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The Risen Jesus Bestows the Spirit : A Study of John 20 : 19-23

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In the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst and said to them, "Peace be unto you." And as he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced at seeing the Lord. So he said to them again, "Peace be unto you. As the Father has sent me, so do I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

THIS pericope contains one of the four resurrection-stories of the Gospel proper, apart from the sequence of chapter 21, which is generally regarded as an appendix to the work and attributed to the group which sponsored and published it after the death of the author. We have first the story of the finding of the empty tomb by St. Mary Magdalene, which is verified by St. Peter and the beloved disciple; but there is no appearance of the Risen One. Next we have the story of the appearance to St. Mary Magdalene. These two stories are interwoven; the story of the two disciples (vv. 2-10) is interpolated into the story of Mary (vv. 1, 11-18), which is independently conceived; this is seen from the mention of the angels (v. 12), who play no part in the experience of the two disciples. Our pericope is the third episode in the sequence, telling of the appearance of the risen Jesus to the whole body of the disciples. The fourth story tells of a second appearance to the group, one week later, by which the doubts of Thomas are overcome.

It will be evident that this entire sequence has no relationship to the earlier tradition which is first summed up for us by St. Paul, that Jesus "appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve; then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at once . . . then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all he appeared also to me, as it were the abortion" (I Cor. 15:5-8). St. Paul's list is not necessarily exhaustive; the Evangelist's is certainly not; but there is no getting around the fact that in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus appears first to St. Mary Magdalene, not to St. Peter. This story, and indeed the entire Johannine sequence of resurrection-stories, is not framed in accord with the traces of the earlier tradition which we find in St. Paul or with the deposit which has found place in the Synoptic Gospels.

On the other hand, it is clear that this story is integrally related to the whole structure of the Fourth Gospel itself. At the very beginning, Jesus has been designated by John the Baptist as "he who baptizes with Holy Spirit" (1:33)—in contrast with John himself, who was sent to baptize with

water. In converse with Nicodemus (c. 3), Jesus has spoken of the necessity of a rebirth, or birth from above, a birth "of water and of Spirit," for all who would see or enter into the Kingdom of God; he does not as yet indicate himself as the minister of such a baptism. He has then spoken to the Samaritan woman (4:10ff.) of the gift of living water which he is to give, which will become in the recipient "a fountain of water leaping up to eternal life"; and while this gift is not explicitly identified with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the significance of the symbolism would not be doubtful to any Christian reader. Again, at the Feast of Sukkoth, Jesus "stood and cried, 'If any man thirst, let him come to me; and let him drink, who believes on me. As the Scripture has said, Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water'" (7:37-38). Here, however, the Evangelist has made the interpretation of the symbolism explicit. "This he said concerning the Spirit which those who believed on him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet (given), because Jesus was not yet glorified" (v. 39). It is the glorified Jesus who is to be the giver of the Spirit. And this aspect of the thought is developed with still greater emphasis in the Farewell Discourses (cc. 14-16), where the promise of the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete who will abide with them forever is brought into the closest relationship with the going away and coming again of Jesus. "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete, that he may be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth; . . . you know him, because he abides with you and is in you. I will not leave you orphans: I am coming to you" (14:16-18); and still more explicitly: "It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you"—and after a considerable exposition of the activities of the Spirit: "A little while and you behold me no more; and again a little while, and you shall see me" (16:7,16).

Another of the Paraclete passages (14:26-28) shows a striking parallelism with our pericope in its association of no fewer than four themes which are here resumed: (1) the conferring of the Spirit; (2) the promise of Peace—there twice assured, here twice spoken; (3) the promise, here fulfilled, "I go away, and I come unto you"; and (4) the joy that banishes fear; "Let not your hearts be troubled, nor let them be fearful . . . if you loved me, you would have rejoiced that I go to the Father." These last words anticipate the fuller assurance of joy to follow sorrow that is found in 16:20f. "You shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy . . . I will see you again, and your hearts shall rejoice, and your joy no one shall take from you."

Again, the wording of the "evidential" clause, as we may term it—"he showed them his hands and his side"—is notable for its difference from the Lucan: "he showed them his hands and his feet" (Luke 24:40). The form of this saying takes up the particular and unique Johannine interest in the story that the side of Jesus was pierced with a spear "and there came out blood and water" (19:34). The care which the Evangelist takes to assure us of the truth of this statement shows that it has for him a significance that is

more than merely factual. It is a symbol of the two major sacraments, and the water is at once the water of baptism and the Holy Spirit, the "living water" which shall flow out of his belly (as in 7:37f., above).

The apostolic commission—"As the Father has sent me, so do I send you"—takes up the words of the prayer: "As thou didst send me into the world, so I sent them into the world" (17:18); and they reflect the characteristically Johannine thought that the relation between Jesus and his disciples is patterned upon the relation between the Father and the Son; cf. 15:19: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you." The words reiterate the conviction that the mission of the church is the continuance of the mission of the Son of God. As the Fourth Gospel never suggests that the mission of Jesus is limited to Israel, it is unnecessary to emphasize (as does Matthew) that the disciples are to go to all nations. There has never been any question of a more limited mission. The Light of the world has come into the *world*; God sent his Son, that the *world* through him might be saved; and his church enters into that world-wide mission.

The words which confer authority to forgive or to retain sins (v. 23) are not in the least Johannine either in form or in content. As Bauer remarks: "Here, for the first and only time in his book, he speaks of the forgiveness of sins, which is not at all in keeping with his conception of Christianity, but is rather an accommodation to the thoughts of the community or to his source-material."¹ The task of the disciples has not hitherto been set before them in any comparable terms; Jesus has spoken to them of "witnessing," and of "bearing fruit" (15:16, 27; etc.), but never of pronouncing absolution. The phrasing offers further difficulty in that it is not paralleled anywhere in the New Testament or for that matter in other early Christian writings, so far as I can discover. "To forgive sins" is of course a familiar enough phrase, but nowhere else do we find the words "to retain sins" (*kratein hamartias*). The double phrase probably derives ultimately from something akin to the Matthaean saying: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18; cf. 16:19). The Johannine words appear to be an ecclesiastical interpretation or application of the idea of "binding" and "loosing" to the reception of converts and the discipline of penitence. They can hardly be of the Evangelist's own framing, since they are given "in a terminology otherwise foreign to John" (R. Bultmann). Yet it may be remarked that they do serve to relate the continuing work of the church to the mission of Jesus as it was first defined in this Gospel in the testimony of the Baptist, as "taking away the sin of the world" (1:29). And again, there is a real correspondence between the double function of retaining and remitting sins, to be exercised by the church under the authority conferred by

1. *Das Johannesevangelium*, 3rd ed. (1933), *ad loc.* (Lietzmann's *Handbuch zum N.T.*, 6). Cf. R. Bultmann's preliminary discussion of the pericope in his commentary on the Gospel (Meyer's *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das N.T.*, XII, 11th ed. [1950]).

Christ, and the double effect of the mission of Jesus himself—the salvation of those who believe and the condemnation of those who put themselves outside the pale by unbelief. One might even claim that there is a touch of the Johannine in the association of the authority to retain or remit sins with the conferring of the Spirit; for we have been told that the Spirit, when he comes, will “convict the world concerning sin and concerning righteousness and concerning judgment” (16:8).

While the pericope thus takes up and brings together so many of the main threads of the Gospel as a whole, it should be noted that it is framed in complete independence of that which immediately precedes and also of that which follows. Except for the one phrase “on that day,” which makes an editorial connection, the story is complete in itself and could very well stand by itself as the one necessary report of the appearance of the risen Jesus to his disciples. It takes no account of the idea that two of the company have seen the empty tomb, or have heard any testimony from St. Mary Magdalene; nor would anyone reading the story itself suspect that Thomas was absent. This independence of the immediate context indicates that the Evangelist has made use of a story current in the oral tradition of the church, which like Luke 24:36–49 and Matthew 28:16–20 (though not dependent on either of these passages) told of the appearance of the risen Jesus to his assembled disciples, of their recognition of him, and of his commission to them of their task. It has been transmitted to him, not as part of the sequence in which it is now found, but as a self-contained unit. At the same time, the complex and varied correspondences with leading themes of the Gospel, in ways peculiar to this writing, make it evident that it has been largely reshaped by the Evangelist in keeping with his characteristic symbolic treatment of the tradition as a whole. He has once again indicated his identification of the promised coming of Jesus with his living presence in the church as its risen and glorified Lord, and with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Easter, Pentecost, and Parousia are to all intents and purposes one. The clause “he showed them his hands and his side” is in part evidential, as in Luke 24:39–40. To some commentators, this seems an unmotivated exhibition. Some have regarded it as an interpolation brought in to prepare the way for the story of the overcoming of Thomas’s doubts; at least one recent scholar (R. Bultmann) suggests that in the source used by the Evangelist there must have been something corresponding to the Lucan picture of the fright of the disciples (Luke 24:37). But none of this seems necessary. Apart from the evidential interest, which is alone apparent in Luke, the clause here serves the purpose of establishing the identity of the risen Lord of the church, the giver of the Spirit, with the crucified Jesus.

The Insufflation itself—“he breathed upon them and said to them, ‘Receive Holy Spirit’”—is a reminiscence of the creation-story; it employs the very verb of Gen. 2:7 (LXX): “The Lord God . . . breathed into his nostrils (LXX—“his face”) the breath of life.” The deliberate choice of this word suggests that this is the New Creation, by which the flesh that

cannot see or enter into the Kingdom of God (3:3-7) is filled with the Spirit, the divine nature, which alone has life and immortality. But more than this, it serves to identify the Spirit which inhabits the church with the Spirit of Jesus.

Two things remain to be said about the authorization to retain and to remit sins. First, the use of the perfects (*apheōntai, kekratēntai*—"they are forgiven, are retained") cannot be taken in the sense that the church merely declares the remission or retention of sins that have already been retained or remitted in heaven. The force is that the apostolic sentence is forthwith confirmed—is effective as soon as spoken. Secondly, the words are probably meant to bear upon the exercise of authority within the church for the discipline of her own members as well as upon her authority to remit the sins of converts whom she admits to baptism and to retain the sins of those who refuse to believe the gospel. The words mark the inauguration of the church as a society entrusted with divine power to control her recruitment and to exercise her own discipline of penitence.

There is the further question of whether this commission is entrusted to the disciples, and this authority conferred upon them, *qua* apostles, the personal bearers of authority within the church; or *qua* believers, simply in their quality as members of the Christian community. Is the scene conceived as the establishment of the order of Apostles (more generally, of the holy ministry), or as the constitution of the church? The answers given seem to be in accord with the ecclesiastical predilections of the commentators. Lutheran scholars generally tend to hold that it is the community that receives the commission to go into the world, and the authority to forgive or to retain sins; Anglicans and Romans are more inclined to hold that the Apostles are alone envisaged in the grant of authority. It is hardly possible to make a decision upon the basis of the pericope alone; it is part of the wider question of how the discourses of chapters 13 to 16 are to be understood—whether the disciples who hear them are addressed as the limited apostolic company, or as representing the whole church. If we include the prayer of chapter 17 in our reference, we shall be obliged to give a good deal of weight to the distinction explicitly made between the immediate disciples—"these alone"—for whom the Lord prays, and the wider community of all whom he includes in his intercession—"those who believe on me through their word" (v. 20). The controversy is in the last analysis irrelevant, for there is at this stage no possible distinction between the church as the community of all believers and the apostolic band which is to serve it. At the beginning, the two are identical—the church consists of the apostles who are here commissioned. And before we press too far the distinction between "these alone" and "those who believe on me through their word," let us take note that the prayer is made to the end "that they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee" (17:21).

To sum up, the story of the Insufflation, which has also been called the Johannine Pentecost, appears to be based upon a story which has taken

shape in an earlier stage of the tradition. This is not to say that it goes back to an apostolic reminiscence of the experiences of the first Easter Day, but rather that it was a popular legend of evidential character, of the same kind as the story in Luke 24:36-49 which we have noticed. In the Lucan story, there is little else but the evidential interest, with its stress on the physical character of the resurrection-body of the Lord. In the handling of the Fourth Evangelist, however, this legend has been almost wholly transformed into myth with a wide range of significance. The emphasis on the physical is at least modified by the indication that the risen Jesus appears in a room with closed doors—though it must be granted that the Lucan story does not read as if Jesus in his very tangible body, which can be handled and can eat broiled fish (to which some manuscripts add for good measure a honeycomb), has walked in through the door! It is only that the popular legend remains in a much cruder form in Luke. The main concern of the Johannine story lies elsewhere. It has here become the myth of the founding of the church with the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, the commission to take up and continue the mission of Jesus in the world, and the authority to remit or retain sins. To this the evidential motive is secondary, but by no means unimportant. It is, however, less concerned to insist on the physical character of the resurrection-body than to affirm the identity of the risen Lord with the crucified Jesus, and the identity of the Spirit given to the church with the Spirit of Jesus.

Further than that, the Evangelist is concerned to show that the Resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit are not wholly transcendental events, but are tied to time and place; just as the authority to retain and remit sins belongs to the temporal life of the church. It is, in a way, the converse to this Evangelist's treatment of the Crucifixion. All through the passion-story, and indeed by intimations beforehand, he has presented the Crucifixion as itself the "lifting up" (*hypsosis*) of Jesus—his "going to the Father." That is to say, he has interpreted an event which undoubtedly took place externally, in the concrete sphere of history, as at the same time a transcendental event in which the love of God was fully and finally manifested and the glory of the Son revealed—the glory which he had with the Father before the world was made (17:5). In the Cross itself, the Son was glorified even as he was glorifying the Father in the perfection of love and obedience. So in this narrative of the Insufflation, the Evangelist has treated the Resurrection, in itself primarily a transcendental event, as having its necessary expression in concrete and temporal experience.