

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 04/24/2022



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

Second Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, April 24th

John 20:19-31

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Believe!

The day started off well enough. In the preceding text and Easter Sunday lection, we read how Peter and John, at Mary Magdalene's desperate prompting, run to find Jesus' tomb empty of His body on that first Easter morning. We read how John saw and believed. Mary Magdalene lingers outside the empty tomb as the two male disciples go back to their homes. As she is weeping, she has an encounter with the resurrected Jesus who gives her a message to deliver to the disciples. Mary then announces to them, *"I have seen the Lord"* (John 20:1-18). Is this the great beginning of the Church? Is this when the disciples take the message of the Gospel to the world? No! A few hours later we find the disciples huddling together behind locked doors in fear of the Jewish leaders. But Jesus comes to them in their fear and appears among them. He commissions them and they receive the promise of the Holy Spirit.

The second story in the text is that of "Doubting Thomas" - the disciple who missed the appearance of the resurrected Jesus in the locked room. The testimony of Peter and John earlier that morning is not enough for him. The testimony of Mary Magdalene is not enough. The testimony of all the disciples who saw Jesus appear among them is still not enough. Eight days later Thomas is confronted with the ultimate proof, and he believes.

So where does this text find us on this Second Sunday of Easter? Are we still hiding in fear? Are our churches nothing more than glorified locked rooms to keep us comfortable from the hostile culture? Are we even going to church in person? How about belief? Do we accept God's Word as it is revealed or are we holding ourselves back from our calling because we are still, deep down, looking for more proof?

John 20:19-31

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.

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 very 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 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

One week after encountering the risen Christ the disciples are still to be found huddled in fear behind locked doors. While this might be surprising to us, the disciples had not yet received the Holy Spirit. What should be surprising is that today there are many inwardly-focused churches who are existing behind locked doors. As their memberships dwindle, they are fearful of the great transformations occurring within our society. Yet our place as Christians is outside. We too have been sent. "*Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid*" (John 14:27b). "*For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control* (2 Timothy 1:7).

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 Jews 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). It was Thomas who was the first person recorded in Scripture who was willing to die for Jesus. 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 raised the concern, "*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*" (14:5b).

On the one hand, Thomas is serious and committed. His question in 14:5b indicates he is processing what Jesus is saying and wants more clarification. Like the Berean Jews in Acts 17:11, Thomas is diligent. He wants the details, and he wants the evidence. On the other hand, Thomas seeks what he thinks is the highest form of proof possible. Intellectual belief alone will never be enough. Perhaps there is a little of Thomas in all of us. In our time the highest level of truth that exists is God's revealed Word. Higher criticism, philosophy and science will not give us what we are looking for. We can perhaps channel our inner Thomas productively to spot those false, distorted, and watered-down gospels that plague the Church today as many Christians seek compromise with our culture.

We should be encouraged that a man like Thomas did finally come to believe. If anything, the Gospel of John illustrates how coming to belief is a process. I am reminded of the words of the father of the boy with an unclean spirit who Jesus encountered after the Transfiguration: "*I believe, help my unbelief!*" (Mark 9:24b).

