

Easter 2, Year A
John 20:19-31
April 23, 2017
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Traditionally most of the attention given to the passage from John's gospel we just read has been focused on the story of "Doubting Thomas." Over the years I have come to find that annoying. Thomas expressed no more doubt than anyone else, and that was precisely the point. To focus on Thomas as uniquely skeptical is to miss what is going on here. John, or more likely, in the opinion of most scholars, one of John's several editors, wrote that story not to tell people what happened on the night of the resurrection, but to assure every future generation of believers that they are blessed, their faith is profound and deep, because they have not seen Jesus and yet they still believe in him. The disciples, and all the first generation of believers - those who believed because they saw - have no advantage over all subsequent generations, and in fact, the subsequent generations have a special blessing because their faith is rooted not in the vagaries of sense perception, but in their hearts, in their very souls. John would have agreed completely with the notion from the great hymn: "Taste and touch and vision to discern thee fail. Faith that comes by hearing pierces through the veil." That is important; it means the faith you and I share is no less real, no less important, and no less valid than the faith Peter or James, or John or Mary or Martha had.

I begin this way because I don't want you to believe I am ignoring Thomas deliberately. I am simply tired of thinking about him as uniquely doubtful, and therefore want to draw your attention to the first half of this story. There we get a different account of the coming of the Spirit than the Church has generally endorsed, and that different account creates a different way of understanding what it means to be part of the Church, and more largely, part of the whole economy of God.

Luke's Pentecost story swept the field; It isn't just the standard account of how the Church became energized for its mission, it is the only account of how the Church became energized for its mission. Too bad, because here today we have what in my mind is a much more theologically sound, and likely to be accurate account of what turned a bunch of confused people into a cohesive body. In John's account, it is the very night of the resurrection when Jesus appears to the disciples and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit. No waiting in confusion and fear for fifty days, now is the moment. This story tells us that the Spirit comes the moment people realize the power of the resurrection of Jesus.

I agree with what bishop Rehberg said in her Easter sermon; arguing about what constituted the resurrection is a distraction, it is living the resurrection that matters. As I have suggested before, I don't happen to believe that what people witnessed was the resuscitation of Jesus' dead body. It is an important and powerful metaphor, but I don't believe it is history. Most Christians, by far the majority, do believe it is history, and frankly, that is just

fine with me. What matters is that we all agree that whatever it meant to be Jesus was raised and those who loved him most and lived with him longest, became keenly and fully aware of that right away.

John adds a crucial dimension to this with a story directly connecting awareness of resurrection and empowerment. Our passage here before us now declares the moment those people became aware Jesus still was what he had previously been, they were transformed into a community that continued to incarnate the presence and power of God in the world. This is what Paul, writing long before either Luke or John produced their gospels, meant when he called the community of the baptized “The Body of Christ.”

This direct and immediate connection between awareness of resurrection and empowerment makes perfect sense, far more sense than a fifty day period of fear and confusion. The people who followed Jesus had seen him forgive the unforgivable, and so transform those unforgiveable people into people who forgive and who could accept forgiveness. They had seen Jesus love the unlovable, and so expand the whole spiritual landscape, reconciling people who had been bitter enemies. They had seen Jesus show mercy to the merciless, and so turn the merciless into those who now themselves showed mercy. They had seen Jesus destroy every means by which human ingenuity dehumanized people, and it changed those followers of Jesus forever. They had seen a power Rome could not harness, a power, which when unleashed fully, would destabilize the way the whole human social order worked.

From Rome's point of view, as from every human system's point of view, we need a stratified social system, we need crucial and expendable people, we need enemies and friends to tell us who we are, why we matter, and who is good and who is evil. Jesus wasn't considered anti-social because he preached love, most everyone does that. He was considered anti-social because he preached and lived out love for those we hate, and so demonstrated the power of unconditional love to transform society, and in so doing he rejected the axioms by which most societies live.

The people who followed Jesus saw all this, and they saw something else as well. They saw that despite its evident success in destroying Jesus physically, Rome could not defeat Jesus and the power he exercised. They saw that executing Jesus had no effect at all on the presence of Jesus. That had to be absolutely electrifying to those who followed him, and the effect must have been immediate. Indeed we know this, because the one completely certain historical fact is that – as I have stressed before – those who had followed Jesus longest and loved him best reacted to his death by going to the very people who killed him with a message of love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

That is the effect of the gift of the Spirit. That is what the scene before us now depicts. The risen Christ so completely transformed his followers that they became able to act on earth as Jesus had acted on earth, symbolized in this story by John's statement that they now could forgive and retain sin, a power that any Jew would tell you only God had. It further declares that the critical moment of

empowerment comes when those who follow him discover that what he was then he is now; there is no power, no matter how destructive, capable of defeating what God has done in Jesus.

Think of this two ways, one corporate, one individual. Together we are the inheritors of that gift. The spirit that animated them now dwells in our community, and by that I don't just mean St. John's, or even the Episcopal Church, but in the whole communion of all those who follow him. When we as a community forgive the unforgiveable, love the unlovable and make the merciless merciful, we are doing as a community what Jesus did. When we reject the axioms of this world which would divide people, declaring who is pure and who isn't, and live into a life of praying for those who persecute us and loving those who hate us, we are showing the true presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives because we are living corporately as Jesus lived.

The only way each of us as individuals can form the kind of community that truly lives that way is to have what happened in them happen in us. We too as people must realize that death had no effect on what Jesus was; he is now what he was then, and no power can change or diminish that. All the powers that deny that reality are as present now as they were when he was crucified, all are just as insistent that Jesus is dead. Thus, only when we our own experience leads us to this realization, that those powers are wrong, and that he lives now as surely as he lived then, can we as individuals be as energized as that first generation of followers were. Only, in other words, when awareness of the

resurrection of Christ is what animates us can we then participate in that larger body in which we have been called to participate.

This, I suppose is the one value I retain from the Thomas story, so let me end with it. Thomas did not know what he already had. He had not connected risen Christ with empowering spirit, and therefore his faith was dormant. Jesus was dead, as far as he knew. Once that connection with risen Christ was made, empowering spirit was immediately present, and here was his response: "My Lord and my God." Let each of us make the same connection he made in that moment, that we might in our own way, in our time, express that same faith.