

The Second Sunday of Easter

THE MOMENT BETWEEN DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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John 20:19-31

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 27 Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' 28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 29 Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his

disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

DIAGNOSIS: Fear unto Death

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *In Fear of the Jews*

In a sentence: The disciples were afraid—rightly so—that they, too, would be crucified.

In the first century, crucifixion had a way of crystalizing reality. For the disciples huddled behind closed doors, it was inconceivable that Jesus, who was crucified, was the promised Messiah, the Son of God (v. 31). If Jesus, who was so promising for the Children of God, could be so easily killed, what chance did they have? What kind of discipleship, if any, did that portend? For them, as in every religion, suffering and death is incommensurate with a loving God. So then, theirs was a question, not only of brute survival, not only of God's promises to Israel, but of God himself. The disciples feared the whole world and locked their doors against it (v. 19).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *In Fear of Death*

In a sentence: The disciples were afraid—unavoidably—to trust in God.

Jesus' faith/trust/belief in God was not, apparently, enough to save him from so vile a death. If Jesus' kind of faith/trust/belief was not well-pleasing to God, what could ever be? Jesus was the disciples' greatest hope for the kingdom of God, and it was inconceivable that there could be a problem worse than death. With Jesus' death, therefore, any hope they

had in God was crushed.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *In Fear of God*

In a sentence: The disciples were afraid—rightly and unavoidably—of God.

The disciples knew full well that God was the author of life as well as its destroyer; that nothing ever happens apart from God. Since it was inconceivable to them that God should have willed the death of Jesus (3:16), with his death they had, so to speak, no God left to rely on; and thus, no God. Without a God they could trust, they were facing death itself, the end of all hope and all meaning. If those locked doors were designed to keep death at bay, it was only as a last resort, a temporary measure at best. So when Jesus “stood among them” (v. 19), having conquered death and redefined life, it must have occurred to them, if ever so briefly, that God was in their midst. In that fleeting instant before Jesus spoke, the disciples must have realized that they were about to die. As indeed they were. They must have realized that their own failure to trust in God was a far greater problem for them than simply dying. God, therefore, was the greater threat. If it was necessary that Jesus be crucified, as they now for the first time had to consider, then what had previously been inconceivable was now conceivable. And it must have dawned on them (not fully of course but incipiently) that the only thing that could have necessitated Jesus’ crucifixion was their own sinfulness. Confronted as they now were by God himself, they found themselves facing a death much more decisive, much more eternal, than any death they had ever imagined.

PROGNOSIS: Resurrection Peace

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Resurrection Peace*

In a sentence: Jesus brought Easter to his disciples.

The moment of truth had suddenly arrived. In an instant, when the disciples were seized by their reality before God, Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you" (v. 19). With those words from the mouth of God, Easter had arrived! For Jesus' erstwhile disciples, there was no turning back. The eternal death that they in truth feared most (which had just then dawned on them) was dissolved-forgiven-reconciled, and the death that they thought they had feared most (against which they had locked the doors) was no longer life threatening (at least not to Jesus' kind of life). With Jesus' resurrection-life came peace with God, a peace so sure and eternal that not even our continued sinfulness can thwart it. The peace that Jesus brought to his disciples stands forever, not only against every power known to humankind but against even the deadly judgment of God. Jesus' resurrection-words meant that the big "D" was behind them forever, and all the little deaths that face them daily have no power against the love of God. Easter changes everything!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Being Forgiven*

In a sentence: Faith in Christ, which is a new kind of life, comes by the Holy Spirit.

In the moment between death and resurrection comes the enlivening Spirit of God. And with the Spirit comes the mission that Jesus began: proclaiming the forgiveness of sins (vv. 21-23). The Holy Spirit creates faith/trust/belief in Jesus himself, whom John aptly says is "the Resurrection and the Life" for those who have died the big "D" (11:25). The Spirit is never still but always creating by means of forgiveness, faith, and mission (v. 31).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Forgiving Others*

In a sentence: The disciples were empowered to Easterize the world.

The mission of the Holy Spirit is unstoppable. It is “the power of God for the salvation of all who trust in Christ” (see Romans 1:16). What an awesome thing it is to forgive others, but that is our unique mission. Nothing less! And nothing more! What we, in Jesus’ name, declare to the world is not declared by any other means than by words, words that God himself has put in our mouths not to stay there but to be proclaimed. For the power of God is in trusting the promissory words given to us. Like Jesus and his early disciples, you too are enlivened and empowered by the Holy Spirit to Easterize the world. And like them, we should not be surprised if, in doing so, in loving others, in changing the world, we are crucified. We are in good company.