

John 20:19-31

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

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."

Jesus and Thomas

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."

The Purpose of This Book

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.

Sermon: What did Thomas doubt?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Good old doubting Thomas. We like to give him a bad rap, we like to think that Thomas is an example of someone who is resistant to God, who has a hard heart, who has either poor faith or no faith at all. We like to look down on Thomas, and at the same time feel a little superior about our own faith. But, what if we're wrong about him? What if we're focusing on the wrong thing and missing the revelation of Christ that is present in this story?

Let's be honest here – the other disciples aren't doing any better. The powerful preaching that we heard from Peter in the Acts reading this morning took place after Pentecost, after the giving of the Holy Spirit. At the time of Thomas' story we find the disciples cowering together in the dark – windows barred, door locked shut, voices low. They are afraid. It's been quite a day so far, early in the morning Mary found the empty tomb and ran to fetch Peter and another disciple, the one Jesus loved, and they ran to investigate. They found that the tomb was indeed empty.

But they didn't linger to figure out what might have happened. The two went back to the upper room again to huddle and murmur with the other disciples. But not Mary. She stayed by the tomb, weeping, where she discovered why the tomb was empty when she spoke with the risen Jesus. She tried to hold

him, but Jesus sent her to the other disciples with a message – I am alive, and I am going to ascend to the Father.

And so a second time Mary runs off to that same upper room to find the disciples and share with them the good news. If the church is a community of faithful believers who witness and proclaim that Jesus, the son of God, has been resurrected and is alive today, then in the very beginning, Mary is the church. Persistently. Mary is the only one who knows, she is the one who spreads the word – the entire gospel proclamation rests on her alone.

Back to the ones that she shared the message with – the other disciples. The two saw the empty tomb, but missed the angels and Jesus. The other nine stayed in the room and didn't even come out. Even after Mary came the second time, relaying that she had spoken with Jesus and that he was in fact alive, these disciples were still hiding, locked away together, afraid. Afraid of the religious leaders, afraid of the Romans, or afraid of being singled out in the marketplace in a repeat of what happened to Peter on the night of the crucifixion – that man is one of them.

These men hiding together are not an inspiring image of the early church – these aren't the prison breaking guerilla preachers that we read about in Acts - not even close. But then Jesus came to them. He breathed on them and said to them 'receive the Holy Spirit.' This is reminiscent of the creation story in Genesis when God breathes life into the man he has made. Jesus breathes his spirit into the disciples – this is John's Pentecost. This giving of the Spirit to the disciples is what gives them courage to begin to be the church.

You see, Jesus needed to call his disciples a second time. The first call didn't quite stick. Even after all the signs of power that Jesus did in their presence, after being sent out two by two and performing great miracles in Jesus' name, they quickly forgot and each one of them abandoned Jesus in his time of need. So Jesus needed to call the disciples a second time - to gather them together to strengthen them, encourage them, and empower them.

But Thomas missed this second call. Maybe he was out shopping, or maybe he was looking around the tomb for his own meeting with Jesus – we don't know. As much as we put down Thomas, he was the only one not hiding in the upper room – but Thomas the twin was not with the other disciples when the Lord came to them – he did not receive the breath of the Spirit that the others did. So, when the others told him what had happened, he replied '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.'

No doubt when Thomas did finally arrive to see the disciples, he felt totally out of place, maybe even thinking that they were suffering some kind of group hallucination. Yet, he didn't abandon the cause of Jesus, nor did he deny the resurrection. He simply wanted to experience Jesus' presence like the other disciples; he needed to know for himself that Jesus is alive, before he committed himself again.

Choosing to continue to follow Jesus just after he had been executed as a rebel would have been a very serious decision – having not seen Jesus directly as the others did – Thomas needed this reassurance.

Thomas' doubt was a quest for faith. It was not simply skepticism for the sake of being obstinate. When he finally encountered the Risen Jesus, Thomas was transformed and eventually he journeyed to the East to share the Gospel in India. Thomas wasn't just being difficult here, he was genuinely seeking answers.

But we can go deeper into this – there is more to be learned from this story. We begin by asking ‘what exactly is it that Thomas is doubting?’ We usually assume that Thomas was doubting that Jesus had been resurrected – that would be our stumbling block. But I think that if we make this assumption it shows we haven’t really been reading the Bible very closely. You see, this is not Thomas’s first resurrection.

The last thing that Jesus and the disciples did before entering Jerusalem was to stop over in Bethany to see Jesus good friend Lazarus and raise him from the dead. This Lazarus who had been dead for days was raised to life in front of all the disciples, including Thomas. Thomas already knew and believed that Jesus was able to resurrect others with the power of God – why then would it be that Thomas would doubt that Jesus could be resurrected by this same power? I don’t think that Thomas for a moment doubted the possibility of resurrection. I think he was overwhelmed by the implications of it. Perhaps Thomas, more than the others, understood what Jesus’ resurrection really meant.

The Jews, including the disciples, were waiting for a Messiah to come in power - a king who would forcibly strike down the oppressors of God’s people, who would drive out the Romans with the sword and purify Israel with fire. Humans respond to violence with greater violence – might equals right and so the righteous God must of course be the mightiest of them all.

And yet, when Thomas bowed before Jesus, crying out “My Lord and my God,” he has to relinquish all his prior thoughts about God. If the executed Messiah who stood before him truly was his Lord, then he would have to understand the Messiah differently. The Messiah comes not with some sort of superior divine firepower. In other words, Jesus doesn’t come with violence to vanquish our human violence. No, that would be our way, not God’s way.

Instead, Jesus came not to execute a greater divine violence, but instead to suffer our worst violence with faith in God’s superior power of life. God submitted to our violence on the cross and revealed it as powerless before God’s power of life.

In the cross and resurrection, our seemingly endless capacity to hurt each other and kill each other is met with God’s truly endless capacity to forgive and to give life. This is what Thomas was struggling with. Not whether God could resurrect Jesus, but instead, thought Thomas, could it be true that God answers death with life? Could it be true that while we committed the worst possible sin of killing God’s own son that he would respond with life and forgiveness, rather than wrath and destruction? Did God really do this thing for us?

Think back to the words of Jesus when he appeared to his disciples for the first time since being crucified; ‘Peace be with you.’

Jesus came to give peace. Jesus came to give forgiveness. Jesus forgave those who beat him. Jesus forgave those who pulled his beard and spat in his face. Jesus forgave those who convicted him. Jesus forgave those who cried out for his blood, who pounded the nails, who betrayed him, abandoned him, swore they never knew him. And Jesus forgives you. For everything that you bring before him.

But more than this, and perhaps this is what gave Thomas pause, Jesus said ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

Not only are we forgiven for the atrocities in our lives, we are called to follow in Jesus' selfless footsteps and forgive others. For everything that they ask for. No matter how much we feel we have been wronged, hurt or betrayed, we are called to forgive. Forgive, because of our gratitude at being forgiven ourselves.

I saw this put into practice in an interview with Naseem Faheem, who is a Coptic Christian in Egypt. Her husband was killed in the bombing of St Mark's Cathedral two Sundays ago that killed 47 people. When asked what she had to say to those responsible, she responded "I'm not angry at the one who did this. I'm telling him, 'May God forgive you, and we also forgive you. Believe me, we forgive you.'"

Imagine the strength of this woman, to be able to say such a thing when her husband has been murdered and her family ripped apart. It is the strength of the Holy Spirit. It is the strength of the resurrected Christ. It is the strength of life and hope, arising out of violence and death.

This is what Thomas struggled with. Not that Jesus had been resurrected – that had been done before – but Thomas struggled with the ramifications of that resurrection. God had responded to our worst act with an overwhelming I love you.

Thomas, realized that the resurrection meant so much more than a body that was alive – the resurrection is a declaration from God, it is a new kingdom, it is an assurance of purpose and place – it is the revelation of the very heart of God. This revelation should fill you with awesome wonder and a wild hope – just as it did Thomas. No wonder he wanted some reassurance.

The way into this new kingdom is revealed by Jesus, and in fact is Jesus. We follow Jesus into the Kingdom by doing as he did, and doing what he told the disciples 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

A very simple way of life. But not an easy one – certainly not an easy one. Jesus knows we cannot live a life of forgiveness on our own power, so he gives us one more gift. 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'

To which our response can only be 'My Lord and my God.'

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.