

Easter Appearances in John, Part I

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Of course the Risen Christ appeared first to Mary Magdalene—all the gospels agree—and she became the first evangelist of Easter’s good news. It was in the garden near the tomb. He appeared to her; she thought him first a gardener, then he spoke her name, and Easter happened to her.

John tells of three other Resurrection appearances, all unique to John. Today we will look at two of them. On May 12 I will cover the third. So we might entitle today’s sermon: Easter Appearances in John, Part I!

I

It was Easter Sunday evening: the disciples were huddled in fear behind locked doors. What would happen to them now? Were the authorities after them too?

Then Jesus suddenly appeared. He needed no door. As John might say, He *was* the door! The door to eternal life.

His first words were, “Peace be with you!” It was the word of forgiveness. The last we heard of the disciples were these words: “And they all forsook him

and fled.” So there was guilt and fear and guilty fear. And Jesus’ first words were, “Peace be with you.” All is forgiven. All is right between us.

Sometimes we lock ourselves in with our guilt and fear, and Jesus comes to fling the doors open with forgiveness. Then Jesus said it again, “Peace be with you”, because sometimes we need to hear it again. How about a thousand times more? Then he showed them his wounded hands and side, and joy overcame them.

II

The Jesus commissioned them to be *apostles*, apostles of the glad grace of Easter: *The best is not at the mercy of the worst. Hate is not the final word, love is. The grave has not the final word, God does. Love wins.*

The words he used were: “As the Father sent me into the world, so send I you.” Literally, as the Father *apostled* me, so I now *apostle* you. “Apostle” means someone who is *sent*.

Here we see the two things that happen in all Jesus’ resurrection appearances to his disciples: he forgives them and recommissions them. And so us as well.

Then he said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” and blew upon them his own breath. And his breath became God’s breath, the breath of the Holy Spirit. It was the Pentecost in John! We cannot be apostles on our own steam; we need the breath of God.

III

And what does Jesus send us to do? First this: Go, forgive peoples’ sins. Literally, *loose* them from their sins. Sin is not just something we do, it is something that does something to us. It binds us, makes us miserable. It extinguishes out hope; it has become a pinpoint of light.

But now we have been loosed from our sins, *loosed*, and now we can loose others from their sins.

We, forgiven, have been a *forgiveness community*. In Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean’s transformation began with the love and forgiveness of a priest. He was a hardened criminal just released from many years in prison. The priest received him into his house for the night when no one else would take him, an ex-con, into their homes. During the night Jean Valjean stole some priceless silver objects from the priest’s house and took off. The next day, the police caught him and brought him back to the priest’s house. The priest told the police that the man had not stolen these objects, they were a gift to him, then grabbed two silver

candlesticks and said, “You forgot these!” The prisoner’s life had now begun a transformation because of this one act of forgiveness. Forgiveness looses us, liberates us to become what God has created us to be.

IV

Forgiveness, forgiving others and ourselves is not an easy thing. That’s why Jesus taught us the *daily* prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Sometimes forgiving ourselves is the hardest part. Anne Lamott has said that forgiveness means to stop once and for all trying to make the past different. It cannot be changed, only forgiven.

This applies to what others have done to us as well. Sometimes it does take 70x7 times to forgive. C.S. Lewis, the famous Christian convert and writer wrote one day in his journal:

Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered--or felt as if I did—that I had finally forgiven someone I had been trying to forgive for over 30 years. Trying and praying that I might.

As I have said before: Some days we pray, “Lord help me forgive.” Other days we pray, “Lord, help me *want* to forgive.” And then on some days: “Lord, help me *want to want* to forgive!”

But Jesus’ call to forgive is even broader: we are to become a forgiveness community, a community of compassion, who offer forgiveness to all. When they come in our doors, they experience the compassion and forgiveness of God.

IV

There was, of course, one disciple not present that night. Thomas. And when he heard about what had happened, he said

Unless I see *in his hands*, the print of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe!

From this episode, Thomas has become known as “Doubting Thomas.” Abraham Lincoln grew up in rigidly fundamentalist Baptist churches, first Little Mount Separate Baptist church in Kentucky, then Little Pigeon Creek Baptist Church in Indiana. He had trouble accepting what he had been taught. At one point in his life he wrote to a friend.

Probably it is my lot to go on in a twilight, feeling and reasoning my way through life, as questioning, doubting Thomas did.

So with many of us. But in fact, Lincoln had perhaps the profoundest faith of any President, tested by the horrors and strains of the Civil War.

Thomas was an empiricist, a rationalist, a realist. Seeing was believing. We need a larger picture of him to more fully appreciate him. When messengers came to Jesus and told him that the brother of Mary and Martha, Lazarus, was critically ill, Jesus' disciples warned him not to go to their home in Bethany, for that was near Jerusalem where great danger lay. But Jesus was determined to go. It was Thomas who said, "Let us also go that we may die with him! (John 11:10) *Doubting?!*

And do you remember when Jesus talked to his bewildered and grieving disciples about his imminent death:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and will receive you unto myself, that where I am you may be also. (John 14:1-6c)

Then he added, "And you know the way where I am going."

It was Thomas who was the one brave enough to ask: "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" The others may have

wanted to ask, but it was Thomas who did, and Jesus answered in his lustrous words of mystery: “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

V

So Thomas, the empiricist, the rationalist, the realist declared that he would not believe unless he saw the Risen Christ so real he could see the prints in his hands and put his hand in Jesus’ side.

And Jesus obliged. He received Thomas, doubts and all. He appeared a week later to the disciples, this time with Thomas there. He turned to Thomas and said,

Put your finger here and see my hands; put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be unbelieving but believing.

In John, “faith” is not an abstract noun, it is a *verb*, *believing*. It implies a relationship, not a doctrine. There’s a difference between believing *that*, and believing *in*. Believing *that* is an act of the mind; believing *in* is an act of the heart, something closer to *trust*.

There’s an old hymn some of us used to sing that goes like this:

My faith has found a resting place

Not in device nor creed.

I trust the Ever-living One

His wounds for me shall plead.

The “blood” imagery may make you squirm, but it means at the deepest level, what we could not do for ourselves, God has done for us. And it points to the truth: Faith is deeper than theology, doctrines, creeds. It is trust, trust in the Ever-living one.

Today’s passage does not say whether Thomas actually touched Jesus’ hands and side, but Thomas was moved in some level of his being to say: “My Lord and my God!” Faith had moved from the head to the heart, or, as the mystics put it: “The mind descended into the heart.”

VI

It is very important to me that Jesus receives us doubts and all, as he received Thomas. Frederick Buechner once said, “If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.”

Buechner also wrote: “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith: they keep it alive and moving.” Yes, I think this is true. The Bible speaks of moving “from faith to faith”—which means from a less adequate faith, or no longer adequate

faith, to a more adequate faith. Sometimes the old structures of faith tumble down, and we are set on a journey to build a new faith. Jesus helps us on our way.

Some days, our patron saint is the man who cried out to Jesus, “I believe, help thou my unbelief”. And the story tells us, that was enough!

Some days old beliefs need to crumble. They are rooted in a God too small, with ideas that cripple and blind us. Doubt helps us move toward a more life-giving faith.

Doubt also saves faith from fanaticism. Someone has said that the opposite of faith is not doubt but *certainty*. Certainty can lead to dangerous forms of faith that inflict harm on others. As Pascal said, “Humankind never does evil so completely and so cheerfully as from religious conviction.” When will the killing of people at worship *stop*?

There is in all faith the element of Mystery, a knowing and a not-knowing. There is in all good theology the dimension of knowing and the dimension of not-knowing. There is the God we can know and describe and talk about, and the God beyond our knowing, deeper than thoughts, concepts, words. Our deepest prayer is beyond words.

We worship a God who is Mystery, a Mystery whose name and face is love, but still a Mystery.

Such a God leaves room for doubt and for us. Sometimes faith is a hot flame, sometimes a cool resolve, sometimes a walk in a dark wood. Sometimes it is a fervent prayer, sometimes a cup of cold water to the thirsty. And Jesus receives it all. Us all.