

PEACE BE WITH YOU

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John 20:19-31

Our reading for today from the Gospel of John can be viewed as two separate but related stories. The **first** is an account of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to his disciples. It takes place in a locked room. The **second** is where we find doubting Thomas who refuses to believe that Jesus appeared to the rest until he can see it for himself.

We find these stories at the end of John's gospel. Jesus has been crucified and hastily placed in the tomb. Three days later, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb so that she might prepare the body for a proper burial. She finds the tomb empty. She runs to get Simon Peter and she tells them what she found. He and another disciple run back to the tomb and confirm what Mary had said. The tomb was empty. They then go home. Mary returns to the tomb and stands there weeping—not knowing what else to do—when Jesus approaches her. She doesn't immediately recognize him until he says her name. Mary then returns to the disciples and announces, *I have seen the Lord*.

The first part of our reading takes place later that same day in the evening. The disciples of Jesus are gathered in a house. They had the doors locked because they were afraid of the authorities. They assumed that they are considered criminals because of their association with Jesus. They didn't know if the Jewish authorities were rounding up all of Jesus' known associates. If so, this group would be at the top of the list. While they are huddled in that locked house, Jesus somehow appears among them. Jesus says to them, *Peace be with you*. He then shows them his hands and his side—the wounds of his crucifixion—as proof of his identity. In response, the gathered disciples rejoice. Jesus again says to them, *Peace be with you*, and he adds, *As the Father has sent me, so I send you*. And then he breathes on them saying, *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*. This part of our reading is wonderfully self-contained. It is a complete story. But it doesn't end there. It continues on with the second part, the part about Thomas.

Thomas, it seems, was not in the house when Jesus first appeared and he was reluctant to accept the word of his fellow disciples when they told him, *We have seen the Lord*. Thomas replies saying, *I need to see him with my own eyes, I need to touch him myself, I need to put my finger in his wounds*.

A week goes by and again all the disciples are together and this time Thomas is with them and Jesus appears even though the doors have been shut. Again Jesus says, *Peace be with you*. Then he turns to Thomas and says, *Put your finger here*

and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe. Thomas responds with a power confession of faith, *My Lord and my God.* Jesus then asks, *Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

Over the centuries, we have attached the adjective doubting to Thomas because of his reluctance to believe in Jesus' appearance. However, this nickname Doubting Thomas is rather unfair. For one thing, early on, as a disciple Thomas committed his life to Jesus. At one point, when Jesus was heading into potential danger, Thomas said to the others, *Let us go also, that we may die with him* (John 11:16). There is no question of Thomas' commitment to Jesus. Secondly, Thomas is not the only one who has difficulty believing in the risen Jesus. None of the disciples believed until they had first seen Jesus themselves. When Mary discovered the empty tomb on Easter, she told the others and two of them had to check it out for themselves. After Mary encountered Jesus that day, she reported this to all the disciples. Yet, it wasn't until Jesus appeared to them that they actually believed that he had risen.

All Thomas wanted was proof. He wanted to believe. But he wanted to see for himself. If everyone had been like Thomas, the Christian movement would have quickly evaporated. Jesus only appeared to a limited group of people. Few new believers got a personal meet-and-greet with the risen Christ in order to bolster their faith. But the movement did not die. It flourished. It flourished because of the testimony of those who had themselves seen the risen Christ. In the book of Acts, we can find at least ten instances in which eyewitnesses affirm the resurrection of Jesus. These testimonies are crucial to the belief of following generations.

But more than just the spoken testimony of the resurrection, equally important is the revealed testimony, that is, the testimony found in the actions of the believers, actions taken in the name of Jesus. Three times in our reading, Jesus says, *Peace be with you.* This is more than just a polite greeting. It is a blessing. Jesus is offering his peace to his people—his peace, his shalom, his wholeness. We can tell people of Jesus' resurrection, but most are going to be like Thomas, and will want evidence. That evidence can be found in the peace of Christ, a peace that we can bring to the world. We can bring this peace to people through our acts of kindness and compassion, of loving our neighbor, of imitating Christ. When we reach out to another who is in need, we are extending the peace of Christ. The proof of Jesus' resurrection can be found in the voice of scripture and the acts of the faithful. It is Jesus' charge to the church to spread his peace. The power Jesus gives us to do this is the power to forgive. After sharing the Holy Spirit with his disciples, he tells them about forgiveness. They have the power to be forgiving. Forgiveness is a powerful healer. *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.* The people of Christ have the power to bring healing.

Last week, I was here at the church into the evening when the doorbell rang. I went to the door and there was a young man standing there. I asked if I could help him. He seemed a bit nervous and anxious and he asked where the meeting was. I asked, what meeting? And he told me, the AA meeting. I explained that AA didn't meet in the main building but instead they met at our annex and I pointed at it. What confused me was that there weren't any cars in the parking lot. Normally, on a meeting night, there will be a half-dozen cars parked here. I told the young man that I would walk with him to the annex to make sure there was in fact a meeting. As we are walking, he asks if I am the pastor of the church. I tell him that I am. He then starts apologizing for bothering me and before I respond he says, "I'm really trying, you know." And I said, "I know you are. That is why I want to make sure you get to the meeting." It was a small thing and I was happy to help. Clearly this young man had a rocky past and he was clearly nervous about taking the next step. I didn't know him; he had not offended me in any way. But on behalf of the church, I wanted to make sure that he felt cared for, that he felt forgiveness. It seemed important. As the church, we have the ability to offer Christ' healing power. It is proof of the resurrection.

When Thomas proclaimed, *My Lord and my God*, Jesus says, *Have you believed because you have seen me?* It sounds like Jesus is scolding Thomas. I don't think he is. I think he is simply stating a fact—Thomas believes because he has the privileged opportunity to view the risen Jesus himself. Jesus recognizes this and tells Thomas, *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.* You've seen me, Jesus says to Thomas. Others will not, but they are just as blessed as you.

On this Sunday following Easter—the same day that Jesus appeared to Thomas—we can be sure that many have heard the news of Jesus' resurrection that we proclaimed last week. But this week, and for the rest of the year, we need to proclaim Christ in our actions as well; we must demonstrate to the world what the writer of Hebrews describes as the *evidence of things not seen*" (11:1).