Sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Easter

April 7, 2024

John 20:19-31

In our 3-year cycle of readings, the Gospel texts for this year will mostly come from Mark. But we heard all that Mark had to say about the resurrection last week, so for most of the season of Easter, we’re going to hear from John’s Gospel.

Today, we get a text we always hear on the 2nd Sunday of Easter. The story starts with John telling us that it was evening on the first day of the week. Which is not an unimportant detail. John uses light and darkness as clues about whether someone believes or not.

Like when Nicodemus comes to see Jesus. He leaves in the darkness, which is our clue that he doesn’t yet believe what Jesus told him. When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, it’s midday. She believes him.

So when we see the disciples hiding out in a house with the doors shut tight, *and* it’s evening, John’s telling us that they heard Mary Magdalene’s story, but they didn’t yet believe her.

Jesus enters the house, visits with an unidentified set of his followers, shares his peace with them, and breathes the Holy Spirit into them.

Thomas was not present when all this happened. Someone had to tell him. John doesn’t tell us *why* Thomas doesn’t believe them, but I think we get a clue from the fact that a week passes, and the disciples are still in the house, the doors still shut tight.

Sometimes, good news doesn’t ease our fears.

When he arrives the 2nd time, Jesus greets his followers, offers his peace, and then directs his attention toward Thomas.

I love that Jesus seems to have gone back for the sole purpose of visiting Thomas. *Not* so he could stop doubting, but to offer Thomas what he needed so that he could come to believe in Jesus’ resurrection.

To be clear, Thomas doesn’t doubt what he’s heard. He doesn’t *believe* it.

The phrase in Greek is *apistos alla pistos*. We’re familiar with the idea of putting an ‘a’ in front of a word and making it the opposite, like apolitical instead of political. That’s what happens here. *Pistos* means “faithful” or “believing.” *Apistos* means “not faithful” or “not believing.”

And it may seem nitpicky, but I would argue that not believing is different from doubting. Unbelief is a conclusion. Doubt is saying, “maybe…but maybe not.”

Jesus isn’t saying here, “stop doubting, Thomas.” He’s saying, “don’t *not* believe, but believe.”

Jesus offers Thomas what Thomas has said he needs in order to believe. He gets to see the risen Lord. He gets to see the marks in Jesus’ side. Just as the other followers had.

Jesus doesn’t single out Thomas so that he can scold Thomas for not believing. That would be kind of mean, since the rest of the gang is still hiding in fear.

He just keeps on offering grace and peace. Keeps offering what they need so that they can move beyond their fears to being people who believe in the good news. So they can go out as he instructed them.

Thomas does just that. He blurts out, “My Lord and my God!” Words nobody else in John’s Gospel say.

And then Thomas went out. Tradition tells us that Thomas traveled farther than any of the other apostles, including Paul. Churches in southern India and Sri Lanka trace their origins to Thomas and his evangelistic travels.

Thomas recognized that he got what he needed so he could believe. And then he *acted* like he believed.

Verse 23 is more or less John’s version of Matthew ending with the instructions to go out into the world to share the good news: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Only this is a lot less clear.

While the other Gospels think about sin as *what we do* that leads us from the path of faithfulness, for John, sin is not believing that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, the Word who became flesh and dwelled among us.

Jesus is pointing his followers here to the importance of thinking about how they treat those who don’t believe in the incarnation, in the resurrection, in the promises of forgiveness and salvation. Like the very people they were hiding from.

Jesus tells them that how they treat unbelievers will play a role in whether others come to believe or not.

Which feels like a good thing for us to ponder. How do *we* interact with those who don’t believe as we do? How do we inadvertently set up roadblocks to people experiencing God’s grace and love?

Throughout history, the Church has often either explicitly or implicitly asked for people to believe a set of things and behave in a particular way in order to belong.

But that doesn’t fit how Jesus interacted with people. He didn’t give them a quiz about doctrine before healing them or calling them as disciples or healing them or sharing meals.

The model we consistently see from Jesus is about welcoming people and offering grace, giving them what they need, like Jesus does here with Thomas. Their belief and their changed behaviors *follow* from that.

Imagine if Jesus had scolded his followers. They were already afraid, already being asked to believe in something that defies explanation. Talking about it would put them and their families at risk.

Scolding them would just have been piling on, pouring salt in the wound.

It’s grace that Jesus offers, abundant grace and peace and welcome. Their belief comes *because* of Jesus’ grace, and their behaviors follow that.

Isn’t that what we *all* need? To experience God’s presence among us without scolding, without judging? Just abundant grace being freely offered to us?

After Thomas makes his confession of faith, Jesus asks, “Have you believed because you have seen me?”

It feels easy to take this as if Jesus is saying Thomas should have believed before he saw Jesus. But I think it’s more a lead up to what follows, which is a blessing for those who have come to believe *without* having seen the risen Lord themselves.

Which would include…pretty much everyone who heard John’s story, because it was probably written 60 to 80 years after the resurrection. So Jesus’ words here are words of comfort for all those who didn’t get to see the wounds in Jesus’ side or hands.

Which would include…us.

Blessed are all of us who have not seen, but yet come to believe.