

“Enough to Believe”

John 20:19-31

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The resurrection is not about an ending, but a beginning. For the gospel writers, Jesus' resurrection was not a happy ending, a nice way to conclude a great story; rather the resurrection was a sign that the gospel story continues; it's ongoing. The observance of Eastertide, the fifty days from the Day of Resurrection to the Day of Pentecost reminds us that for the Church, the Day of Resurrection, Easter Sunday is not a past event, commemorated on a single day, once-a-year. Jesus' rising from the dead is a creative act that allows the life of faith to continue. Christ is risen. And here we are.

In our gospel reading for today it's *still* the Day of Resurrection. But now evening has come and, even though Simon Peter and the other disciple have seen the empty tomb, even though Mary Magdalene has told them, “I have seen the Lord,” the disciples meet in fear behind locked doors. The scattered flock reassembles, still trembling with shock and disbelief at the crucifixion of their “good shepherd.” We are not privy to their conversations, but I imagine them sitting there in the darkness, trying to decide what to do next: “I could always go back to fishing.” “I suppose I could go back to collecting taxes.” “I could go back to being a prostitute.” I could go back.

Perhaps there was no real conversation. Maybe it *was* just as silent as the scriptures, and all of those thoughts of going back, of returning to the safety of the status quo, were simply unspoken temptations. Maybe it's just my imagination. But before the disciples could say or do anything, “Jesus came and stood among them.” He didn't come with harsh words, “Why did you leave me?!” “How could you deny me?!” “Where were you?!” Instead, he said, “Peace be with you.” With those gentle words he reminded them of his promise: “My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27). Peace be with you. It was not a wish—like, “May you have peace.”—but a statement of fact (cf. Ray Brown). It may be more helpful to translate it: “Peace *is* with you.” It's an affirmation. Someone once said, “I am never sure how, or why, Jesus has come to

me and stood in that sequestered place of fear and forgetfulness, but he has again and again."¹ Jesus keeps his promise; and there is peace.

Then Jesus does something interesting, he simply shows them the wounds in his hands and his side, perhaps a silent gesture to remind them that “it” happened; and that he was no ghost. But rather than initiating a theological conversation on the nature of resurrection of the body, Jesus reaffirms the peace they possess, and *commissions* them: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” There is no going back.

And at that moment Jesus breathed on them, just as God breathed life into Adam in Genesis 2:7, and he said, “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.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that “[w]hen he did that Christ made the Church, and in it our brother [our sister], a blessing to us” (Life Together, 111). In this blessing is the freedom to live with one another without pretense. We don’t have to be fake. “The pious fellowship,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “permits no one to be a sinner. So everyone must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners” (110). Yet Jesus’ commission dares us to do just that, to acknowledge that we have need of forgiveness as much as the next person. **Confession and forgiveness of sins are signs of resurrection, of a new creation.**

The Apostle Paul wrote that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, **and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.**” (2 Cor. 5:17-18). We think of Sunday as the first day of the week, but “The *Epistle of Barnabas* called Sunday ‘an eighth day, that is the beginning of another world...in which Jesus also rose from the dead.’ Early Christians saw the Lord’s Day as the eighth day of creation, when, having rested on the seventh day, God began to create anew” (Handbook 18).

“But Thomas” wasn’t there that Sunday evening, that first-eighth-day (v.24). Where was he? He seemed willing to follow Jesus to death (Jn 11). How far away did he run? If you weren’t here last week, you are Thomas. It’s okay, I like Thomas. He gets a bad wrap, I think. In Scripture he’s called Didymus, the Twin, but we know him better as “Doubting Thomas.” Because when the disciples echo Mary Magdalene’s testimony, telling him, “We have seen the Lord!” **it’s not enough for Thomas.** No, he needs tangible proof to believe that this talk of

¹ <http://thelisteninghermit.wordpress.com/2011/04/25/is-it-really-you-easter-2/>

resurrection, this new-life-in-Christ-talk is real: “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” (v.25) . And for that we call him a doubter. In his consternation and disbelief, Thomas dares Jesus to show himself; he dares him to be resurrected. And “after eight days,” the next Sunday, Jesus returns to their hideout and dares Thomas to see his hands and touch the wound in his side; Jesus dares Thomas to believe. Hear. See. Touch. Believe.

We are not told that Thomas actually touched Jesus, and there is some debate about that, but I like to think he *did*. Caravaggio created a marvelous painting of this scene, called *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, which I’d prefer to call *The [Audacity] of Saint Thomas*. In this painting, we see Thomas putting his finger into the spear wound in Jesus’ side. To me he bears the expression of a blind man, searching in the dark for just enough to believe; his eyes widening with astonishment, as his finger enters Jesus’ wounded flesh. I don’t know about you, but I am a lot like Thomas. As Frederick Buechner says:

Even though [Jesus] said the greater blessing is for those who can believe without seeing, it’s hard to imagine that there’s any believer anywhere who wouldn’t have traded places with Thomas, given the chance, and seen that face and heard that voice and touched those ruined hands.

If you were to tell me that you saw someone I saw die, up and walking about, I’d need proof, too. And if you were to tell me that God loves me, and that my sins are forgiven, I’d need some proof. I’d need to hear it, see it, and feel it in order to believe it.

This is why Jesus’ commission to the disciples (to us) is so important, not as a theory, but as a practice. Through Christ’s commission we may be as Christ to one another (111). “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.” (v.22) We *all* need to experience the giving and receiving of forgiveness, and can do so because we have received God’s Spirit and *this* great commission. And I’m not talking about the purely sentimental kind of forgiveness that assumes that in an instant everything will be fine. The visibility of Jesus’ wounds reminds us that “it” happened, and that forgiveness, resurrection does not erase the past; it does not restore the Garden of Eden. But real forgiveness does allow for healing and for life to go on, even though things are no longer the same. There is a *new* creation!

Real forgiveness is difficult. Most of us find it easier to withhold forgiveness, to hold a grudge. It is the road most traveled, and that is why I believe we have practices like “passing the peace.” It is more than a friendly greeting during worship. Consider it practice for forgiving, for resurrection. When you hear “The peace of Christ be with you” hear also “Christ is risen”. And when you hear “and also with you” hear “He is risen indeed.” *Allelulia*. You may feel like you’ve been doing this for so long it has lost all meaning, but try greeting someone with a *sign of Christ’s love and affection* after you’ve had a falling out. That is not an easy handshake. The same is true for the times we join in the Prayer of Confession and tell each other, “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!” It is not always easy to say, but we do; we have to. Much of what we plan and do as the church is preparation for the times when we will be called to truly enact the love of God, being the visible, flesh and blood Body of Christ. As Peter Gomes once said: “[We offer our own lives] as the immediate and ultimate ‘explanation,’ remembering that Christian truth is advanced not by postulates and formulas, the bone-crushing logic of arguments point and counterpoint, but in the living flesh of human beings.” (xii)

Forgiveness, resurrection could have happened anywhere at anytime, but it began on a Sunday, on the eighth day, the Lord’s Day. And in that passing of the peace and commissioning, something new was created, life together as the Church. So if such a thing were to begin in our time, why not start today, the eighth day, the Lord’s Day in this meeting place. On any given Sunday we stand in need of a sign that forgiveness is real, that in fact if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation. All the sign we may need is a handshake or hug accompanied by the words of Jesus: “Peace be with you.” It may be enough for someone to hear, “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!” And somewhere in the heart and mind the confession may be heard, “My Lord and My God!”

Amen.