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John 20:19-23 -- The Upper Room Appearance of the Risen Christ

According to the Gospel of Luke, there were two other appearances of Jesus, which had taken place earlier in the day. We have recorded in some detail the experience of the two on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-33), with whom Jesus had walked unrecognized, to whom He had explained the OT scriptures concerning Himself, and to whom He was made known as He broke bread at the supper table. Upon realizing what had happened, they immediately returned the seven miles to Jerusalem (Lk. 24:13,33), and found the eleven disciples gathered (actually, we find out from John that Thomas was not there -- 20:24) along with some other followers of Jesus, who told them that Jesus had also appeared to Peter. Of this personal encounter with Jesus, we have no record, although Paul alludes to it as the "first" resurrection appearance, ...at least "first" in his list of eyewitnesses (I Cor. 15:5), for we know that He appeared to Mary Magdalene before He appeared to Peter (Jn. 20:11-18). Since it was during the interaction between the Emmaus travelers and the other disciples that Jesus makes His upper room appearance, we also have a clue as to when this would have occurred. Since Luke reports that the Emmaus travelers had invited Jesus to stay with them, since it was "getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over", and that they had actually gathered for their evening meal when Jesus was recognized by them, we can conclude that it must have been at least 5:30-6:00 p.m. by this time. Then these two disciples had to repack and journey an uphill road back to Jerusalem, which would have taken more than two additional hours. Thus, the upper room meeting we are about to examine would have occurred in the later evening, certainly well after dark, probably approaching eight-thirty or nine o'clock.

Notes:

Vs. 19 -- *when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week* -- That is, Sunday evening. *when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews* -- We find out from Acts 1:13 that they were staying in a large, upper room. It was large enough for 120 people to gather therein (Acts 1:15). Fearing further retaliation from the Jewish leaders who had just crucified their Master, the disciples were staying to themselves and kept the doors shut, and probably locked (the Greek word encompasses both meanings). The point of telling us this is not only to indicate the fear of the disciples, but also to set the stage for the miraculous appearance of Jesus. He did not simply sneak into the room when they weren't looking. The doors were barred against any surprise visitors. *Jesus came and stood in their midst* -- His sudden appearance right in the midst of their gathering was startling, conveyed more vividly in Luke's account. *and said to them, "Peace be with you."* This was the normal Hebrew greeting. The Hebrew word, shalom, which underlies this greeting refers to health, prosperity, and balanced order. It was a declaration, not a wish. Literally, the Greek simply says, "Peace to you", not "*May* peace be with you", which sounds more like a desire for peace, not a statement or declaration of it. Jesus was here bringing peace, not asking or hoping that it might happen.

Vs. 20 -- *And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side* -- From Luke's account, we learn that they thought that possibly they were seeing a ghost (Lk. 24:37). Jesus took deliberate action to show that He was risen with a physical body. He was not a phantom. He was risen from the dead. To the Jew, since they saw our humanness as a holistic body-spirit self, resurrection required the coming to life of a body. To the Greek, who saw human existence as dualistic, where matter was evil (or irrelevant) and spirit was good, the resurrection of the body was confusing, even offensive (e.g., Acts 17:30-32). To them, the body was nothing more than a prison-house for the spirit-self. To be rid of the body was a good thing, in their view, while Jews saw the separation of the spiritual-self from the body (occurring at death) as a "naked state" (II Cor. 5:3). Of course, the Jewish view grew out of the revelation from God recorded in the OT (Gen. 2:7). It is clear that the teaching of Jesus and the apostles were consistent with this foundational revelation. Thus, Jesus sought to clarify that He was not some disembodied spirit, but a resurrected person, complete with a body. This physical aspect of the resurrection made it verifiable, hence Jesus encouraged His disciples to use their physical senses to establish that He really was there, risen from the dead. Luke tells us that, in addition to touching Him, they gave him food to eat, and watched Him eat it (24:42,43). It is important to see that the Bible treats Jesus' resurrection as a historical event, ...not as a symbolic hope, or "the

rise of faith in the disciples", as though this were merely an overcoming of fear, while Jesus' body still lay in a tomb. No. Without the resurrection of Jesus' body there is no hope of grace through Him. The resurrection was an actual event, as verifiable as any other historical event of the past. These eyewitness accounts form the backbone of the evidence (I Cor. 15:4f). *the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord* -- You can imagine the height of their emotion, moving from despair, to disbelief, to fear and now to the most incredulous experience of joy.

Vs. 21 - *So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; ..."* Again, the declaration, "All is well", designed to comfort and to clear away the lingering emotions that they had been experiencing in their hopelessness, and now in their alarm. *as the Father has sent Me, I also send you* -- The sending of Jesus by the Father is expressed as a past action with ongoing result (He sent Me, and I am still on mission), whereas the sending of the disciples by Jesus is depicted as a present, ongoing action (I am sending), because He is in the process of commissioning them. The "according-as" communicates that Jesus is commissioning them in a way that is similar to what He Himself experienced from the Father.

Vs. 22 - *And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* -- This is a very controversial passage. Did the disciples actually receive the Holy Spirit on this occasion, or was this merely a symbolic, prophetic action which was intended to dramatize the relationship between Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the disciples? How one understands this verse becomes a watershed interpretation in that person's theology, leading to other consequent interpretations, especially regarding Acts 2, the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost.

For example, many of those involved in the charismatic movement see in this passage a Biblical basis for what has been their personal experience. They believed in Jesus, maybe even experienced a very moving conversion, but experienced little of the power of the Holy Spirit, often for an extended period of years. Their spiritual lives were at best mediocre, with very little intimacy with God, or fruitfulness. Then, at a later time, they experienced a powerful influx of the Holy Spirit, usually in conjunction with an experiential manifestation of some sort, such as the gift of tongues (ala Pentecost), or being "slain in the Spirit" (falling to the ground in an almost trance-like state, unable to move). From that time on, they experience an intimacy and immediacy with God, an empowerment of the Spirit, and a fruitfulness in service, which they had not previously experienced. Hence, like their own experience, they tend to see Jn. 20 as the time when the disciples received the Holy Spirit to indwell them and cause them to be born again, and then Acts 2 is a second work of the Holy Spirit, a "baptism of the Spirit", which is an empowering for ministry. The persuasiveness of this interpretation to those who have had such an experience is extremely powerful. It is difficult for them to see beyond their personal journey to examine carefully what the Biblical text actually says.

This is a common danger in interpreting the Bible. It is very easy to "read into" the text things that are not actually stated, because we expect things to have been a certain way, especially if our expectations are based upon our personal experience or our church traditions. In this example, however, the Biblical data is clear that the disciples did not receive the Holy Spirit in that upper room on resurrection day evening. How can we know this? In Acts 10 and 11, we have the account of the first Gentiles coming to Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit. No one really expected that God would accept them as Gentiles, but the Holy Spirit fell upon them while Peter was still sharing the Good News with them, and they all spoke in tongues, just as the apostles did at Pentecost. The text says they "were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also" (10:45). Peter's response was, "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" (10:47). Note that in these two statements, Peter linked Pentecost (not the upper room) with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the next chapter, as he recounted these events to the church in Jerusalem, he noted, "...the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning" (11:15). In the next two verses, he refers to this as the fulfillment of John's word that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit, but links this baptism with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. On a parallel track, it is important to see that Luke 24 reports that on that resurrection-day evening Jesus told the disciples, "I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (24:49). Luke returns to this same upper room conversation in Acts 1, giving us more details. Jesus linked the "promise of the Father" with the "baptism with the Spirit" in vss. 4,5, and in verse 8 mentions that they will receive power "when the Holy Spirit has come upon you", obviously indicating that this had not, as yet, occurred. Then, in chapter 2, when Peter is explaining the powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit, who had just "filled" them (2:4), he indicates that Jesus, "having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this

which you both see and hear" (2:33). Soon after, he invites his hearers to "Repent, and ... be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you..." (2:38,39).

When you attempt to put all these pieces together, it becomes clear that, although Jesus breathed on them and told them, "Receive the Holy Spirit", in the upper room, He went on to tell them to wait for the promise of the Father, the baptism of the Spirit, which did not occur until Pentecost. Peter, looking back on these events, saw Pentecost, not the upper room, as the time when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. In addition, he clearly understood this as a very definite and significant shift in how the Holy Spirit worked in the lives of people. As Jesus had indicated in the upper room on the night of His arrest, He was going to depart from them, but He would "ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom ...you know... because He abides with you and will be in you" (Jn. 14:16,17). In the conversation that followed, Jesus repeatedly refers to the fact that this Helper, the Holy Spirit, will be sent to them, both by the Father (14:26), and by Jesus from the Father (15:26; cf. 16:7). His coming will introduce a new dynamic, something which will be more advantageous to them than even Jesus' physical presence (16:7). The author of the fourth Gospel had already hinted at this new dynamic in Jn. 7:37-39. There, he refers to the Spirit, "whom those who believed in Him (i.e., Jesus) were to receive, for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." From the words of promise, waiting and anticipation, to the powerful events of Pentecost, to Peter's explanation of those events and his later recollection of his experience, the testimony is consistent: The apostles did not actually receive the Holy Spirit until Pentecost. Therefore, what Jesus meant by breathing on them and commanding them to receive the Holy Spirit, was a prophetic act, not an actual impartation of the Spirit. The Greek word for Spirit also means "wind, or breath", so the act of breathing on them, and saying, "Receive Holy Breath/Spirit", would have dramatically portrayed the reality that the Spirit of God that was in Jesus was the same Spirit that would be given to them, enabling the apostles to do as Jesus had done (cf. Jn. 14:12). This is even further strengthened by the fact that John used the exact same word as is used of God breathing into Adam the breath of life in the Greek Septuagint translation of Gen. 2:7. Clearly, John saw that his spiritual life and ability to serve came entirely from the life of God given to him by the indwelling Spirit.

The other sidebar to this is that the Holy Spirit was given, once for all, poured out upon the church at Pentecost. Peter's conclusion is that He is the "gift" that is available to all who believe. Regarding all of us who are true believers, the apostle Paul says, "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, ...we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (I Cor. 12:13). Biblically, the baptism of the Spirit happens at conversion, but there are many experiences of the Spirit that may follow in our spiritual journey. The point is not to try to analyze this to death. That leads only to unprofitable quarreling. Let us rejoice in whatever manner the Holy Spirit chooses to work in the lives of God's people. Let us marvel and glory in His mighty workings, as well as His quiet whisperings. In any case, the point of Jesus' admonition in Jn. 20:22, and again in Acts 1:8, is "...take hold of the Holy Spirit...". Do not ignore His working, do not spurn or turn away from His promptings, but get hold of what the Spirit is doing in you, and respond to Him.

Vs. 23 - If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained. -- This may seem to be a shocking statement, but it is part and parcel with Jesus' commission to His followers. Just as the Father had sent Jesus to forgive and retain sins, so also He has given us that same role. Now this is not some spooky thing, as if we, by waving our hand over someone, or uttering some words, had the ability to forgive sins, or prevent them from being forgiven. That is a total misunderstanding of what is meant. First, we need to see that Jesus established a precedent that God gives such authority to people. In Matthew's version of Jesus' healing of the paralytic, Matthew reports that the crowd correctly perceived this fact (Matt. 9:1-8). Jesus had spoken words of forgiveness to the man, and the Pharisees balked at what they perceived as blasphemy ("Who can forgive sins but God?" -- Mk. 2:7). Jesus demonstrated that he had the authority to forgive sins by healing the man. It was by the power and authority of God, which were given to Jesus for this purpose, that He was able to heal and to forgive sins. Now, by Jesus' commission to us, this power and authority are given to us. We are not causing the forgiveness or retention of sin. Rather, we are simply God's instrument to bring words of direction and clarification to what He has done for people, and what their spiritual condition actually is. To those who believe, we can say, "Your sins are forgiven" because they *have been* forgiven. To those who are resistant to God, or are not looking to His grace, we can say, "You are still held in the bondage of your sins", because that is what is the case. They are still trying to stand on their own merits, instead of accepting God's provision in Christ for them.