

Just Supposin’ John 20:19-31

¹⁹On 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." ²⁰When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."

²⁴Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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."

²⁶Eight 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." ²⁷Then 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." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but 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.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we have four different sets of readings every Sunday (including the older traditional series), except the Sunday following Easter. On this Sunday we have just one Gospel choice, John’s narration of Jesus’ appearance to the disciples gathered in a locked room, late on Sunday afternoon, and then His second appearance to the disciples and Thomas a week later. John’s narration places the events of the two Sundays in opposition to each other, especially the believing disciples and doubting Thomas. Four significant events jump out at me from the text: 1) the disciples’ seclusion behind locked doors, 2) Jesus’ sudden appearance and His blessing of peace, 3) Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples and including them in His mission, and 4) the reaction from Thomas when Jesus appears to him also. Reacting to that last event I was tempted to select as my theme “OMG, it’s Jesus!”

Have you ever played the “just supposin’” or “what if” mind game with yourself either as a child or an adult? It goes something like this – “just supposing” or “what if this happened or that didn’t happen”? I surmise some great discoveries, inventions, and wonderful stories have arisen from such mind games. Just supposin’ the world wasn’t flat. What if Germany hadn’t lost the war? Just supposin’ I affix silver nitrate to a pane of glass, put it in a light-proof box, and briefly focus light on it? What if we could make telephones portable and smaller than a deck of cards? Just supposin’ Marilyn and I had never met in high school. There is a significant chance that we would never have gotten married, had children and grandchildren, and I might not have returned to church and subsequently attended the seminary. Those little junctions in the road can have a profound influence on the course of our lives and the people around us.

However, there is a much bigger, more dramatic, far more important “just supposin’” in our text for this morning. As we examine Jesus’ appearances to His disciples and to Thomas, what if Christ had not risen from the dead?

That was not a “just supposin’” for the disciples. This was their soul-shattering reality. Jesus was indeed God incarnate raised from the dead but for the first three days following the crucifixion they had no way of knowing. They found themselves suddenly bereft of hope, deprived of direction, and robbed of certainty. No wonder they hid behind locked doors until they could make sense of what had happened.

We must suspend our knowledge and walk in their shoes for a moment. They were confused misfits who appeared to be totally wrong about the King of the new kingdom. Their teacher, master, leader, and hope were dead, and now they feared what this all meant and what would happen to them. Imagine all the haunting “what if” questions they thought of, based on what they had seen and heard for three years.

To summarize their world in two words, it would be “doubt” and “pity.” Thomas does not see, so he doubts. Paul writes, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:11). If Christ is not raised, then He is a liar, a false god, and we are stuck in our sins facing eternal death. So how does God engage the skeptics?

Jesus meets with them behind closed doors. But in that room, what did the ten disciples experience? Their world-ending fear was turned back into the joy they had hoped in. Their secluded gathering was turned into a powerful commissioning. Their despair was turned into the tangible presence of the eternal Lord and the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

In short, they had a religious experience. But only ten of them had that experience. One of the twelve may never have believed in Christ and killed himself. Another one of the

twelve, Thomas, was still an outsider to the Christ the other ten had experienced. He was still locked in a tomb of doubts.

I find something extremely interesting happening in this incident. Jesus had been building trust in His disciples. He had proved Himself honest and trustworthy but He set up a challenge that could bring it all down. It was a challenge that had to be raised. “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19). “You believe in the Father, believe also in me” (John 14:1). He put it all on the line in the crucifixion. Can we ultimately trust in Christ? Can we surrender everything to Him? If He proves unfaithful in this challenge, then trust and hope, and faith will collapse faster than a house of cards.

What was Thomas’s experience? Was he so distraught that he needed to be alone? Was he bitter and hardened because all he learned of Jesus seemed a lie? Was he the most practical of the group? “No use sitting around here, we have to get on with our lives, hope or no hope.” Was he confused because he had to redefine all the supernatural as merely psychological phenomena? The text does not tell us, but this is what Thomas today tells us.

The disciples’ prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling. They don’t know how to relate to an invisible God. Life is so hard God hardly seems loving. They are beset with disbelief as they watch hypocritical church leaders ensconced in scandal. Pain is a problem, creation is a hoax, and the supernatural is unnatural. We have no one to lean on but ourselves.

Thus, when the ten report on what they had just experienced, Thomas felt skepticism and doubt – the Doubter had not all the same religious experiences that the ten did. Their experience seemed foreign, well-intentioned but not well advised.

Thomas seeks tactile, visual, and physical proof. He is merely expressing the sentiments that countless pilgrims following him still echo. Jesus appeared to Paul, why doesn’t He appear to me? God spoke audibly to Moses, so why don’t I get a burning bush? God gave Gideon a wet fleece, so why won’t He tell me His will for my life?

We read that when Jesus did return to visit the disciples it was a week later. What was that week like for Thomas? Again, we can only conjecture but perhaps he was feeling the same things many who doubt in their churches feel – alienation from friends, not just alienation from what they believed. Those in doubt need community but tend to avoid it. Those in doubt need support and someone with whom they can express themselves, but they keep to themselves, stewing in their own juices. After all, their community holds daringly to things they are questioning and with which they are wrestling.

As Jesus returns to engage His last doubting disciple, He appears as dramatically as He had with the ten – He offers the same ironic words, “Peace be with you” to Thomas who is far away from peace at that moment. Knowing what Thomas needs, Jesus provides tactile evidence of Himself as well. “See, touch,” said Jesus.

As we encounter those who doubt, we remember that God knows their needs better than we do. Perhaps He is testing and stretching them through their exploration. Perhaps they need to lay down their idol god, or their ideal god in favor of the God. In any case, God knows best what they need and God is working in their doubt, like all things, for their good (Romans 8:28). God will provide the answer. Therefore, there is no better way to partner with people in their doubt than to pray that in His kindness God would address their deepest needs and make known the ways He is shaping them through their questioning. But notice what Jesus does not do in the face of a “doubting Thomas.” He does not punish, ignore, shame, patronize or marginalize.

Think back to the story of Job, a man of tremendous wealth and influence. A man of faith he had a loving and God-fearing family. He had been beautifully blessed and thanked God every day. Then things began to go wrong, terribly, horribly wrong. He lost everything, his wealth, his children, and his health. His wife urged him to curse God and die. Three of his old friends, who knew him in better days, stopped by to commiserate with him. They sat in sympathy for a week and then they told him to get his act together. Who was he to think he was special? Why should he be treated differently from anyone else? What might he have done to deserve such punishment?

When people question God in church, do we act more like Job’s friends than Jesus’ friends? Do we toss about trite clichés and religious generalities? Do we feel more comfortable with those who have it all together than those who are honestly engaging God? Do we accidentally create sterile operating rooms of faith where questions are a disease that must be avoided like contamination?

But God reaches out to those of little faith.

One night Jesus and His disciples were sailing across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had fallen asleep in the bow, resting on the bundled nets and tackle. Suddenly a summer storm arose. Lightning flashed across the sky. Huge claps of thunder shook the boat. The winds picked up. The sea became confused, and water started sloshing over the gunnels faster than the disciples could bail. They ran to the bow, shook Jesus awake, and pleaded, “Master, save us. We are perishing!” Jesus responded, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid” (Matthew 8:23-27)?

OUCH! What an indictment of their faith. What an indictment of our lack of faith when we fear we are perishing or our doubts grow. “We wish you had not said that, Lord!”

But He said it. Notice what He did not say. He did not say, “Listen losers, come back to Me when your faith is stronger, when you really believe, and then I might try to help you out.” He didn’t say that and then go back to sleep.

Instead, after reminding them that they had a way to go yet in their faith walk, He immediately came to their aid. He rebuked “the winds.”

Jesus rebukes the winds; we don’t. We cannot build faith in ourselves. It is God’s work. Thomas does not “achieve” coming to faith. Faith is something the risen Christ brings to Thomas.

Jesus gave Thomas the help he needed even he was in the “just supposin’” mode. Even though Thomas was still wondering, “Just supposin’ Jesus is still in the tomb.” Jesus was willing to meet Thomas in the no man’s land where faith and doubt intersect.

Thankfully there is power in the Word and power in the Sacraments. John writes, “Now Jesus did many other signs...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” (John 20:30-31). As was the case with Thomas, when the Way, the Truth, and the Life engage the doubter, Christian reality prevails. “My Lord and my God,” he cried. If Thomas was to text us across the millennia, he might have typed, “OMG! It is the Lord!”

Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe, but blessed also are those who see and believe. All seeing, all blessing, all faith comes from the same God and Savior. Amen!

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen

Soli Deo Gloria!