

Written that You May Believe

In the name of him who is our Lord and our God, dear friends in Christ: this morning's Gospel reading begins with the disciples (most of them, anyway) gathered together behind locked doors. A deep sense of fear fills them all. They perceive there to be enemies and threats of all sorts are out there. And the locked doors create at least the illusion of safety and protection.

It's the evening of the first Easter Day. Twelve hours ago, none of them believed in the resurrection of Jesus. They were all skeptics of his claim that he would die by crucifixion and rise again on the third day. To be sure, though he had told them this repeatedly, most of them didn't let these words sink in. They didn't expect him to die much less rise again from the dead. And when he did die, they were shattered. Nothing he said mattered much to them after that.

At sunrise several of the women in their company went to the tomb for the purpose of anointing his body with fragrant oils. They were on a mission to complete the embalming job that had been performed so hastily by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus just before sunset on Friday. The women wanted to see the job finished properly. That, and pay final respects to their fallen leader. When they arrived at the tomb, they were surprised to find it open. And when they looked inside they were even more surprised to see not the body of Jesus, but an angel sitting on the slab where his body had been. The angel told them that Jesus had risen from the dead, and to go inform the disciples.

They did. And no one believed them. They thought the women were talking nonsense. Peter and John rushed out to the tomb and found it empty; but they didn't see or hear any angels. They still thought Jesus was dead. At least one of the women who heard the angel thought so too. That was Mary Magdalene. She returned to the tomb to weep there. When asked why she was crying, she said, "They've taken the body of my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him." She still thought Jesus was dead even after a messenger from heaven had told her he was alive. You know, the figure of Doubting Thomas plays a prominent role in today's Gospel reading, and we tend to think of him in a negative light because of his stubborn refusal to believe in the Lord's resurrection. My point is that none of the followers of Jesus believed it at first. They all doubted when they heard about it.

By the time we get to what transpires in today's text, however, that had changed. With the group of disciples in the room behind the closed doors are at least four people who have actually seen and spoken with the risen Lord Jesus. He's appeared to Mary Magdalene and to Peter, and to the two disciples with whom he talked the entire afternoon while they walked together on the road to Emmaus. These two have just now arrived quite winded after their hurry to get back and tell the others the good news. So, at this point the whole group has pretty much accepted the truth that Jesus is alive. The trouble is they don't yet know what it means.

You see, they had envisioned a very different kind of Messiah. They were thinking in terms of an earthly king who would restore the glory of the nation of Israel. They thought of Jesus in political rather than religious terms. Thoughts about Jesus fulfilling the Scripture and the whole Old Testament system of worship by being himself the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world were about as far from their thinking as they could be. They didn't make the connection. So, even now knowing that Jesus was alive, they were still thinking in political

terms. Okay, he's back. That's great. We're happy to hear it. But where does that leave us? We're still outnumbered and outgunned, despised by those in charge. Our enemies beat us once. What's to stop them from doing it again? How has this horrible death and resurrection of our beloved leader helped our cause in any way? If anything, it only makes us look weak and pathetic. And that, in part anyway, is why the disciples are so afraid.

It's then that Jesus appears to calm their fears and convey to them what his mission has really been about all along. And if getting them to believe in his resurrection was an uphill battle, I have to believe that getting them to reject their political aspirations and to understand the true theological significance of what had happened to him had to be a steeper climb still. Fortunately for us, Jesus is a good and patient teacher.

He begins by pronouncing a blessing of peace upon them. This is more than a simple greeting or an expression of good will. The words of Jesus are powerful. When he speaks peace he actually delivers to troubled hearts the peace of God that surpasses understanding. He then reveals his hands and side that bear the indelible marks of his suffering. And again, this is more than a way to say, "Yes, it's really me: the guy who was crucified." No, he shows his scars because in them is the living proof of God's great love and forgiveness. It's in the wounds of Jesus that our peace with God is written in every language so that everyone can read it. When the disciples read it there, they are filled with inexpressible joy.

And then Jesus empowers and commissions them to do for others what he has just done for them, namely to deliver the great and everlasting peace of God to the troubled hearts and minds of sinners. To do this, first he breathes on them the Holy Spirit. This is only possible now. Before Jesus' death for sin, the Spirit could not dwell inside a person as he does in the New Testament age. But now, made clean because of the Word of forgiveness declared by Christ and that he achieved through his suffering, the disciples have been made a holy place for the Spirit of God to enter and to remain. And from within the disciples the Spirit can now do his work of illumining hearts and minds to fully understand the sacred Scriptures, to trust in the words and promises of God, to make bold witness of this saving Gospel, and to guide the believer in the paths of holy living.

And thus having enabled them by the Spirit to do these things, Jesus now grants the disciples the true power of the Gospel: the authority to forgive the sins of those who repent and to retain the sins of those who refuse to repent. Earlier, when they were with him in his preaching and teaching ministry, he had given them some level of authority to cast out demons and heal people of diseases. While it's amazing to behold such miracles, the people so delivered were only spared from afflictions in time. Now, with the greater authority to declare the forgiveness of sins in his name, Jesus is giving his disciples the means to deliver people from an eternity in hell and grant them the gift of everlasting life.

All the disciples received this greater authority—except for Thomas, who was not present when Jesus appeared. In him we have a case of an especially hardened skeptic. He claims that it wouldn't be enough for him to simply see Jesus and hear him speak. No, he says, "Unless ... I place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Now, I've preached many times on the willful unbelief of Thomas, and how it's not so much a problem of his scientific thinking. The real problem is his sin. That's what causes unbelief. And the truth is that Thomas has more than enough credible evidence to believe that Jesus has risen even without seeing Jesus with his own eyes and touching him. The tomb is

empty. The body is gone. No one has found it someplace else. More to the point, at least 20 people whom Thomas knows and trusts implicitly say they've seen Jesus alive and have heard him speak. That's enough to establish a truth in any court of law. And this isn't the sort of story they would make up. What motive would they have for doing so? It doesn't make sense unless it's true. And again, they were all unbelievers at first. It was only seeing Jesus alive that convinced them they had been wrong. Beyond that, Thomas can see the change in the other disciples' lives. They're not going around in sorrow and fear anymore. Now they're full of hope and joy. He can see that they've experienced something profound. And he knows what it is: they all claim to have seen the risen Lord. What else could explain that? The facts are in front of his face. But still he refuses to believe. This is nothing short of the deliberate sin against the Holy Spirit.

But rather than take Thomas to task for it as I and countless other preachers have done, I'd like us to consider two other aspects of this story. First, is the amazing love and grace of Jesus who comes to Thomas and gives him exactly what he desired despite his willful and obstinate sin against the Lord and his truth. It doesn't offend Jesus. He appears again a week later, pronounces his peace upon all, and says to Thomas, "Here you go. Put your finger here. Jam it into the nail marks, if you must. Thrust your hand into my side. Don't doubt. Believe."

And there in the wounds of Jesus, Thomas could read for himself what the others had read the week before. All of my sin and shame – even my lack of faith in the words and promises of God and the testimony of his apostles – were nailed to the cross with Jesus. He suffered, died, and rose again, even for me, the one who doubted. Jesus, you truly are my Lord and my God. And let me make this clear: Thomas did not deserve this special revelation. It should not have been necessary for him in order to believe the truth of the resurrection. But Jesus didn't want any who were his to be lost through sin and unbelief. And in his great mercy he gave Thomas the proof he so sinfully demanded to see.

The second aspect of this story I'd like us to consider is that by it Jesus shows great love and mercy to the rest of us. We don't get to see Jesus like the original disciples did. We don't get to read the story of God's love for us in Christ in the nail marks in Jesus' hands and side. We read that story instead in the marks the eyewitnesses of his resurrection wrote down on paper for us. As John the Evangelist who recorded this account tells us, "These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." John includes the account of Thomas' stubborn unbelief as further verification for us who don't get to see what they did. John wants us to know there was a guy who categorically refused to believe unless he saw for himself – and who ultimately did see and believe – precisely so that we will be among the blessed of the Lord who without seeing, believe; and that by believing we may have life in his name. Therefore, through what has been written for us by those who saw and the power of the Holy Spirit, may our gracious God work such saving belief in us, now and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!