

Providence Presbyterian Church
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John 20: 19-31

There are different ways to tell the same story. Different people will retell the same event through different eyes, attentive to different details, construed through different perspectives. If you have ever corrected your spouse's, or close friend's version of a story, you know what I am talking about. Therefore, it is notable that our scriptures preserve different perspectives, different emphases, different remembered or construed details around the events of Jesus' death and resurrection.

John tells us of the events following the resurrection somewhat uniquely. What I like about John's account is that he draws out two significant aspects. The First is the impact of these events on the disciples, its magnitude, and how the disciples have reacted. They are grieving and distraught, like Mary at the tomb in our passage last week. They are fearful for their lives. Thomas is full of doubt. Peter, in chapter 21, has gone back to fishing, back to the family business which he had always known. There is a cloud of trauma, bewilderment, guilt, and failure. They scattered. They hid.

The disciples are portrayed in their frailty and humanity. We get glimpses into their hopes and dreams that didn't pan out as they expected. We hear of their failings, of denying and turning away. We hear of their confusion, their grief, of locking themselves in a house. These are the early church pioneers, many of whom will come to be portrayed with saintly halos, who will die martyrs' deaths. But we see them in John's gospel with all their humanly emotions and ups and downs.

The second aspect John draws out is the relationships between Jesus and the disciples; that Jesus does not shun them for these human emotions and ups and downs. Just the opposite, Jesus goes to them, like one goes to a dear friend. Jesus seeks them out. He initiates a reconnection and even reconciliation. Jesus acknowledges what they have been through, lets them touch his scars as he acknowledges and dignifies theirs. Jesus appears in the locked room. He offers words of peace, of hope, of God's continued presence with them, and of ongoing ministry that now rests in their hands. "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

So even while John writes to convey the events of the cross and resurrection and what it means in God's redemptive history, he does so in such a way that highlights the relationships. He highlights the friendship and what Jesus meant to them. He

gives us a window into how the disciples are doing. We hear of how Jesus goes to them and reconnects. They are fearful and still reeling. And Jesus comes to them.

In our passage this morning, Jesus has risen. Jesus has conquered the grave. And while that objective truth is great, you wouldn't know it by the disciples' state. They are still locked in the house, hiding. You see, that's what John's gospel captures a bit of, the process of the disciples coming to grapple with and connect to the reality of the resurrection and what it means now. The same question applies to us. Christ has risen, but could you tell looking at us?

And so in verses 19-23, the disciples were locked inside the house out of fear, and Jesus appears before them. He shows them his scars, and he speaks, "Peace be with you." Now we are not told of their specific reaction, but they do go out and find Thomas, who was not there, and exclaim to him, "We have seen the Lord." Jesus meets them in their fear and dismay and confusion, and this encounter seems to start to revive hope. Though it is notable, we are told they are still locked in a room a week later.

But Thomas is not there at the time. Thomas is obviously the one with bad luck or unfortunate timing. I mean, Jesus had to come back just as he went out for falafel. But, while the others exclaim that they have seen Jesus, Thomas does not believe yet. No, he needs some encounter of his own. He needs to touch the scars and the wounds before he can believe again. To believe again—not just agree that yes, Jesus rose, but believe like he did the first time, to be compelled and propelled in such a way that this calling takes over one's life and choices. He needs more.

Growing up in the church back in the hills of western New York, Thomas was dubbed doubting Thomas. Doubting was construed as a flaw. Thomas was made an example of, don't doubt but believe. But can I ask you, do you doubt? Do you have questions? Perhaps you recite the creeds or answer the church's constitutional questions and have points where the wording is hard to give a straight or hearty yes to. And while doubts can be intellectual, doubts and other similar emotions are often connected to experiences. Sometimes the doubt comes from experiences when God didn't work as we expected him to, didn't act as we expected. Or we have seen things in the world that don't square well with what we profess in church. And so we may have our doubts. Thomas has been through something significant, and he can't just push forward without acknowledging and processing it all. He doubts.

So Jesus will repeat his appearance for Thomas' sake. Just as Jesus goes to Mary, and as he goes to Peter, he comes to Thomas. In verses 26-29, Jesus appears again

to them in the locked room, and he shows his scars again. And this time, Thomas will touch the wounds and put his hand in Jesus' side. And, as Thomas gets a chance finally to touch the wounds of Jesus, we hear his exclamation in that moment of reconnection - "My Lord and my God!" We hear a bit of Thomas' passion and hope coming through. And this is important because what Jesus wants for the disciples is not just mental assent, but the rebirth of passion and conviction that will carry it forth. Because they will be given the ministry and responsibility of forgiveness.

So even though Jesus has already revealed himself, already gone through the walls of the locked room, already showed his scars, already pronounced the blessing of peace, already commissioned the disciples to carry on the ministry of forgiveness, Jesus will do again for Thomas. In doing so, we see Jesus' value on the relationship and compassion and his continued vision for characters like Thomas.

Jesus and Thomas model something for us here. They model for us what many a wise counselor would tell us also – that one cannot just move forward without reconfiguring or coming to terms with the past. Those wise counselors might remind us that our experiences in the past can continue to shape how we see or live into the future.

You see, the fear and the impulse to lock oneself away, the sadness and the hesitancy to trust, the questions that need some type of answer, these are all tied to experiences that don't wash away easily. And the commission to forgive--what is it that must be forgiven? While I suppose it is possible to forgive the future, forgiveness is usually about coming to terms with what has happened. Coming to terms with each other's limitations. Will you forgive or retain/hang-onto what has happened? God gives the disciples the ministry of forgiveness and the sense of responsibility because it is possible, it seems, to rather than forgive, one can retain and hold onto the past, to hurt, to errors, to insults; to stop the process of healing rather than aid it.

We often like to say the past is behind us. We need to forget the past and look towards the future. But what we see here is that the resurrection changes not only the possibilities of the future. It changes how Thomas understands and experiences what has happened in the past as well. The past and the future are deeply connected, and that to move into the future without coming to terms and reconfiguring the past means that the future is actually, in no small degree, determined, not open at all. Meaning we will continue to play out old patterns and respond to stimuli in established ways. Unless Thomas touches the wounds and has

his own fears and wounds acknowledged, he will not likely be able to live out of hope and healing and courage.

Jesus seems to know this. He patiently and lovingly makes his rounds, coming to his friends and disciples. Touching wounds. Remembering. Crying. Rejoicing. So rather than stuffing down the doubts, hiding the hurts, suppressing the big questions, he embraces these. Because while we often see doubts and experiences connected to them as problems, as detractors to faith, Jesus embraces these and deepens the relationship. There is room for these in Jesus' presence. Jesus can handle them. He can sit with them. He can be present to their confusion and pain. Because Jesus is not just interested in them believing as in mental assent. He wants their hearts, growth, healing, passion and love. He wants them to be able to forgive, not to retain the sins of the past.

This is why I love Amichai's poem. Because he suggests that if we want growth and fruitfulness in our life, we have to till the soil, let the dirt breathe so that new life can grow. He suggests that it is our need to be right or certain and not acknowledge the doubts that pack the soil, don't allow the soil to breathe, don't allow new growth. On the other hand, doubts and loves are the things that till the soil and make the new growth possible. He conveys doubts as a hopeful and fruitful resource. This seems to be true of Thomas. His doubts and all that is unresolved for him push him towards Jesus, to a place of healing, and hope and possibility.

Now John Kullman shared an insight on this poem the other night that I hadn't noticed, even while he claimed to be a novice with poetry. Nice try, John! He recognized the contrast between moles and plows, same with doubts and loves. For moles, like the benefit that worms bring to your garden, both moles and plows till up the soil. They let air and nutrients down into the soil. However, moles are more wild and unruly. In the same way perhaps, doubts can serve us well, though more unruly than loves. We might be quick to shun doubts, just as we might not ordinarily welcome moles into our yard.

Our questions, our inquiries, our unrequited hopes and longings, things that some might view as at odds with faith, these might actually serve us well, might lead us closer to the things of God, to the presence of the one who loves us. Perhaps there ought to be room for questions and doubts in the church, places to acknowledge our doubts and the experiences often tied to those doubts. Because John reminds us, central to this gospel story is a savior who knows what we have been through and who comes to us even as he did his disciples and friends.

John says that, "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." He wants us to believe, but believe like Thomas did. Not pushing down the doubts and experiences, but acknowledging them, and even using them as a resource that pushes us closer to the one who loves us, a resource that can deepen our love. For, we must remember that Jesus not only cares about his friends and wants their best, but he commissions them to forgive. "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Can you go to others the way Jesus goes to Thomas? Can you help us come to terms and heal? Can you forgive and help them forgive, or will we retain the power of the past experiences, past failings, past conflicts?

So, I invite you to remember, in this season of Easter, that our Lord is risen, and he comes to us. He shares his wounds, he acknowledges ours, and he breathes on us the Spirit so that we might embody Christ's grace and forgiveness in the world. Because these things are written so that we too might declare with passion and conviction, the words of Thomas, "my Lord and my God."

And all God's people said...

Num 6:24-26

The Lord bless you and keep you;

²⁵ the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

²⁶ the Lord lift up his countenance^[a] upon you and give you peace.

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

(Lk 24.36—43; 1 Cor 15.5)

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^c), 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^d that Jesus is the Messiah,^e the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

^c Gk *Didymus*

^d Other ancient authorities read *may continue to believe*

^e Or *the Christ*

