

## The Church With Nothing

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[slide 1, blank] Check out church websites and you'll find some impressive sounding places of worship.

Some churches seem to have it all. Others, however, appear by contrast, to have nothing at all. [slide 2] Take, for example, the church described in Jn. 20.

Here we get our first glimpse of the disciples gathered together after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Here we see the church - the church being followers of Jesus, not a building of bricks and mortar - gathered together in its earliest days. And it's not a pretty picture.

They are to be God's people, who show God's love to others with gates open wide and welcome mat out.

But here we find them at night, barricaded in a house with the doors bolted shut.

They listen fearfully for every footstep on the stairs and every knock at the door.

They are to be God's people who go boldly into the world and proclaim the good news about Jesus' death and resurrection.

But here we find them cowering in fear, hoping nobody finds out where they are lest they face the same abuse, torture, and death they had just seen their Messiah, Jesus, suffer.

In short, here we see the church at its worst – fearful and anxious, discouraged and demoralized.

If this small group of closed-off Christians had a website on the internet, what might it say?

“There’s a place for you at friendly so-and-so church?” Hardly, unless one counts locked doors as a sign of hospitality.

How about, “The church with a warm heart and a world-changing mission?” In reality, they are more like the church with sweaty palms and a fearful spirit.

In essence John paints for us a picture of a church with nothing – no plan, no purpose, no promise, no program, no nothing.

In fact, this fearful, small group of people, huddled in the corner of a room with a chair braced against the door, has only one thing going for it: the risen Christ.

And that seems to be the main point of the story. **[slide 3]** This is a story about how Jesus, the one who has risen bodily from the grave, miraculously stands amid a church with nothing and empowers them to live for him.

**[slide 4, blank]** The implication is that every church, ours included, is like this one. Every church, no matter what’s on their webpage, no matter how many people they have, if left to their own resources, have nothing.

No number of programs or activities can conceal the fact that apart from the presence and power of the risen Christ, the church has nothing.

Do you sense that worship is taking place in the power of the Spirit?

If so, then no matter how badly the service may run, that truth cannot be hidden.

If, on the other hand, you sense that the only spirit at work in the service is the human spirit

and that the only things moving in the sanctuary are the offering plates, then no matter how good the worship, no matter how polished the music, the singing, and the sermon may be, the emptiness of the moment cannot be concealed.

If you want to see a picture of what the church becomes when the presence and power of the risen Christ is absent, [**slide 5**] look at the disciples huddled in fear in a darkened room, peeking anxiously out through the shutters to make sure no one is coming to get them.

[**slide 6, blank**] When the risen Christ is absent, we, as his church, are hollow, empty of power and purpose, locked in fear behind our own walls.

The ceaseless and sometimes frantic activity of many churches – with programs for this that and the other – is often a desperate attempt to fill the void where Jesus should be.

The good news, however, is that into the midst of this void, into the center of this fearful church with nothing, [**slide 7**] the resurrected Jesus comes and says in Jn. 20.19, “Peace be with you.”

Can you imagine the reaction of the disciples as the resurrected Jesus appears in their midst?

Can you see Peter drop to his knees, James jaw dropping to the floor, Andrew’s hand covering his mouth?

Then Jesus’ eyes meet with each person in the room. He opens his robe so they can see the scar in his side. He pulls up his sleeves so they can see the scars in his wrists.

[**slide 8, blank**] The risen Jesus hasn’t replaced the crucified one. The risen Jesus isn’t a ghostly substitute for the crucified one.

The crucified Jesus and the risen Jesus are one in the same. And John tells us in v.20 that the disciples “were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”

Into the fearful emptiness of their lives, Jesus comes to fill the vacant space with his presence. And Jesus' presence drives out fear and brings joy.

Considering their conduct since Good Friday, we may have expected Jesus to rebuke his disciples, saying something like,

"Shame on you for your fear and failure. I sent you out into the world, not into a locked room."

Or perhaps Jesus would just bail out this group of terrified followers and take over the mission himself.

"Obviously you guys can't handle the mission I've given you. Here you are only 3 days after I leave and you're hiding out in this house shaking in your boots. You're dismissed. I'll take over from here."

But no, Jesus neither rebukes them nor relieves them of their responsibility.

To this church with nothing, to this small group of fearful followers, Jesus makes, what sounds like to us at least, a rather odd statement in vs.23:

[slide 9] "If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven." How do you feel about that? Are you up to the task? Of course not!

But the worse is yet to come. He goes on to say, "If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

If anyone thinks they're ready to take on that mission, that job, they need to go back to school for a few lessons on humility. But Jesus believes his disciples can do it.

They could come back at him and say, "But we thought only God could forgive sins!" And they'd be right.

God is going to forgive sins – through them, through the gospel message they proclaim.

It's important to note that these words of Jesus come after they receive a crucial promise and gift.

[**slide 10**] One verse earlier, v.22, Jesus says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Jesus has said so much already about the Spirit, his own Spirit, the Spirit, which is the Father's special gift to his people, in chapters 14 & 16.

Now the time has come to receive the gift of the Spirit.

The point of receiving the Holy Spirit is not to give the disciples some new 'spiritual experience,' though they will have plenty of those.

Nor is it to set them apart from ordinary people, a sort of holier-than-thou club – though they are called to live a life like Jesus in their character and conduct.

The point of receiving the Holy Spirit is so that they can do what Jesus had been doing. [**slide 11**] Look at v.21 where Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."

In other words, the point of receiving the Holy Spirit is to equip them for their mission; for the task of being sent to proclaim forgiveness of sins to the world.

That's an important clue to understanding this story.

[**slide 12**] Think about it. How does the unique achievement of Jesus – forgiveness of sins and new life in him – which happened in one time and one place (c. A.D. 33 in Jerusalem), affect all other times and all other places?

How does the message he proclaimed in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, spread to other cultures and peoples around the world who aren't thinking about God's kingdom and who aren't waiting for a Messiah?

Back in Jn. 4.22 Jesus told us that salvation is from the Jews. It is from the Jews but for the world. And the disciples are the ones to start to process of taking it there.

So how does the unique achievement of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins and new life in him, which happened in one time and one place, affect all other times and places including our time and place?

To answer that question, we must understand the difference between something being achieved and something being put into action.

Think of it this way. A composer achieves the writing of the music; the performers then act on it by playing it out.

Or think of a clockmaker. A clockmaker designs and builds wonderful clocks. But it's the owner of the clock who must set the right time and keep it wound up.

Likewise, Jesus achieved victory over sin and death and has begun the work of new creation. That work is now to be put into action by his disciples.

That's why they need the Holy Spirit: to enable them to do the job they could otherwise never dream of doing; to fulfill the mission given them by Jesus.

John tells us in v.22 that Jesus "breathed on them," and they received the Holy Spirit.

The Gk. verb used here for "breathed," em-foo-sah'-o, is the same verb used in Gen. 2.7 in the creation story.

In Gen. 2.7 God breathed into man his own breath, the breath of life, and man became alive, alive with God's new life.

Now, in the new creation, the resurrection life of God is breathed out through Jesus,

on his disciples, giving them new life, and thus through them, they can offer this new life to the world.

[slide 13] And the result is peace, twice repeated in vs.19 & 21, which Jesus had promised back in 14.27 and 16.33.

[slide 14, blank] Empowered by the Holy Spirit and with the peace he gives, the disciples are enabled to carry out the extraordinary mission Jesus has commissioned them to fulfill in v.23.

They are to proclaim, in Jesus' name and by his Spirit, the message of forgiveness of sins.

If, however, they proclaim, in Jesus' name and by his Spirit, the message of forgiveness of sins, and that message is spurned or rejected, then they are to warn people that sin is a serious, deadly disease, and that to remain in it will bring death.

They are to warn people, not because they don't like them, but because this is God's message to a confused and still rebellious world.

Twenty years later Paul asked in 2 Cor. 2.16, "Who is equal to such a task?"

He, like John, gave us the right answer. None of us is equal to such a task. But God enables us to do it through the empowering presence of his Spirit.

Jesus comes to the church with nothing and gives it everything. He provides it with all it needs to truly be the church.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, and with his peace, he sends you and I on a mission to proclaim forgiveness of sins.

Here's a story to illustrate this point. The computer revolution was brought to us, in large part, by Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple computers.

Steve was just 21 years of age when he and Steve Wozniak invented the Apple computer.

Until then, computers were a monstrous mass of vacuum tubes which took up whole rooms.

The two Steve's managed to replace that mass of tubes with new technology that fit inside a box small enough to fit on a desk.

The two Steve's offered their invention to Atari. Atari was not interested. They offered their invention to Hewlett-Packard, but HP was not interested.

So, Jobs sold his Volkswagen and Wozniak sold his calculator, and with the \$1300 that gave them, they formed Apple Computers.

Steve Jobs was a visionary. Spurred on by his vision he built a successful computer company.

But Jobs soon realized that if his vision was to be fully fulfilled, he needed to bring someone on board who had greater management expertise than himself. So, Jobs approached John Sculley, then President of PepsiCo.

There was absolutely no reason why Sculley should leave a highly paid position in a Fortune 500 company and go to work for a computer geek in a then fledgling industry.

Not surprisingly, Sculley turned down the offer. But Steve Jobs wouldn't take no for an answer. He kept after Sculley with his offer time after time after time.



In one last ditch effort, Jobs passionately presented his vision to Sculley and asked Sculley a question that left him no choice but to accept the position with Apple.

The question was: “Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want to change the world?” The rest, as they say, is history.

Jesus comes to us with more or less the same question. “Do you want to spend the rest of your life living for self or for a mission that will change people’s lives forever?”

Without the presence of Jesus, we, his church, have nothing. With his presence we have everything we need - his peace, and the empowering presence of his Holy Spirit - to accomplish the life-changing mission he gives us.

Will you accept God’s mission? Will you give your life completely to God to be used for his mission to the world – to live out, in word and deed, the gospel of forgiveness?

When those fearful disciples experienced the personal presence of Jesus in their lives, their fear evaporated, and their hearts rejoiced.

May each of us experience that same release from fear and that same feeling of joy as we trust and obey Jesus by fulfilling the mission he gives each of us.

Song: His Provision

Prayer: Father God, give us, by your Spirit, ears to hear your commission, ready wills to respond to it, and above all perseverance in obeying it to the end. In Jesus name we ask this. Amen.