

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 04/07/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Second Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, April 7th

John 20:19-31

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A matter of belief

The text for the Second Sunday of Easter is a continuation of the resurrection narrative from John's Gospel. Despite Mary Magdalene's eyewitness account of the risen Christ earlier on that first Easter Sunday, later in the evening the disciples are still cowering in fear behind locked doors. The risen Christ is not passive. He appears to His followers in their trauma and brings them peace and comfort. As the first part of the resurrection story focused on the perspective of Mary Magdalene, this text centers on another individual's perspective – Thomas. For whatever reason, Thomas was absent when Jesus appeared to His followers. Before He would believe He demanded the ultimate proof. A week later, Thomas encountered the risen Christ and believed.

John 20:19-31 Commentary

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

If Good Friday was a long day for the disciples, then Easter Sunday was just as long. A lot happened that day. The footnote in the ESV Bible suggests the word for Jews (Greek = *Ioudaioi*) probably refers here to Jewish religious leaders, and others under their influence. Jesus appears to them and greets them with the standard Jewish greeting. Perhaps they did not immediately recognize Jesus in His resurrected (and glorified) body, so He shows them His hands and His side. This did the trick. We are told the disciples were "*glad*" (or "*rejoiced*") when they discerned (*idontes*) it was the Lord.

²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And 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 withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Jesus repeats the earlier greeting and thus there is perhaps greater meaning here. Perhaps this is a connection to Jesus' statement earlier in John, "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid*" (John 14:27). Next comes the Johannine version of the "Great Commission." As God the Father sent Jesus, now Jesus sends His disciples. All three persons of the Trinity are involved in this commission. The Father sent the Son, the Son sends His disciples who will be equipped with the Holy Spirit. Like the prophets of old, Jesus symbolically illustrates the coming of the Holy Spirit that will

shortly occur at Pentecost. There is a connection here to Jesus' earlier conversation with Nicodemus. The same word (*pneuma*) is used to describe wind, breath, and Spirit (John 3:1-14).

Verse 23 involves the Greek perfect tense verbs - the sense of completed past action and continuing results. The text can be translated as "*they have been forgiven*" and "*it has been withheld*." What appears to suggest the disciples have special power to forgive sins or withhold the forgiveness of sins is better understood as they proclaim the Gospel message of forgiveness of sins, those that believe in Jesus have their sins forgiven and those that do not believe do not have their sins forgiven. This reflects the action that God has already accomplished. It is the same for us today - our responsibility is to proclaim the Gospel in words and deeds.

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, 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 in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Thomas was not present in the locked room and missed the appearance of Jesus. He did not believe the testimony of the rest. Thomas also states that he will not be satisfied just to see the wounds, but he insists on being able to feel that they are real. This is so he can be sure that the resurrected Jesus has a physical body and not some sort of phantom or apparition. Thomas is quite adamant: "*Unless..., I will never believe.*"

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, 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; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, 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 believed."

The following Sunday (eight days includes counting the starting day) the festival of Unleavened Bread is now over, and the disciples are in the same position behind locked doors. One would have thought an encounter with the risen Christ the previous week would have had some effect. Jesus appears to them as he did the previous week and extends the same greeting. Jesus then grants Thomas his wish and challenges him to believe. It is not recorded whether Thomas touched Jesus, but Thomas has no doubt who Jesus is. He confesses Jesus as "*my Lord*" (*Kyrios*) and "*my God*" (*Theos*). This is the highest confession of faith. This echoes the proclamation of Jesus as God in 1:1 and 1:18. Notice that Jesus does not rebuke Thomas' claim of His deity. Rather, Jesus responds with a benediction that extends to you and I who do not have eye-witness testimony but still believe. God delights in our belief.

Some non-believers argue that Thomas is merely exclaiming astonishment and thus taking God's name in vain - that he never claimed Jesus was God. The text, however, is clear: "*Thomas answered him.*"

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Now comes the purpose statement of John's entire Gospel. It is considered the climax of what is also known as *The Gospel of Belief*. The author is echoing the words of Jesus: *I came that you may have life* (see John 10:10).

Reflections

Poor old Thomas. "The Twin" might not be the best nickname in the world but it certainly beats being known throughout the rest of history as "Doubting Thomas!" Before we judge Thomas too harshly, let us consider Thomas' earlier behavior recorded in John's Gospel. When Jesus learns of Lazarus' death, He decides to go back to

Judea to visit Lazarus. The disciples are quick to point out that the Jewish leaders there were just now seeking to stone Jesus. "So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'" (John 11:16). So, Thomas was the first person recorded in Scripture who was willing to die for Jesus. There is nothing about Thomas that suggests he lacks courage. At this point he lacks belief.

In many ways Thomas is just being diligent – being much like the Berean Jews in Acts 17:11. Earlier in John's Gospel after Jesus had just explained that He was going away to prepare a place for His disciples in His Father's house and that they would one day join Him there, it was Thomas who raised the concern, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5b). These questions indicate Thomas is processing what Jesus had said and that he is seeking more information. In this week's text, Thomas demands the ultimate proof – only if he sees and experiences for himself. At this point, he believes.

The story of Thomas illustrates how Christianity should not be an absolute set of doctrines that must be blindly accepted. After all, history has taught us that this approach to religion and politics never ends well. The Reformation was a movement that questioned such tradition and instead encouraged an *ad fontes* approach – going back to the sources. In this case the sources were the earliest examples of the Scriptures in Greek and Hebrew not the "orthodox" Latin translation. In many ways the church is always at risk of becoming like the Jewish leaders of Jesus' days where human traditions take precedence over God's Word. At the same time, our inner Thomas also helps us to spot those false, distorted, and watered-down gospels that plague the Church today as many Christians seek compromise with our culture or charlatans seek to satisfy fallen human desires cloaked in the semblance of religion.

Ultimately it was not "proof" that caused Thomas to believe, it was an encounter with the risen Christ. The text does not say that Thomas did what he demanded: "Unless I ... place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (v.25b). Encountering the risen Christ was everything He needed. We should be encouraged that a man like Thomas did finally come to believe. The Gospel of John illustrates how coming to belief is a process. In our time, while testimonies, intellectual arguments, and personal experiences may be part of the faith journey, faith is born from the Word and coming to belief is ultimately the result of an encounter with the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the words of the father of the boy with an unclean spirit who Jesus encountered after the Transfiguration are worth noting: "I believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24b).



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