

Now to the possible explanations that may explain it aside from simply allowing that the style, tone, and context of John's writing are communicating beyond the simple reporting of events.

This was a "closed" gathering. Perhaps this experience was limited to just this group and the broader experience occurred at Pentecost.

The Spirit was given, but the full manifestation of the gifts wasn't granted until Pentecost as it was then that they spoke in tongues and began working their own miracles in earnest.

Rather than being offered in the moment, this was spoken as a command to remind them to pay attention and look for the coming of the Spirit that was promised. This was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.

This interaction with the disciples concludes with a verse about granting the disciples power to forgive and withhold forgiveness that is often misinterpreted. The bottom line of this verse implies that the disciples now hold the power of judgment to redeem or condemn. This doesn't jive with the sense that God and God alone hold this power. So how does it sort out?

It sorts out by connecting it to the context of Jesus sending them to minister and John's understanding of "sin". Throughout the entire gospel, John's use of the word "sin" doesn't apply to our general understanding of the term. We understand sin as being connected to moral failing. John uses it time and again referring to the groups of people who refuse to believe Jesus when He offers them His identity. Their sin is refusing to believe Him. This is a foundational issue from which all other sin springs.

The job of the disciples is to persuade people to believe that Jesus is who He says He is. They are to persuade people to faith in Christ. In their success, those who are persuaded are forgiven and those who are not are not. In other words "whom you disciple will be forgiven, whom you do not will not."

Then we get to poor Thomas. The "doubter" which we will see is a misnomer. He gets a bum rap for daring to make the statement about literally being able to physically feel and experience that Jesus' wounds are genuine for proof. But think about what has transpired to this point. In fact, Thomas is asking for nothing less than what the disciples as a group had already been given for evidence. Remember, a week earlier Jesus revealed His wounds to ease their fear and convince them as well.

Imagine you are Thomas. The others have told you they saw Jesus. He popped into the room and displayed His wounds. It's a fantastical story. Perfectly understandable would be an almost sarcastic "well that's a pretty tall tale, I'll believe it when I can put a finger in the nail holes and my hand in the spear slice". Keep also to mind that this statement was spoken to the disciples, not to Jesus.

Then the scene from a week earlier repeats itself for Thomas. Jesus pops into a locked room. Offers the same greeting. Then He offers the same evidence He offered to the others but with the twist the Thomas spoke to the disciples(not to Jesus).

Before addressing the "doubter" label, we should make one important point. This duplicated scene reveals a bigger point. Jesus ministered to both the group and the individual. He could have just appeared to the first gathering and let it to the rest to believe or not. Jesus isn't satisfied with this. He is just as concerned with the individual Thomas. In other words, the love of Christ is both corporate and individual. He is concerned with both the greater good of the collective and our own unique and individual circumstances.

The doubting misnomer results from a translational issue. The verse that often includes the word "doubt" is better understood as "don't be unbelieving, believe". This is reminiscent of when Jesus was asked to perform a healing and when asked if the man believed the man responded "I believe help my disbelief." Thomas is in a very normal situation for any human. Rather than an insult and a scold, Jesus responds to a real and understandable experience in Thomas and meets it by giving him what he needed to close the gap between belief and disbelief.

For me this is comforting. The notion that in Jesus final time on earth He would turn to scolding and a harsh tone never set well. In truth this isn't what happened at all. Jesus did what Jesus still does. When we are struggling, be it big or small, rather than scolding us and harshly telling us to "buck up" and crawl to Him, He steps towards us offering what we need for our faith to grow and come to greater fruition.

This tone then informs the next verse, also often misunderstood. "You've believed because you've seen. Blessed are those who have not seen and believe." I've heard this interpreted as a slam on Thomas, implying that somehow those who haven't seen and believed are a level above Thomas. Once again, if we know the heart of Christ and who He is, it makes no sense that He would take another pot shot at the disciple who literally just made the most bold and enthusiastic proclamation of who Jesus is. Honestly it doesn't make sense that Jesus would be pot shooting at all.

So how does this interpret more faithfully to the spirit of Christ? We go back to the commissioning He gave the disciples and look forward to the verses that follow. He sends them out to disciple the world, and in the verse that follows John affirms the mass body of signs Jesus performed in His ministry. Those who have seen and believed are blessed. The possible question at hand is "we've seen, had our own difficulties in believing, and came to believe, how can we expect those who haven't seen to believe?" Jesus' assurance here is "don't worry, people don't have to see to believe, they will."

Quickly John reinforces this as He iterates the purpose for his gospel. He writes so that those who have not seen might believe. And as we know throughout history, they have. In fact that is the story of all of us who believe today. We haven't seen as the disciples did yet still came to faith. There is wide thinking that this is the actual end of John's gospel. The last two verses read like a conclusion where we might expect to see "The End" following. We'll explore this as we know there is a chapter 21 next week.

Once again, I feel this isn't as practical as many of the other chapters we've studied previously. Yet the theology that is delivered like a fast ball down the middle is truly inspiring. Jesus is risen. The body of believers is wide and often the unexpected are strong in faith and witness. He hasn't left us high and dry once He has been exalted, but rather calls us all to great ministry and purpose, and has equipped us through the Spirit to persuade the world to faith. Even in our fear and doubt, Jesus reaches out to meet, calm, and empower us. And not just as a greater group, but down to each of us individually. And finally, we have the gift of the gospel writers not just to tell the story, but to inspire us to life changing faith in the only Son of God.

Lent

A SEASON OF PREPARATION

- Wed, Mar 17 – BLOOD DRIVE @ Marion Fire Hall
Our turn!
Volunteers needed! (no food, this time)
- Sun, Mar 28 – Palm Sunday
- Sun, Apr 4 – Easter Sunrise Service
- Sat, Apr 10 – Stitch 1, Pray 2 8:30am

Calendar



Stitch 1 Pray 2
Second Saturdays
8:30am

giving

Offering	\$3,674
Improvement	\$122
Building Fund	\$20
Missions	\$97
Received	\$37,047
Needed	\$40,670

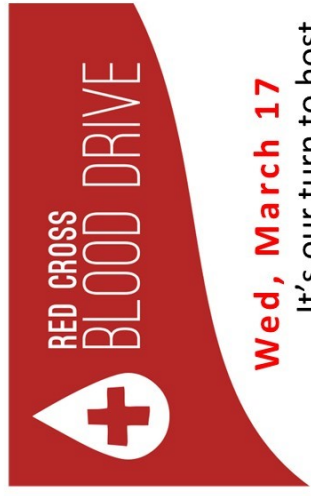
Thank You

Special Offering
Weekly Focus

The Council has expanded the "Special Offering" calendar.


- 1st Sundays: Improvement Fund
- 2nd Sundays: Building Fund
- 4th Sundays: Missions

On these Sundays, the Sunday School offering will go toward these collections, and folks are encouraged to make a special donation to these ongoing needs using the envelopes



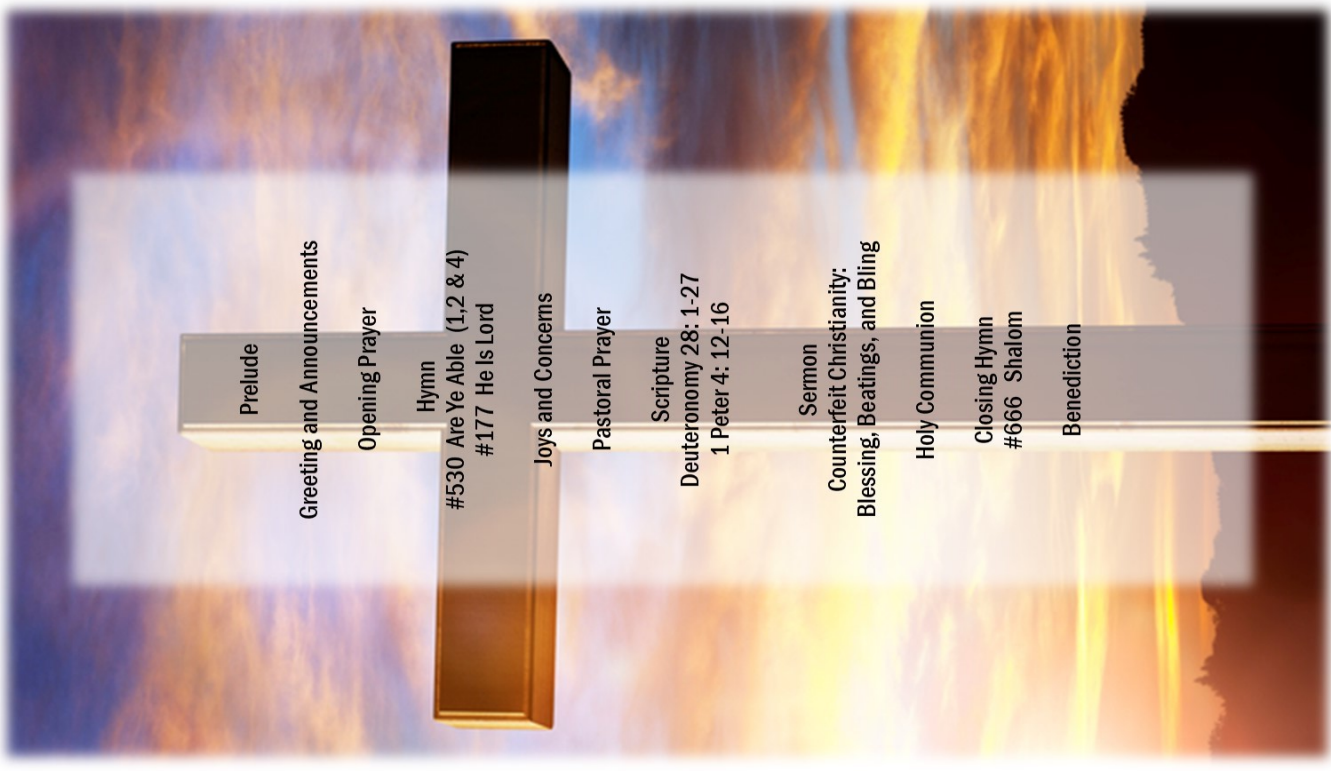
RED CROSS BLOOD DRIVE

Wed, March 17
It's our turn to host.
Volunteers are needed!



sermon series
Pastor Brent Stouffer
Counterfeit Christianity
EXAM
Marion First United Methodist Church

9:30 service



Prelude
Greeting and Announcements
Opening Prayer
Hymn
#530 Are Ye Able (1,2 & 4)
#177 He Is Lord
Joys and Concerns
Pastoral Prayer
Scripture
Deuteronomy 28: 1-27
1 Peter 4: 12-16
Sermon
Counterfeit Christianity:
Blessing, Beatings, and Bling
Holy Communion
Closing Hymn
#666 Shalom
Benediction