

Resurrection Living: Forgiveness
John 20:19-31
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Doubting Thomas. That's how we tend to refer to this dear disciple. This one story is so powerful for us that we have nicknamed him according to it, and that name has stuck. In fact, it has stuck so well that you don't have to be a Christian to use the phrase "Doubting Thomas." It has become part of our common language.

And perhaps that is one of the struggles with the reality that we hear so few stories about the disciples. In most stories they are simply cast as a group, as the back-up singers in Jesus' grand performance. In a few stories they are named individually. But, let's be honest – people know Thomas for his doubt, Peter for his denial, and Judas for his betrayal. We really know nothing of Bartholomew or Thaddaeus for instance, although they may be the lucky ones.

Because that is where our focus goes when we read the story that we heard today. We tend to only think about Thomas and we tend to only consider his doubt. And yet there is so much more here.

Not only would it do us well to remember that the reason Thomas doubted was because, while the others were locked up for fear, he was not there. He was out in the dangerous world, perhaps even among some of those who had helped put Jesus on the cross, and yet we forget to acknowledge that and tradition has often criticized him for asking questions.

And maybe we focus on his doubt because we relate to Thomas. If we are honest, we are known to have questions. We are known to have doubts. We are known to not know what to think, to want to see it to believe it. Maybe we focus on that aspect of Thomas because we know

it so well. Maybe we focus there because we haven't yet taught each other to embrace the doubts and questions of our faith.

But it's not even just that.

Yes, we need a broader view of Thomas. Yes, we need to rethink our dismissal of doubt and our treatment of it as the enemy of faith. But we also need a broader view of this story. Because there is so much going on here beyond Thomas and the mingling of his faith and doubt.

So, I'm going to ask us to notice some other things in this story today.

The story occurs on the day of the resurrection. According to the writer of the Gospel of John, Mary, Peter and another disciple had found the tomb empty and after the two men went home, Mary encountered the risen Jesus. She then took the message to the others, telling them that she had seen the Lord. And it was that night when the disciples – whether that be just the ten or whether it was a larger group – were gathered together for fear of the authorities.

While there, Jesus entered the room. We aren't told how, but often imagine him floating through the wall as if a ghost. And while we tend to focus on the first Jesus sighting in this passage, the one that the larger group of disciples is privy to and then their retelling of it for Thomas...while we tend to focus on Thomas' response, his need to see it, and Jesus' return a week later when Thomas is present. There are a couple of things we seem to skip right over.

We tend to skip the fact that Thomas doesn't actually need to do what he suggested. While he said that he would need to see and to touch Jesus' wounds, when Jesus shows up and looks him in the eye, that request seems to dissipate. But we often forget to give him credit for that.

Then there's another thing we tend to read right past but that I want us to spend a few minutes with today. And it is the conversation that Jesus had with the group of disciples upon his first appearance to them.

So, I want you to hear this again, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"¹

We like to make this passage about Thomas. We like to make this passage about doubt. But we often read right past the words of Jesus.

Typically, if we consider Jesus at all, we think his role in this story is to prove the resurrection. And yet if we listen to his words, he comes not to prove a theological concept, but to commission his followers to carry on with his work.

See, we look ahead fifty days after Easter to Pentecost and wait for the Holy Spirit to show up in fire and wind, in languages from around the world. But, here, in the shadow of the disciples' fear, is when the Holy Spirit is first given to them...*this* is when Jesus first commissions them. Pentecost, it might seem, is just an encore.

If we listen to Jesus in this first post-resurrection encounter with the disciples, then we hear that they are sent with the same power that Jesus was sent. And, if we are paying attention, we will notice that the only explicit instruction Jesus gives in this encounter is that of forgiveness.

¹ John 20:19b-23, NRSV.

See, we are better at remembering the instructions from Matthew 28 – that which we call the Great Commission. We are better at claiming that the disciples’ job is to preach and to teach and to baptize and to take the word about Jesus into the whole world. Even when we aren’t at our best, we are better at claiming that to be our role as Christians, too.

But, here in this encounter recorded in the Gospel of John, the disciples are told that they are sent in the same manner Jesus was sent and that they have not just the right, not just the privilege, but the responsibility of forgiveness. Did you hear those words? “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Let’s sit with that for a minute.

It is big.

Why is it so big? Because we understand ourselves to be in the line of disciples. We understand that, just as they were called to be the hands and feet of Jesus on earth, so are we. And as difficult as it can be to talk about our faith or as difficult as it can be to respond to the needs of the poor or as difficult as it can be to welcome someone who is different from us to the same table, the reality is that all of those are more palatable to us than offering forgiveness in places where real hurt has occurred.

And yet, here in the Gospel of John, the resurrected Jesus doesn’t say, “Make sure that you have a sound theology of resurrection.” He doesn’t say, “Go build me a church with a steeple taller than your neighbor’s.” He doesn’t say, “Why are you locked up here in fear when there are people starving out there?” But the writer of John tells us that he says, “You have the power to forgive. And it is also an act of power when you opt not to.”

Friends, forgiveness is not easy. There is no simple formula to make us ready. There is no one sentence or passing act that can make it real. In fact, if it is something that really needs forgiving, it is downright difficult.

Forgiveness means letting go of our power over another and their power over us.

Forgiveness means not allowing a hurt of the past to write the story of the future.

Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning, it doesn't mean approving, it doesn't mean inviting future hurts, but it does mean that we choose to see a picture much broader than the hurt that was inflicted on us.

And the work of forgiveness is just that – it is work. And it happens, most often, over time rather than in the moment.

I do not have a magic wand to wave that will make forgiveness easy. That is true whether the forgiveness you struggle to offer is to another individual who hurt you deeply or whether it is to an unjust system that continues to hold you captive. That is true whether we are talking about forgiving ourselves or forgiving others.

Real forgiveness is hard work.

And it is the work to which we are called.

Last week we celebrated Easter. We celebrated the resurrection. And we talked about bodily resurrection mattering because we are created to live on this earth, in these bodies, and because God cares deeply for this life. We talked about the reality that God's kin-dom isn't about some far-off fairy tale land, but is something we are invited to help bring about here and now.

If we are living the resurrection...if we are working to bring about the kin-dom of God...then forgiveness is part of the task.

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It's not easy. It won't happen all at once. But it is our call. And so it is important.

In Bible study a couple weeks ago I asked the question, "What would the world look like if we took seriously the responsibility to forgive?" Without missing a beat someone simply answered, "Things would be better."

It isn't easy. It is hard work. But each step toward forgiveness is a step toward a better world.

As people of the resurrection, this work is ours. And these steps are steps we take together.

So, I invite you to take a first step today. The post-it note in your bulletin is there for you to use. I invite you to envision someone – a person, a group, or a situation – to which you need to offer forgiveness. Then write that name on your paper. As you are ready, you are then invited to fold up that piece of paper and come and put it in one of the chalices – there are three around the sanctuary – as your commitment to begin or continue the work of moving toward forgiveness.