

Year C Easter 2 John 20 19 to 31

Here we are, still hearing about the first day of the week – the day of Jesus' resurrection. A lot has happened...the tomb is empty, Mary Magdalene has encountered the risen Jesus in the garden near the empty tomb and she has told the disciples of this amazing encounter. Yet, the disciples are still huddled in fear, in the upper room, with the door locked. Their beloved teacher was brutally murdered and they are afraid that they are going to be next. It is not safe out there for the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

Into this fear-charged, defeated scene comes Jesus...suddenly appearing in their midst despite the locked door. The looks on their startled faces must've been quite a sight to behold – a mix of fear, disbelief, surprise, questioning...

Jesus shows them the wounds made by the nails in his hands. He shows them the wound made by the sword that pierced his side. And then the disciples rejoice – this really is their risen Lord. Of course, they tell Thomas about this encounter and Thomas issues his infamous statement: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Poor Thomas is labelled as "Doubting Thomas" when, in reality, they all doubted. Remember, Mary Magdalene had told them the exact same news of the resurrection yet they were still hiding out at the beginning of our story. They did not rejoice until after Jesus had shown them the physical proof of his wounds.

The very next Sunday – today, in our timeline – Thomas has his opportunity to see the risen Lord. Jesus offers to let him touch his wounds and Thomas certainly believes he is looking at his teacher who was dead and is now very much alive.

Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

John is writing these words quite a few years after Jesus spoke them. He was writing to the young church in order to instruct them, to let them know what was important. It can seem like the important message is simply to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that we are blessed if we do. There is a lot more to it than this. Our clue is in John's final words today: "but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." "You may have life in his name."

This is one of the keys to better understanding this message to us. We are meant to have life in Jesus' name. This doesn't mean life as in breathing, functioning, not dead. The disciples are alive at the beginning of the story but they don't have much of a life – huddled in fear, despairing because they saw the Messiah murdered. The Greek word that John writes, that we hear translated as simply "life" is the word *zoe*. It literally means "life of the age" and it refers to eternal life. It is the life given to those who believe, those born of God; life that, in John, transforms us from merely existing to living in the abundance and eternity of God. It is the life that John tells us, at the beginning of his Gospel, is at the core of creation: In the beginning was the Word...In him was life, and that life was the light of all people (John 1:1, 4). That is the life we have in Jesus' name when we believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

That brings us to another word that we hear a number of times in this passage – believe. Do you believe...those who believe...so that you may believe....

Again, our English translation of “believe” is very narrow compared with the meaning encompassed by the Greek word *pist*. I can believe that you are a doctor or a school teacher or a grandma or whatever label you choose to tell me. But that doesn’t mean I know you very well or even that I like you. *Pist* means having faith or trust in someone. This is much deeper than just the head knowledge. It requires the heart as well. And that means being in relationship with someone. Here we have the crux of the message John is giving to us, the church. Those who are in a deeply committed, trusting relationship with Jesus as the Messiah, they will have everlasting, abundant, joyful life in his name. Now this is a world-changing, life-changing message. And, in this passage, John shows us the implications of this life in relationship with Jesus.

“Peace be with you.” The first words Jesus speaks to his frightened, despairing disciples. Peace be with you. He has not changed their situation. But he is with them. They recognize him as their Lord and they are able to rejoice in his presence. Jesus bathes them in his peace that brings deeply abiding joy in spite of the circumstances of the world.

Then Jesus again says, “Peace be with you,” and we learn more of what it means to share God’s peace, to be brought into relationship with Jesus the Christ. It is not a passive, bask-in-the-warm-glow-of-his-peace kind of relationship. It is an empowering, mobilizing peace. “As my Father sent me, so now I send you,” he says. Well...uh-oh...They’ve just seen the consequences of his mission – he reminded them of this when he showed them his wounds. This relationship is a risk-taking, turn the world upside-down, you may get hurt sort of relationship. Sharing God’s peace isn’t about making everyone happy. It is about living in the

kingdom in order to reveal the kingdom and that brings resistance from the worldly powers who do not want to give up their worldly power.

We saw these worldly powers murder the Messiah. And even as they were hammering the spikes into his hands and feet, Jesus says to his Father, “Forgive them.” Even those who crucify him are given the gift of the opportunity to be in relationship with him, to share his peace. And then Jesus lays that task on us. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them,” he says. “If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” And if Jesus forgives those who kill him, that does not give us much lee-way in retaining any sins, does it? Being in a committed, trusting relationship means continuously needing to forgive the other in order to maintain that relationship. Fortunately, we do not do this on our own. Jesus breathes the gift of the Holy Spirit into his disciples.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” John tells us. Jesus brought God’s presence to us and brought us into God’s presence. God intends to bring all things into relationship with each other and with God through Jesus Christ.

“What God did once-for-all, decisively, in Jesus, he applies to the needs of the world by the Spirit. The Word became flesh and [dwelt] in our midst; and, through wise, humble human lives and loves, the Word becomes flesh again by the Spirit.”ⁱ The Spirit calls us and equips us – perhaps to our own surprise – to speak God’s peace and to be God’s peace in the world, to the world, for the world. Forgiving as God forgives is a crucial part of this peace. We see this in Jesus’ next appearance.

The second appearance in this Gospel story mirrors the first – in the first, Jesus says Peace be with you, shows the disciples his wounds, and tells them they must

forgive...In the second, Jesus says Peace be with you, shows Thomas his wounds, and models for them the forgiveness he has commanded of them. We have seen a peace that brings deep joy in the midst of fear and troubling circumstances. We have seen a peace that empowers and mobilizes. Now we see a peace that reconciles through the act of forgiveness. There was, perhaps, some tension between Thomas and the other disciples over the past week. He did not believe the story of their encounter with the risen Lord. The implication being that he thinks they're either delusional or lying. Either way, that would be rather insulting to the disciples. Jesus comes among them and speaks peace to them once more before turning his attention to Thomas.

Jesus meets Thomas in the place where Thomas is at. There is no condemnation of Thomas' challenge and desire for proof. Jesus only gives an invitation – a loving welcome into relationship should Thomas choose to accept. Thomas does more than accept.

N.T Wright relays a story told by the late cardinal archbishop of Paris, Jean-Marie Lustiger. The Archbishop used to tell the story of three boys who played a trick on the local priest by going into the confessional and 'confessing' all kinds of wild stories. The first two ran away, and the priest wasn't fooled. He gave the third boy – who happened to be Jewish – a penance to perform. He told him to go to the far end of the church, to look up at the large crucifix hanging there, and to say to the figure on the cross, 'You did all that for me – and I don't give a damn.' He told him to do it three times. Off went the boy: this was all still part of the game. 'You did all that for me,' he said, 'and I don't give a damn.' Then he said it the second time. And then...he couldn't say it the third time. He broke down, and left the church a

changed person. ‘And the reason I know that story,’ the Archbishop would conclude, ‘is that I was that young man.’ He spent the rest of his life following, and serving, the Jesus who had come to the place of brokenness, of failure, of lies.ⁱⁱ The Jesus who had brought him into relationship with him through his love, through his peace, through his forgiveness, through his life.

Thomas, too, leaves the encounter with the risen Lord a changed person. “My Lord and my God,” he proclaims. This is the highest affirmation of Christ of any person in all of the Gospels. Thomas, in awestruck wonder, worships the risen Christ – sharing in and ready to share with others the peace of God. In commitment and trust, Thomas has found the abundant, joyful, everlasting life in Christ’s name. Our life – our *zoe* – is found within the life of the crucified Christ who sends us out as his Father sent him. “Peace be with you.” Jesus stands in our midst. “And also with you.” Jesus stands in our midst. With Thomas, in awestruck wonder, may we truly believe and have life in his name.

ⁱ N.T. Wright. “*Preaching the Cross in Dark Times*,” 14-15. 2021.

ⁱⁱ *IBID.*, 9.

N.T. Wright. “*Preaching the Cross in Dark Times*.” N.T. Wright Online: Renewing Minds Through Biblical Teaching. 2021.