John 20:19-23 — An Exegesis

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Those who bear the responsibility of preparing men for the ministry of the Word of God have a steady concern for emphasizing and demonstrating the dynamic movement from the Word written to the Word proclaimed. This movement, which has its roots in exegesis, or interpretation, and finds its fulfillment in preaching, experienced such a renaissance at the time of the Reformation that it may be described as one part of our Reformed heritage. It was perfectly natural, for example, that John Calvin, a prolific author of commentaries on books of both Testaments, was also a prodigious preacher whose extant sermons number in the thousands. To this day, preparation for biblical exegesis and biblical preaching remain an integral part of the curriculum in seminaries of the Reformed faith. Although exegesis and preaching are always united in the person of the minister of the word, there is a division of labor at the point of instruction. The occasion of the installation of a professor of biblical languages and literature and a professor of preaching offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate our mutual concern for both parts of this single organic movement. That movement originates in a selected pericope, or scripture portion, and moves from the determination of the ancient text itself through a process of exegesis and exposition to an application of this Word of God to the world of today.

With the editors of Interpretation, who are currently publishing similar articles authored by one man, we agree that “not many dare or care to take a text and say, ‘This is a way from this text to proclamation’ let alone the way.” Like them, the makers of this presentation will be satisfied if this attempt stimulates “discussion and reflection about the crucial process in which most ministers are involved at least once a week.”¹ The Scripture portion selected for our study is John 20:19-23. It has been chosen because it is of great theological significance. Within the brief compass of five verses, John records the momentous transition from the earthly ministry of Jesus to his continuing ministry in the life of the church.

The exegete, or interpreter of Scripture, is first of all a listener. His encounter with the Word comes via words. This means that his initial task is to determine to the best of his ability the most reliable version of the original text of the passage. An examination of the text of our pericope discloses that it has been transmitted with little variation. The only major variant reading appears at verse 23. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Many manuscripts give the verb “they are forgiven” in the present tense,

¹Interpretation, “Editorial,” XX (1966), 229.
while other authorities give the perfect tense. Joachim Jeremias is one of the few scholars who accepts the reading of the present tense, but he proceeds to interpret it as a futuristic present. In this way the verse is made to say that those to whom the church promises forgiveness God will forgive at the last day. The reading with the perfect tense, however, is to be preferred. It is better attested, is the natural parallel with the undisputed perfect tense of the verb "they are retained" in the second half of the verse, and is in theological harmony with the teaching of the New Testament that the forgiveness of sins is not a future event, but a present reality based upon the past action of God in Jesus Christ. If I John is the work of the writer of the gospel, support for this interpretation is given at chapter two, verse twelve, where the perfect tense of the verb is in keeping with the assurance, "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake."

An adequate understanding of this pericope also involves attention to its context or setting in the Fourth Gospel. Although the gospel contains twenty-one chapters, the contents of the second half of chapter twenty indicate that as first planned the book ended at 20:31. In our pericope the church is commissioned and receives the promised Holy Spirit. These events are followed by the appearance to Thomas, who makes what C. K. Barrett describes as "the culminating confession of the gospel, My Lord and my God." This is obviously the climax of John's original design and is followed immediately by the summary statement of his plan and purpose: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (30, 31). It is difficult to regard any material coming after this conclusion as anything other than an epilogue or appendix added for a subsequent purpose. For this reason, our verses are not to be viewed as being simply one of several paragraphs in the next to the last chapter of the gospel, but rather as a part of the climax of the Gospel according to John. This context fosters an expectation of weighty theological statements which is not disappointed, for the pericope focuses upon the risen Lord as he commissions and equips his church for its mission in the world. C. H. Dodd has subjected the resurrection appearances of Jesus to the method of form criticism with results which further enhance the significance of our pericope. Dodd's analysis of Matthew 28:8-10, Matthew 28:16-20, and John 20:19-21 not only reveals a common pattern in content (A. The Situation: Christ's followers bereft of their Lord; B. The appearance of the Lord; C. The greeting; D. The recognition; E. The word of command), but also a spare, concise form, offering nothing but essentials, which suggests that these appearances belong to "a deposit which was deeply cherished and constantly repeated because it was

bound up with the central interests of the Christian community." Furthermore, Dodd concludes that the similarity in form of these resurrection appearances, with similar concise narratives which occur in other parts of the gospels, means that the appearances "merit the same degree of critical consideration, not only in their aspect as witnesses to the faith of the early Church, but also as ostensible records of things that happened."

Turning to the verbal content of the verses, it is apparent that the first part of verse nineteen sets the stage for the appearance of Jesus. The fullness of the Greek construction, *ouses oun opsias te hemera ekeine te mia sabbaton*, "Therefore, when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week," is unusually full, suggesting emphasis and the paraphrase, "On that day, that never-to-be-forgotten first day of the week." The *te mia sabbaton* refers back to the *te mia ton sabbaton* of chapter twenty, verse one, and thereby establishes the time of this appearance as the evening of Easter day. John further notes that the disciples were behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews. This detail, which is peculiar to the Fourth Gospel, is perfectly understandable when accepted at face value. The atmosphere in Jerusalem was still charged with danger and uncertainty and it was too early for the disciples to know how they were to fare at the hands of those who had crucified their Master. Self-preservation would instinctively demand locked doors. This simple explanation of why the doors were locked, however, leaves unanswered the deeper question of why John thought this detail worth recording. A two-fold answer may be offered. First, this detail may be John's way of indicating the nature of the resurrection body. Just as the later demonstration of the wounds (v. 20) establishes the fact that Jesus' body was identifiable, so does his ability to appear to the disciples in spite of locked doors emphasize the fact that the body of the risen Lord has undergone a change suggestive of the "spiritual body" of I Corinthians 15. There is, then no radical discontinuity between the Jesus of history and the kerygmatic Christ. The church looks backward to the Jesus of history whose wounds recall the crucifixion, but it goes forward in the service of the risen Lord. Second, this detail may be intended to set up a contrast with the commissioning depicted in verse twenty-one. Without the Lord the disciples were preoccupied with guarding against an invasion from the world. With his living presence among them, their efforts were shifted to an invasion of the world.

The two circumstantial constructions, "when it was evening" (*ouses opsias*) and "the doors being locked" (*ton thuron kekleismenon*) lead to the main verb whose subject is both at the center of this verse and at the center of the entire pericope. Jesus is the one who acts and speaks throughout. It is he who *came and stood* and *says* (v. 19) and *showed* (v. 20) and *sends* (v. 21) and *breathes* and *says* (v. 22). And who or what is the object of his words and actions? In view of the significance of what transpires in these verses, it is of the utmost interest

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5Ibid, p. 35.
that question cannot be answered with certainty. John mentions only “the disciples” (v. 19) as being present. Does this mean specifically the ten (that is, the Twelve, without Judas and Thomas), or were others included? John’s use of mathetai (disciples) cannot settle the issue because it is often impossible to determine whether this term refers to the inner or outer circle of Jesus’ followers. If the description of Thomas as “one of the twelve” (v. 24) argues for the inner circle, the fact that the closest synoptic parallel to this passage (Luke 24:36 ff.) describes the group to which Jesus appeared on Easter evening as “the eleven and those with them” (v. 33) argues for the larger group. John’s infrequent use of the term twelve (dodeka) indicates that he had little interest in the number as such. The fact that preciseness is lacking on so crucial an occasion as the first reunion of the Lord with his disciples after the resurrection, the bestowal on them of the Holy Spirit, and their commissioning, lends support to the position of Hoskyns and Davey: “The controversy whether the commission is given to the Church as a whole or to the apostles is irrelevant. There is no distinction here between the Church and the ministry; both completely overlap. The evangelist records the birth of the Church as the organism of the spirit of God, and the origin of the authority of the ministry. Both are inaugurated together. There are as yet no converts—no fish and no lambs. The Christian community was, at its inception, a community of Apostles.”

The first words addressed to the assembly, (eirene humin) “Peace be with you,” constitute the conventional Semitic greeting, shalom lachem, in Greek dress. What are we to understand from these words? That they have a deeper meaning than the stereotyped “May all be well with you” is indicated by (1) their repetition in verse twenty-one—which seems singularly out of place for a greeting, and (2) the display of the wounds and the joy of the disciples which are framed by the repeated phrase, and (3) the development of the meaning of shalom (peace) in the Old Testament. C. S. Foerster suggests that the starting place for understanding the deeper meaning of eirene in the New Testament is the usage of the Old Testament term shalom to mean the Messianic salvation which comes from God. A. Weiser, for example, points out that the meaning of shalom in Psalm 29:11 is really salvation, and translates v. 11: “May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with salvation!” In Isaiah 53:5 shalom denotes the idea of wholeness (“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.”) which in turn is synonymous with salvation. The same thing may be said of Isaiah 54:10: “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.” This Messianic salvation which comes from God arrived on the stage of history in Jesus

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Christ. Thus to proclaim Messianic salvation in the New Testament is to proclaim eirene (Acts 10:36). In John 14:27 Jesus appears as the one who is able to confer eirene upon the disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you," and in 16:33 Jesus expresses his concern that the disciples may have peace in him. In the sense of the eschatological salvation of the whole man eirene has been revealed decisively in the resurrection of Jesus.

The fact that the display of the wounds and the joy of the disciples is framed by the phrase eirene humin suggests a connection between them. Jesus' ability to confer eirene upon his disciples (14:27) opens up the possibility that John intends eirene humin to be understood as both a wish (the conventional "peace be with you") and an announcement ("peace is yours") that salvation has come to them through him. It has already been noted that in chapter sixteen Jesus links eirene with himself in a most personal way: "I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace." The experience of the disciples in the world, however, is in contradiction to the concept of eirene. For in the world they have thlipsis—not a fear and anxiety that are the opposite of peace of mind—but oppression, affliction, and opposition. But these latter experiences are not decisive for the disciples. The decisive reality for them, according to Jesus, is that he has "overcome the world" (v. 33). These words appear in a context which hints at a battle between Jesus and the ruler of this world: "A little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me. . . Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (16:16, 20). When Jesus appears to the disciples on Easter evening, this battle has been fought, and, as the resurrection appearance testifies, Jesus has been victorious. The wounds in his hands and side, then, are more than marks of identification which prove to the disciples that the one who stands among them is really Jesus. For John they are also the signs of his victory over the world! Therefore, the joy of the disciples represents more than a gladness evoked by an unexpected reunion with their Master. It is also indicative of the church's realization that the prediction of John sixteen has been fulfilled. The resurrection proclaims the fact that the world has been overcome. On this Easter evening sorrow is dispelled and the hearts of the disciples rejoice with a joy which no one will take from them for they have seen both the risen Lord and the signs of his victory. The significance of this fact is underlined by the repetition of the phrase eirene humin. The long-awaited Messianic salvation has arrived in him.

From this emphasis upon Jesus and his victory attention shifts to the church and its mission: "As the father has sent me, even so I send you" (v. 21). The perfect tense of the first verb (apestalken) indicates that the mission of Jesus is here viewed from the standpoint of the permanence of its effects. The fact that it is this same mission which is to be continued is signified by the shift to the present tense for the second verb (pempo). The church, then, is not to engage in a new work of its own creation but rather is to continue the ministry of Jesus. The form of the mission is here changed from the incarnate Jesus to the church, the
body of Christ, but the content of the mission remains the same. The emphasis of the Greek construction *kathos...kago*, i.e., "Just as . . . so also," is on parallelism, not on contrast. This may be seen from identical constructions at John 15:9, "As the father has loved me, so have I loved you," and at 17:18: "As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." This parallelism indicates that just as in the words and deeds of Jesus men encountered the Father who had sent him, so also in the words and deeds of the church men encounter Jesus the Son of God.

The organic relationship between the mission of Jesus and the mission of the church is further established by an examination of John's use of the two verbs of the commissioning, *apostello* and *pempo*, both of which are translated by the English verb "send." Their generally synonymous use in John prohibits the initial temptation to set up a significant contrast between one being sent as a delegate with transferred authority (*apostello*) and one who is simply sent (*pempo*). The investigations of Karl Rengstorf have shown, however, that when the Johannine Jesus uses *pempo* in speaking of his sending by God there is a definite formula involved. Its simplest expression is *ho pempsas me*, "The one who has sent me." This usage is wholly restricted to God and is sometimes expanded to *ho pempsas me pater*, "The father who has sent me." When speaking of himself Jesus uses other forms of *pempo* and God is never called *ho apestelias me*. Instead, whenever *apostello* is used of the sending of Jesus by God it occurs in a statement. Rengstorf explains this remarkable usage as follows: "In John's Gospel *apostellein* is used by Jesus when His concern is to ground His authority in that of God as the One who is responsible for His words and works and who guarantees their right and truth. On the other hand, He uses the formula *ho pempsas me* to affirm the participation of God in His work in the *actio* of His sending. This explanation is in full accord with the Johannine view of Jesus as the One whose work originates in God's work and by whom 'God's work ... reaches it goals'." Rengstorf concludes that this usage "is followed exactly in 20:21, except that it is here applied to the relationship of Jesus to His messengers. The work which they have to do is finally His work for He sends them." The implications of this fact are apparent. If the ministry of the church is essentially the continuation of the ministry of Jesus, then the church must pattern the form and content of its ministry after that of Jesus. If Jesus brought a whole gospel for a whole man, the church may do no less.

For this task the church is immediately empowered by the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. "And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' " (v. 22). That the Spirit represents the continuing presence of Jesus with his church is implicit in what has been said above. If the disciples are actually to carry forward the ministry of Jesus, *his* ministry, then the

gift of the Spirit is essential, for it is in the Spirit that the presence and participation of Jesus in their work are effected. This significant aspect of the transition from the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of the church is predicted throughout the Fourth Gospel. From the beginning Jesus is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1:33). It is reiterated in the gospel that the Spirit can only be given after Jesus has been glorified, i.e., after His death and resurrection. The evangelist comments at chapter seven, verse thirty-nine: "Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." At chapter sixteen, verse seven, Jesus says, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." That the Spirit represents the creative power of God at work in man is a concept familiar to the Old Testament. John's choice of language in verse twenty-two of our pericope, however, points to one example in particular. This single appearance in the New Testament of the verb *emphtsao* ("to breathe") recalls Genesis 2:7: "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." The translators of the Septuagint, or Greek Old Testament, rendered the Hebrew verb *naphach* with the Greek verb *emphtsao*. John is so intent upon emphasizing that the church is the new creation of God that he points all the way back to the first creation for a parallel. Just as at creation man received the gift of life (the *nishmath chayyim*) directly from God, so here the church receives the life-giving Spirit directly from the risen Lord.

That the Holy Spirit is here given on Easter Day rather than on the Day of Pentecost may be explained in two ways. John may have utilized an independent tradition which remembered the entire process of Jesus’ glorification, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension, as a single dynamic event. That this is the view represented in John is at least open to possibility by a comparison of the resurrection appearances which precede and follow our pericope. In the first appearance Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (20:17). As it stands, this statement could imply that it would be permissible to touch him after the Ascension. In the appearance to Thomas a week later, Jesus invites that disciple to touch the wounds in his hands and side (20:27). The implication is that the Ascension has taken place between the two incidents—perhaps on Easter Day itself. This completion of Jesus' glorification would then open the way for the promised bestowal of the Spirit. Although this explanation cannot be ruled out entirely, it must be noted that the evidence supporting it is quite fragmentary and would disappear completely should the difficulties of verse 17b be solved via J. H. Bernard's conjecture that *me haptot*, "Do not hold" is a corruption of an original *me ptoot*, "Fear not."11

A valid alternative is the assumption that the bestowal of the Spirit on Easter

evening is another example of John's freedom to adapt the existing Christian tradition to his own theological purpose. If John was free to place so crucial an event as the crucifixion a day earlier than the synoptists in order to emphasize the theological point that Jesus, the Lamb of God, died while the Passover lamb was being killed, he would be equally free to place the gift of the Spirit immediately following the glorification of Jesus and the commissioning of the church. The frequent promises that the Spirit would be given when Jesus had been glorified lead the reader to expect this bestowal. Moreover, more important than the chronological difficulties is the fact that John is in theological harmony with the rest of the New Testament in identifying the gift of the Spirit with the equipping of the church for its mission.

The commissioning of the disciples is climaxed by a statement of the basic theological content of the church's mission: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (v. 23). Two facts preclude any interpretation of these words which would understand them as conferring upon the church the power to forgive sins. First, in biblical teaching the forgiveness of sins in an absolute sense is always the prerogative of God. Second, only in Mark 2:5 does Jesus himself claim the power to forgive sins by his own fiat, and even in this instance the declaration, “Your sins are forgiven,” is ambiguous. It may be interpreted as a prophetic announcement, “Your sins are forgiven (by God),” the passive voice being a way of reverently avoiding the use of the divine name. But even if Mark 2:5 is understood as an example of Jesus' exercising the divine prerogative, the fact remains that he generally urged men to repent in order that God might forgive them.

John 20:23 then requires interpretation. The fact that the verb aphiemi in the sense of the forgiveness of sins does not appear anywhere else in the Fourth Gospel suggests that John is here drawing upon the larger tradition of the church as represented in the synoptic gospels. That view is strengthened when the content of the Johannine commissioning is compared with the content of the commissioning recorded in the synoptic gospels. In the longer ending of Mark the commission is to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (16:15f). In Matthew the wording is: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28:19). In Luke, the Gospel which contains material which most nearly parallels our pericope, the risen Lord says to his followers: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins aphesin hamartion should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:46f). The Synoptic Gospels therefore define the task of the church as the universal proclamation that in Jesus Christ men are faced with the decision which results either in the forgiveness of sins, that is, salvation, or in the retention of sins, that is, judgment. With this view the Fourth Gospel is in complete accord.
We may now summarize the points to which our exegesis has led. The context and form of our pericope indicate that John 20:19-23 occupies a climactic place in the Fourth Gospel and a central place in the theology of the early Christian community. With a remarkable economy of words it describes the momentous transition from the earthly ministry of Jesus to his continuing ministry in the life of the church. The origin, mission, and authority of the church are unmistakably rooted in the risen Christ who is in turn identified as Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died among men. His wounds testify both to this and to the fact that he has been victorious in accomplishing the saving work for which the Father sent him into the world. This salvation has, in him, come to the disciples. They are commissioned by him to continue his mission in word and deed. To this end they are gifted with the Holy Spirit who represents in them both the presence of Christ and the power of God. Equipped with this presence and power, they are confidently to announce to men everywhere the call to repentance and the forgiveness of sins.