

Sunday Lesson – April 24, 2022

GOSPEL: John 20: 19-31

"To Believe"



Context

“What is a disciple to do in the wake of Jesus’ resurrection?

Following the Easter story of Jesus’ appearance to Mary Magdalene, two parallel stories in John explore the responses of disciples to the message of his resurrection. Although Thomas is often singled out as deficient in belief, his story shares much in common with the response of the disciples as a whole. The twin accounts present the disciples as both believing and disbelieving. The gift of the Holy Spirit enlivens the disciples to continue Jesus’ ministry without rendering them perfect believers.” (Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-2019-31-9 by Susan Hylen)

Insight

“What then does it mean for Jesus to breathe out the Holy Spirit and to tell this larger group of disciples, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them”? The passage is a commissioning scene, but it is a commissioning of the church as a whole, not an elite group of leaders. In Jesus’ absence the church steps into this role. The image is not a narrow one of a priest assigning penance but a broader recognition that the church becomes the arbiter of acceptance or rejection of Jesus.

Even so, part of our modern difficulty with this text may be that Jesus leaves this authority in the hands of disciples who are not themselves free from sin. John seems well aware of this, having positioned the story of commissioning in the midst of the disciples’ struggle to come to terms with their resurrection faith. Instead of trying to “solve” the problem of this responsibility granted to the church, I would say instead that the passage

seems consistent with John’s portrait of the disciples. They are called to do much more than they are capable of. Yet they occasionally achieve great clarity, and in those moments they manifest the hope of the resurrection.” (Excerpts from workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-2019-31-9 by Susan Hylen)

Gospel Reading

“Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, “Peace to you.” Then he showed them his hands and side. The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were awestruck. Jesus repeated his greeting: “Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you.” Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he said. “If you forgive someone’s sins, they’re gone for good. If you don’t forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?” But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, “We saw the Master.” But he said, “Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won’t believe it.” Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, “Peace to you.” Then he focused his attention on Thomas. “Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don’t be unbelieving. Believe.” Thomas said, “My Master! My God!” Jesus said, “So, you believe because you’ve seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.” Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.” The Message

What It Could Mean?

“The purpose of John’s Gospel: belief or trust?

The Greek root behind the English “believe” is *pist*. While overwhelmingly rendered as faith (for the noun) or believe (for the verb) in English NT translations, its lexical range fully includes the concept of “trust”. Re-reading John 20:27-31 embracing the nuance of trust inherent in *pist* we find: Jesus’ words to Thomas: “Do not be **distrusting** but **trusting**” and **“Are you trusting** because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to **trust**.” The purpose of the gospel: “ ... written so that you may come to **trust** that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through **trusting** you may have life in his name.”

It’s all about opening doors: Aren’t we also, as churches, in the business of opening doors, whether encouraging “new” folks to enter our churches, or “sending out” into ministry those that have entered?

Our passage depicts a community immobilized by fear after Jesus’ crucifixion, and Jesus’ task is to re-mobilize them. The inherent risk to the disciples is precisely why trust is needed. Risk and trust go hand-in-hand; the amount of risk one is willing to take is dependent upon the amount of trust one has. “One does not need to risk anything in order to trust; however, one must take a risk in order to engage in trusting action” risk is the indispensable ingredient that transforms trust into trusting **action**. This highlights the pivotal nature of the resurrection appearances for the formation of the disciples—the very risky post-crucifixion situation is the fertile ground upon which their trust in Jesus can grow.

The resurrected Jesus is seeking the cooperation of his disciples to continue his ministry (the Holy Spirit is not thrust upon them; neither are they pushed out the door). Cooperation does not require trust in every situation.

In a risky situation, trust is needed for cooperation to even begin. Once established, a trust relationship can be nurtured through further cooperation. We see this in the interaction between Jesus and Thomas (20:24-29): Jesus makes his body available to Thomas, and Thomas cooperates with Jesus’ instructions to examine his hands and side. Jesus’ exhortation to trust is a follow-up to these cooperative actions. This is a demonstration of the evolution of trust through relationship. Trust is not a one-time, absolute assent, but a relational virtue that can be nurtured and grown.

Rescuing the Greek root *pist* from the narrow confines of “belief” reveals a gospel that tutors us on “designing for trust”. One consequence is hearing Jesus’ words to Thomas as nurturing rather than admonishing. What other NT passages might benefit from embracing the nuance of trust inherent in *pist*? (Excerpts from *workingpreacher.org*, Revised Common Lectionary, by Rene Such Schreiner)

Readings for Further Study

- **Mark 9: 17-27** “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief”
- **1 Peter 1:8-9** “Though you do not now see him, you believe in him...”

Thought for the Day

“In John 20: 19-31, “the disciples of every age come to know the implications of and the gifts bestowed through the resurrection of Christ – the gifts of peace and joy; the gift of the presence of the risen Christ in the Holy Spirit; the gift of faith; and the calling and mission.” ~ *Daily Discipleship, ELCA*

A Prayer

Almighty God, with joy we celebrate the day of our Lord’s resurrection. By the grace of Christ among us, enable us to show the power of the resurrection in all that we say and do, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**