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JOHN 20:19-31

John Series: Get a Life in Jesus

You can open your Bibles to John 20. Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, we ask that you would quiet our hearts so that we can listen to you and hear you. We thank you that you speak to us in a number of different ways. You speak to us through parents, you speak to us through friends, your Holy Spirit speaks to us directly, and you speak to us through creation, and most importantly you speak to us through your word. So we're eager to hear what you have to say today, Lord. And that eagerness is demonstrated in our availability to you. Lord, we want to make our hearts available to you so that you can mold them and correct them, empower them. Inspire us because of your word today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Today I want to talk about your imagination. In fact I would suggest that faith requires imagination. We're going to see that in our passage today. The imagination to see past where we are now and to wherever God might have us go. But where does imagination take us? I think that's probably why Jesus affirmed the children and said we need to have faith like children. Because children have this ability to have this imagination. I wonder if that imagination decreases when you get older or it gets limited when you get older or we start getting into the grind of life. So our imagination decreases in some ways. I'm not sure. But I know that God in a childlike way wants us to have an imagination when it comes to faith.

Let's look at some verses. Before we look at our main passage today, let's just look at some verses that deal with this idea of imagination. We have this first one in Ephesians 3:20. It says – *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.* So you know what that tells me about imagination? My imagination can't go as far as God can. I can imagine all kinds of things that God might do and that God is able to do, but I don't know exactly what that is. My imagination might open me up to that, but God does *more* than my imagination allows. So what I think that means is we can't necessarily imagine the end result of what God wants to do in our lives. That imagination doesn't take us to the end because we don't know all of what God is going to do. What God's going to do is really big. It's so big. It's bigger than our imagination. But it seems to me that imagination is a starting point that allows us to get out of ourselves and move forward. And that imagination is tied into faith.

So let me show you another verse from Hebrews 11 which says – *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.* So faith is something that allows us to move into something bigger or allow us to have this greater confidence inside. I want to tie the

idea of imagination and faith together today in our Bible story because that's what I think is happening in this story of Thomas in God's word.

In fact let me just take you to the key verse in our passage today. This is the one from John 20:29. I'm going to show you the whole passage in a moment, but this is what Jesus says to Thomas after Thomas gets to put his hands in Jesus' hands and touch Jesus' side. He says this to Thomas – *Because you have seen me, you have believed.* Then He says something to you and me and this becomes the key verse in the passage that allows us to take with us an application to run with. It says – *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.* That's you and me. We haven't seen, yet we believe.

That's where we're going today. But before we do, let's read the whole passage. Would you stand with me as I read this passage of scripture? This is what we're looking at today and you can look in your own Bibles at John 20 starting in verse 19. Let me read it for you.

It says this: *On the evening of that first day of the week (this was the day that Jesus was risen from the dead), when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I don't have an imagination." That's what he's saying. I can't imagination this. He says, "I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

You may be seated.

When I talk about imagination, I'm not talking about creating an idea or just believing in something. Belief is what some people think is really important in life. Just believe. It's not the belief that's important, it's what you believe that's important. It makes a difference what you believe. We're not saying here just believe in something, just imagine something so that it can come true. That's not what we're talking about here. And we're going to see that the belief that Thomas should have had was based on the truth and the reality of Jesus' presence in that room and who He was. But Thomas had a hard time of seeing outside of his own little room that he had locked himself into and God wanted to expand his imagination so that he could see more.

If we go through the story, it says that *on the evening of that first day of the week*. This was the day that Jesus rose from the dead. He had an appointment when He got up that morning and He got up and He met with Mary first. His next appointment was on the road to Emmaus when He met with two of the disciples on the road and He talked with them. He had dinner with them that evening. And then in the evening seven miles back to Jerusalem this story takes place. So now we're back in Jerusalem here.

On the evening of that first day of the week when the disciples were together... This was their gather time. It was Sunday night. This was their church experience, if I could say that. They're starting to get together. They're going to start worshipping every Sunday now. Maybe not in the evening, maybe during the day. They're going to break bread and eat together. But this is their time to get together. This was church for them. They were together on this special time and Jesus is going to be present there and Jesus is going to do something in the midst of their experience, as He often does here in the midst of our experience. Jesus reveals Himself in the midst of that. There's nothing like being physically present with believers. You know you can watch good shows, you can listen to great music, but there's nothing like being together, physically present, with believers. So that's where they were. They were together.

The doors are locked. We're going to see the doors are locked mentioned twice. The point is made because of the miracle that's going to take place. Notice why the doors were locked. It says – *the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders*. Maybe you're thinking they crucified Jesus on Friday and so they're afraid that they're going to crucify other believers. And I think that's partly why they were afraid. But remember the story.

The story is told in Matthew about how the guard at the tomb when Jesus rose from the dead, the Bible says *they shook and fell on the ground like dead men*. I mean they were just out. When they got up, they went and talked to the Jewish leaders and they said to them He's gone, then told them the story. The Jewish leaders said, "Hey we're going to give you some money to make up another story. We want you to say the disciples stole the body." So that's how that story came about. So now these disciples are locked in there. Maybe they're afraid that they're going to be taken out and they're going to be condemned for this taking the body away. Whatever it is, they are afraid and they have locked the doors.

I just imagine in our lives that sometimes we build such a structure that we lock the doors of our room of our life that we start closing things off. Sometimes we say "well I don't have enough money," so that becomes a boundary. Or we say "my schedule is too tight." And so that becomes a boundary. Or we say "I don't have enough energy," so that becomes a boundary. So pretty

soon we start locking ourselves up, closing ourselves off. And Jesus wants to come into our lives in the midst of the lock and control that we put into our lives. He wants to come in there and He wants to do something different. He wants to reveal something in our hearts. I hope He'll do that for you this morning. I hope that you'll see that Jesus is present in the midst of all of that and He wants to knock down the walls. He wants to send us out. He wants to do something with us.

Jesus came and stood among them. Obviously He appeared. It wasn't like He came through the door. The point is that the doors were locked and He just appeared there. He came in there and He says to them these words: "*Peace be with you!*" Now you might think that's just a greeting and maybe it is. Maybe He just said *shalom*. But it's mentioned three times in the passage. I think it's referring back to Thursday night, three days before when Jesus had talked to them and He said – *My peace I give to you*. Not as the world gives. He says *do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me*. He had told them back there three days ago in the upper room about this peace that is just so powerful that God wants you to have. And now He's in the room with them and His first words are *peace I want to give to you* or *peace to you*. See I think that the disciples heard something on Thursday when they were all together from Jesus that now they really need and make sense.

Maybe that happens to you sometimes. You go to church, you hear a good sermon, you walk out and say, "That was a good sermon." And then during the week you're going, "Whoa, I need to go back and listen to that sermon. I need that sermon in my life right now." I think that's what's happening to these guys. Jesus is emphasizing this idea of peace. And notice they are afraid. So He's emphasizing this peace to them. He's sharing that with them as a greeting. He's going to say it again.

After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. When they experienced the reality of Jesus in their locked room, it changed their emotion from fear (as you see in the first part of the verse) to this verse next, which we read in verse 20 – *The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord*. Oh wow. That's what happens when you allow Jesus to come into the control parts of your life when you feel like you're secure because you've set up the walls and you've locked the doors and you've got your life pretty well set. That's what we all do. We set our lives pretty well. Then we feel comfortable because we've got it all set and we've got some control there. Jesus wants to come in and when He does we go, "Whoa. I don't need the doors to be locked. I don't need walls in this room."

They were overjoyed. And notice what Jesus does. He's taking them through this progression. He comes into this locked room and says again, "*Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.*" You can't stay in this secure, locked, safe, controlled environment. We call some people who are in this environment control freaks. Because they really like things controlled. What Jesus is going to do is He's going to break down those walls and say I'm going to reveal myself in new ways. I want you to experience me in new ways. And He says I am sending you out. You're on a mission. And the mission isn't to protect your little wall and be safe where you are, it's to take risks to get out there. I'm sending you out to do something important. And then He equips them with these things.

It says – *And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”* The receiving of the Holy Spirit I’m not exactly sure how this compares to what happens at Pentecost. You know at Pentecost there’s this infusion of the Holy Spirit that empowers them in a great way. But at least He’s saying you’re going to have the Holy Spirit here. Receive the Holy Spirit. He’s going to empower you as you go along in life. If you want to give up the control of the locked room of your heart, of your life the way you might have set it up, you’re going to need the Holy Spirit because He’s going to guide you through. He’s going to produce the peace. He’s going to allow you to get outside of that and move forward. That’s what He does.

And then He says this statement: *“If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”* Now that phrase has led some to believe that you must go to a person in order to have your sins forgiven. You confess your sins to a person and that person forgives your sins. But that doesn’t seem to be consistent with what the Bible teaches throughout about God forgiving sins and how we have the privilege of going to God ourselves and asking for those sins to be forgiven. I think what He’s saying here is guys, I want you to have confidence. You’re having the Holy Spirit, He’s going to empower you, and you’ve seen the Lord, you’ve seen the resurrection now, you’ve experienced the crucifixion. You’re understanding more about what all of this means, and so I’m sending you out so that you can say to someone, “If you ask Jesus Christ into your life and you come before the Father, your sins will be forgiven.” You can speak with confidence. God wants us to be able to go out and say, “Yes, your sins are forgiven when you trust Jesus Christ as your Lord and your Savior.” So Jesus is empowering them, notice, to move from their fearful state to a state of mission, a state of joy inside of them when the walls seem to be holding them in.

Well now we come to this interesting story about Thomas. It says – *Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.* He didn’t go to church that day. I wonder why. Maybe he was too tired to go to church that day. Maybe his son had a sports event that they needed to get to. Maybe he wasn’t feeling well. Isn’t it true that sometimes you don’t feel like coming to church, but it’s on that day that you actually do come to church and you go, “Wow, I’m sure glad I came.” Thomas missed out.

I like the story of the man who says to his wife in the morning, “I’m not going to church today.” She says, “Honey, come on. Get up. You’ve got to go to church.” He says, “I’m not going. I don’t feel like going to church. I just don’t want to see those people. I’m not going to church.” She says, “Honey, you’ve got to come to church today. Come on. Get up out of bed.” He says, “Give me one good reason I should go to church.” She says, “Because you’re the pastor.”

I do know that sometimes any of us can feel like they don’t want to come to church. But there’s something about going to church that allows us to experience God in ways that we didn’t expect. And Thomas missed out on church this Sunday. *So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”* It’s the testimony that we hear.

Two weeks ago we had our leadership meeting and out of that leadership meeting one of the things people said (I think three or four people said this) we really like the testimonies on Sunday

morning. When someone gets up, stands up and shares a testimony, we really like that. So this is an invitation. I would like to have more testimonies on Sunday mornings. If you've got something to say, if God is working in your life, maybe you'd like to come up and share that with other people so that people can see. Why do we like that? We like that, as Tim commented in the leadership meeting, because we see that faith is being worked out in normal people's lives. Just in the normal things we can identify with that person. If they can be going through that and giving their experience and tell their story of what God is doing, then that's a powerful thing. We like testimonies.

Thomas is getting a testimony here. The testimony is *"We have seen the Lord!"* But Thomas is one of those people sitting there, he's a doubter. He gets this famous name, the doubting Thomas guy. I'm not sure he earns that name, but that's what he's called, doubting Thomas. What happens here is that he's skeptical that the person who's sharing the testimony that really applies to me. What might happen in that person's life can't happen to me. Oh yeah. It might be true for them, but it's not true for me. That's what Thomas is saying. So notice Thomas' words. He said – *"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."* Thomas is stuck.

It's important for us to realize that our faith is not based on an illusion. It's based on fact. But fact can only take us so far. Reason can take us from point A to point B. Logic. Imagination can take us anywhere than we ever imagined. I think the imagination that is required in faith may not allow us to see the end result because God does something bigger in our imagination, but imagination allows us to say to ourselves, "I think God wants to work here. I'm going to allow Him to work. I'm going to imagine myself moving out of the control, out of the situation." I'm going to imagine myself looking for another job. I'm going to imagine myself getting out of debt. Or I'm going to imagine myself dealing with my health issues. And when we start imagining what God wants us to leave sometimes then He does more than we ask or imagine.

Thomas is stuck. He's stuck because he doesn't have the faith and he can't imagine that this could possibly be true. Why? I'm thinking poor Thomas. You know the crucifixion was a gruesome, violent experience. Here's a man who had put his trust in Jesus and now Jesus was violently killed. It wasn't just the physical violence; it was he put his trust into something and now that something is gone and now he doesn't want to be hurt again. "I'm not going to believe in this. I'm not going to get hurt again." There are some people in relationships who say, "I'm not going to trust anybody anymore because I've been hurt." I think that's where Thomas is at. He's at this place where he doesn't want to allow himself to be hurt again. It's got to be all laid out. I've got to know all of the facts before. And faith embraces the facts, but it takes us past that. So there's a jumping off point here where we say okay I'm going to allow that to work in my life. I want God to be my... Well let's see what Thomas says.

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. He decided to go to church on this day. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said the same words "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." And Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Those are the only words we have recorded by Thomas. *“My Lord and my God!”* Because I think that’s what faith is all about. “But Lord, I want you to walk me through this. Take my hand,” like you take the hand of a small child crossing the street. “Lord, help me come out of my control areas and learn something new about you. Help me to experience some form of your greatness.”

There are times when I don’t know how to pray for someone. I pray for people regularly. Someone comes to me, “Would you pray for me?” I say, “Yes, I’ll pray for you.” But sometimes you don’t know exactly how to pray for someone. And sometimes I don’t know how to pray for the situation. I could pray that they be healed or I could pray they’ll be rescued from this situation. It’s such a difficult, complicated situation. I have a hard time imagining what healing looks like or rescue looks like in this situation. So what I need to pray for is “I pray, Lord, would you please reveal your power in this situation. I don’t even know what that looks like, Lord. But I just want to pray that you would reveal your power. It may be in the confines of the challenges that are here or maybe something brand new. I don’t know. But I want to be open to your power to be demonstrated in ways that I don’t even know how to pray for.” God is much bigger than we can imagine and faith is going to take us there. Not faith in just illusion, but this faith in God that He’s going to do something bigger. Something that we can’t even imagine.

Then He makes the statement in verse 29, which is the verse for us. It’s the application for us in our own lives. He says – Now Thomas, *“Because you have seen me, you have believed.”* I think it’s just very compassionate of God to have done this, for Jesus to come and reveal to Thomas what he needed. I think sometimes Jesus does that in our lives. He gives us what we need so that we can have those easy steps in order to go where we need to go.

But He says there’s a special blessing. Do you see that word *blessed* there? There’s a special blessing for *those who have not seen and yet have believed*. There’s a blessing waiting there outside of the walls, the locked doors that’s waiting for you and me. The only way to get that is to allow God to take us out of there or at least realize that Jesus is inside of the room and the control with us, and then He knocks down those walls, He takes us out to accomplish a mission. But there’s a blessing waiting there.

And notice. I’m just going to take you really quick to the last line before I read it all. It says – *and that by believing you may have life in his name*. Real life is not in the confines of the locked room that we build for ourselves in our lives. It’s in the taking of risks and going out to accomplish the mission that God has for us. It’s life. It’s the blessing. It’s what’s waiting for us outside of the control areas of our lives where we don’t have all the answers, but we’re willing to trust God to take us out of there. That requires some imagination. Some people shake their heads, roll their eyes. “I can’t believe that God might do anything different than what I have right now.” That’s why faith requires this imagination to get out of where we are to get where we need to be.

Now I think verses 30 and 31, I always thought they’re in the wrong place. They’re at the end of chapter 20, but the book isn’t over yet. You’d think these are like concluding verses for the whole book. They should be at the end of chapter 21. But they’re at the end of chapter 20 and they say this: *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not*

recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

I think they're great at the end of the book, but I think the reason they're here is because John wants us, as the readers, to realize that we don't want to be just like Thomas who has to have all the facts in order to believe. There's a lot more stories about Jesus we don't know about. There's lots more stories about our lives that haven't been written yet. I like those who look at the book of Acts, which is what takes place after Jesus' time. Now in the book of Acts we have 28 chapters and sometimes people say, "I'm in Acts 29," because we're in that part of scripture that is promised for us. We're living out the faith. We're in the next section. We're experiencing the life and the blessing. So John, as he's writing this book under the power of the Holy Spirit, writes these things.

There's lots more stories about Jesus, but the ones that are here that are written are designed for a purpose. They're there so you can escape the confines of your locked room and you can believe. In the midst of that imagination and faith, God wants to do something big, He wants to bless you, He wants to give you life.

Well that's going through the passage verse by verse. So we ended now John 20. But what happens after that? Well we know what happens in John's life. Let's just go to a couple verses. He wrote 1 John. So he wrote the gospel we just read, but years later he writes 1 John. Notice the words. Once you have this context of what happened in the upper room here and you see Jesus in that presence, now let's read how he starts this epistle in 1 John 1. He says – *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.* John is confident: We've got a message. It's something that we've experienced personally and we share it with you.

Peter is another guy who's up there in the upper room. He starts out his book in 1 Peter 1 down in verse 8 and 9 he says – *Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy* (see all of that coming out of the upper room in that glorious room there), *for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* The end result of our faith is much bigger than we can ever imagine.

What happened to Thomas? This is a fun part of the story. We don't have anything in the scriptures anymore about Thomas, but history tells us that Thomas traveled from Israel all the way to India and at 52 A.D. he shared Jesus Christ with some people in India. So today in India the Christian people in India look back on Thomas as the missionary who came and shared the gospel with them so they could learn more about Jesus Christ and who he is.

I have a friend, his name is P.C. Mathew. Dr. P.C. Mathew and I teach together. The next time I'm going to see him is in Dubai. I'm going to Dubai in November and we're going to be teaching pastors and Christian leaders about family ministry and I will see Dr. P.C. Mathew then. He is from India. I hope someday he's going to come and teach here at our church. He heads up the Urban India Ministries in India and they're having a great ministry to the people of India in

regards to sharing the faith of who Jesus is and applying that to family dynamics in the home. But P.C. Mathew was reminding me that we see our history, our faith history, our Christian history going all the way back to Thomas.

I've got to tell you, something happened between Thomas' experience in the upper room and his experience in India. How he got to India, that must have taken a lot of faith and a lot of imagination for him to decide to leave that upper room, to say yes. He now says, "My Lord and my God. I see and I believe." I'm willing to take that and expand that and allow God to work.

I would suggest that as Christians we have the greatest ability to fly because we know that God exceeds our imagination. And that imagination is something we all need. That imagination is going to increase our faith. That imagination is going to allow us to move outside of the boundaries of the confines of our life the way it is now. I don't know what God's going to do in your life. I'm kind of intrigued. I wish we could zip ahead and see some of the great things some of you young people in particular are going to do.

When I was thirteen years old I was in a Sunday school class and my teacher's name was Elliot Lee. He took a liking to me, as he did with a lot of the young men in our church and ongoing (not just in the years that I was with him, but that was just his whole life). He was in his mid-twenties when he started teaching my class. He took me and he said, "I'll teach you how to preach. You want to learn how to preach?" I said yeah. At thirteen years old, yeah I'd like to learn how to preach. So he took me into the sanctuary and he had me stand up in front of the pulpit. He told me, "I want you to tell me any kind of a story you want. Tell me the story of the three little pigs if you want. And when you tell me the story of the three little pigs, I'll critique you." He was the only person in the congregation and I told the story of whatever the story was and he would critique me about gestures and my position and different things. I just really was blessed by Elliot Lee.

This last week I was on vacation in California and I had breakfast with Elliot Lee. He's seventy years old now. He was telling me that three of the people that he cared for and he ministered to as a Sunday school teacher have gone on to be pastors in their lives. What a testimony to a man who was able to take an imagination, just have this imagination of a thirteen year old boy somehow learning how to preach and be a pastor. It just gave me such faith and I just appreciate his mentorship when I was there. I can hardly wait to see what some of you are going to do in your lives and what God is going to do to expand His calling in your life to be something bigger. But it's going to take imagination.

Imagination is part of faith. Thomas lacked it at first, but God did something powerful in his life that really opened doors of ministry. I trust that He will do that in our lives as well.

Would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, sometimes we just ask you for the grace to get through the day. We ask you for the imagination to complete the day and to get through whatever challenge we're experiencing. Lord, we know you have much bigger plans for us. Give us the faith to believe and to trust you. Do that work in our hearts to grow us, to expand us. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.