

## Discipleship in the Lectionary - 04/16/2023



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

**Second Sunday of Easter**

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, April 16<sup>th</sup>

**John 20:19-31**

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### **The Risen Christ overcomes our doubt**

The lectionary for the second Sunday of Easter is John's Gospel account of the continuing events of the first Easter Sunday. That evening we find the disciples gathered behind locked doors in fear of the Jews. It is at this low point that the risen Christ comes to His disciples and strengthens them with His presence. He then sends them out into the world and the world will never be the same again. Without any fanfare, President Biden on Monday of this week signed legislation to end the national emergency for COVID 19. Yet how much of the church is still on lock down mentality? How much is COVID-19 still an excuse to keep ourselves to ourselves? To what extent are we still locked in the self-imposed upper rooms of our minds?

#### John 20:19-31 Commentary

John's record of the first Easter Sunday begins with Mary Magdalene visiting Jesus' tomb early in the morning when it was still dark. Finding it empty she runs to find Peter and presumably John. The three of them return to the tomb and Jesus appears to Mary while she is stood weeping outside the tomb. As Jesus directs her, Mary goes and announces to the disciples, "*I have seen the Lord*" (20:18).

*<sup>19</sup> 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." <sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.*

From 20:1-18 we know Peter and John witnessed the empty tomb and Mary told the disciples she had seen the Lord. We might conclude the natural response was one of celebration and one in which all the disciples felt compelled to share what had just happened. Yet later that same day we find the disciples behind locked doors because they were in fear of the Jews (Greek = *loudaioi*; refers here to Jewish authorities). This was a very real threat. It was in their state of fear and behind locked doors that Jesus appears to them and greets them. Perhaps they did not immediately recognize Jesus in His resurrected (and glorified) body (as Mary did not earlier in v.14) so He shows them His hands and His side. We are told the disciples were "glad" (or "rejoiced") when they discerned (*idontes*) it was the Lord.

*<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> 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). Peace (Hebrew *Shalom*) has a much richer connotation than the English word. It also involves a sense of blessing and a right relationship with God. 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.

*<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> 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. We do not know why Thomas was absent, but 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.*"

*<sup>26</sup> 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." <sup>27</sup> 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." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> 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 Christological confession in the Gospels. This echoes the proclamation of Jesus as God in 1:1,18. Notice that Jesus does not rebuke Thomas' claim of His deity. Rather, Jesus responds with a benediction that extends to all who do not have eye-witness testimony but still believe.

*<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> 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 to be 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 Thomas. He has gone down in history being known as Doubting Thomas. Yet Thomas was the first of Jesus' disciples that was willing to die for Him. When Jesus learned of Lazarus' death and announced that He would return to Judea to visit Lazarus, the disciples were quick to point out that the Jewish leaders there had just sought 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). We also hear from Thomas again 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 was the only disciple willing to voice his confusion and ask the question, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* (14:5b).

How is Thomas any different from the other disciples? Mary saw the empty tomb, but it took an appearance of Jesus for her to understand. Mary then witnessed the risen Lord to the disciples, yet they were still huddled in fear behind locked doors. It took meeting the risen Lord to convince them. Thomas is behaving no different than the others only that he is apparently more outspoken. Where Thomas demanded physical proof, he received something even greater - an interaction from the risen Lord. We do not know if Thomas even followed up on his condition for belief: *"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"*(v.25). The encounter with Jesus was enough. A man requiring the highest form of proof possible began to believe when he encountered the risen Jesus.

Just like the first disciples, we also have been sent in our time to point people to Christ by our words and actions. Yet our testimony will never be enough to convince anyone to believe. No complex theological argument, scientific proof, philosophy, or higher critical study of the Bible will ever be enough. We just point the way. It ultimately takes an encounter with the risen Christ. And that is exactly what Christ continues to do in our time. This is not a one-time thing. He continues to seek us out, even in the midst of our fears when we sit behind locked doors. No matter where we might find ourselves in this world, Christ will be there.

This week's Gospel lection challenges us to identify the locked doors in our lives. Even though there are many Christians in the world today where the threat of persecution is very real, for most of us it is usually our indifference that is more of a threat to our discipleship than fear.

When the disciples finally emerged from their locked room filled with the Holy Spirit, they began telling the world of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel created a shockwave that began in Jerusalem and radiated out across time and space leaving transformed lives and new social systems in its wake. Eventually the shockwave arrived on our shores. There have been times when this wave was barely a ripple and then times when this wave roared like a tsunami as mighty outpourings of the Holy Spirit led to great awakenings that changed the very fabric of our nation. We appear to be at another great Kairos moment for the church. We are at a time where the established expression of church may give way to an altogether new expression of church. What this will look like is still difficult to discern but one thing is clear, nothing fundamentally has changed. Christ is risen and the mission of the Church remains the same, even if local expressions may change.

## Application

- What parts of you need to die and be resurrected in Christ today?
- What beliefs do you profess to hold that you have yet to act upon?
- What is stopping you from having abundant life through Christ on earth right here, right now?

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