

The Reunion

John 20:19-31

(Lk 24:36–43; 1 Cor 15:5)

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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. ¹

I call this message the reunion, not because it is like a high school, or college, or family reunion, but because it is the reconnection of Jesus with his followers after his resurrection. They had spent years following him and learning from his teaching about God and God’s new reign. However, they needed to be reacquainted with Jesus. After all, they had seen him die and be buried; and although he had told them on more than one occasion, he would rise from the dead...scripture makes it clear they did not understand his resurrection statements.

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Jn 20:19–31). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

On the first Sunday of Easter, we learned about the resurrected Jesus reuniting with Mary Magdalene in the tomb garden and how she shared the good news that she had seen the Lord! Now on this second Sunday of Easter we learn that on that same day Jesus reunited with his eleven disciples, blessed them with his peace, breathed on them, giving them the Holy Spirit, and commissioned them for the work of ministry.

A week later, there was another reunion, this time with Thomas. Of all the characters Jesus meets in the post resurrection world of John's Gospel, none has left a stronger mark on the imagination of Western Christianity than Thomas. We love him. He is the incredulous nonbeliever who hides inside every believing Christian—the questioner in us that resists easy answers to hard questions of faith, who always wants a little more proof.

In the annals of Christian study and understanding, there are numerous accounts of why Thomas doubts, each reflecting the skeptical impulses of the era in which they arose. In the early church, doubters questioned whether God, as eternal and divine, could die and still be God, and Thomas bore the weight of those debates about God being Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Later, medieval scholastics depicted his doubt as logical, putting in his mouth the question, “Is resurrection metaphysically and analytically intelligible?” For the mystically oriented, doubt is described as the “dark night of the soul” where, in the midst of unbelief, belief germinates in shadows. More recently, Enlightenment theologians used rational, empirical arguments to craft their brand of Thomas' doubt. When they asked, “Who has actually seen the dead rise?” they turned the resurrection Christ into a symbol of an existential tendency for the future.

In the same way, most believers, I mean us, experience different kinds of doubt over time. In youth, often, it is the rationalist who reigns; in early adult life,

the analytical metaphysician takes over. When middle age settles in, a maturing mystical doubt often arrives. And in the years that follow, the wisdom of those seemingly nonsensical Trinitarian questions can sometimes make more sense. One such question, “Can God die?” is a question that, if we are fortunate, receives more than symbolic answers as the end of life draws near. At each stage, doubt follows faith’s lead, and stirring up those still waters we are always seeking.

What remains a constant in the midst of all these questions, however, is the answer to the doubt that we find in John’s story, an answer that concerns who *Jesus* is, not who *Thomas* is. It is here that we find the real point of the Gospel narrative—a tale about God’s coming to the disciples with their worries, concerns and doubts; and coming to us, wherever we might be.

John’s answer begins at the door we see at the start of the story. Instead of depicting Jesus as one who opens it, walks right up to Thomas, and starts to argue with him by trying to answer his rationalist queries and worries, John paints a starkly different picture that tells us much about the unique character of resurrection faith, even Easter faith, and its relation to doubt.

John tells us, first, that Jesus walks through a closed, locked door to get to Thomas. It is not that Thomas’ doubt drives him to demand answers from Jesus. It is Jesus who is determined to reach this skeptic, whom no one else seems able to convince. It is Jesus who refuses to let dead bolts or chains block the movement of love toward the one who lacks faith.

So too it is with us. When doubt crowds out hope, we can be confident that Jesus will come to meet us where we are, even if it is out on the far edge of faith that has forgotten how to believe. What a strange thing to hold on to—this certainty that answers to our most profound and desperate questions about life come not because we seek them with focused determination but because God

comes seeking us, stepping through the walls that hardship builds around us, (our difficulties and shattered dreams), offering love at the very moment that grace seem nothing but a ghost story told by not-to-be-believed friends.

John also tells us that even though Jesus walks right up to Thomas, the disciples are not quite sure who he is. It is odd, isn't it, that Thomas does not jump up in shock the minute Jesus arrives, particularly if Jesus looks like he did before his death, if he still has the same carpenter's hands, the road-calloused feet, and kind smile that graced his face before the cross took him down. This tells us there is a good chance that when Jesus comes to find us in our doubt-filled wanderings, we, like Thomas, will not recognize him, even when he is two inches from us.

How are we to know when God arrives if, in our doubt, our capacity for seeing God is sure to fail? John gives an answer to this question that brings us to the heart of faith's peculiar form of knowing. Jesus offers Thomas two clues to his identity. He speaks the simple words, "Peace be with you," and then asks his doubtful friend to put his doubtful fingers into the wounds that he, Jesus, bears from the nails and swords that destroyed his body only days before. What does this tell us about faith? When God comes, we will recognize God's presence in those moments when peace is offered, in those moments when life's most brutal violence is honestly acknowledged, and when, in the midst of this bracing honesty, we realize that we are not alone but have, in fact, been always, already found.

It is good news, indeed. In the different seasons of our life, Jesus' appearance is certain to change, and we will not always know him, particularly when hardships have given us many reasons to doubt. One moment he may come to us dressed in golden garb, calling us to celebrate joyously the richness of spirit faith promises. The next, however, he may come wearing beggar's rags, reminding us

that the love which saves is vulnerable and costly, and that the glory which awaits us is humble in texture and well worn in feel. At still other times, he may come to us wrapped in the wool shawl of the wise old grandmother who simply holds us as we weep. Whatever his appearance may be, though, we will know it is he if inside those golden garbs, street-faded rags, or warm knitted cape, we find not a logically argued response to our questioning faith but a surprising proclamation of peace and touching love that is stronger than even violent death itself. **SERENE JONES**

In the wonder of those wounds, he finds us and says, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19). But it is an unexpected peace. Or at least it is not a peace given according to the expectations of the world (cf. John 14:27). It becomes evident that the peace Jesus announces is not one that can allow the disciples or us as members of the church, to remain behind locked doors. For as soon as the disciples have rejoiced in the presence of the Lord, Jesus tells them that they have a new status and role. They are no longer merely disciples. Now they are apostles as well, sent into the world, just as God has sent Jesus himself. “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them, recreating them not only as those who follow (disciples), but now as those who are sent (apostles). When we had an encounter with Jesus, our risen Lord, we too, will have a glorious reunion and recognize our Lord and our God in spite of our doubts, worries and fear! **D. CAMERON MURCHISON²**

² Gaventa, B. R. (2008). *Perspectives on John 20:19–31*. In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B* (Vol. 2, pp. 400–405). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.