

Jesus Appears to His Disciples
John 20:19-31
Second Sunday of Easter, Year C April 27, 2025
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Good morning, friends, as we gather for worship during this season of Easter. Yes, that's right, *season*. I know that for many years we thought of Easter as just one Sunday, but our lectionary includes the weeks between the Day of Resurrection (Easter Sunday) and Pentecost in this season. Jesus' ascension occurs on a Thursday, forty days after his resurrection and ten days before Pentecost, so there are three special days in this season. From now through the seventh—and final—Sunday of Easter, we will be exploring the Gospel of John. Today we again see a resurrection appearance of Jesus, just as we did last week. We'll see another resurrection appearance next Sunday as we continue to read John 20—21.

If you look at your insert, you'll notice that today's Scripture reading is divided into three segments: "Jesus Appears to His Disciples" (20:19-23); "Jesus and Thomas" (20:24-29); "The Purpose of This Book" (20:30-31). We'll look at them in order to see how they flow together.

As the story begins in John 20:19, we are told that "it was evening on that day," alerting us to the fact that the empty tomb had been discovered just that morning. We're told that the doors were locked "for fear of the Jews" (20:19). Let's be clear: These disciples are Jews themselves, so they are not afraid of all Jews, but they are fearful of the Jewish authorities. The same religious leaders who had Jesus condemned to death could certainly come after his disciples, so they are, very understandably, hiding in fear. Their fear also indicates that they had not believed Mary Magdalene when she told the disciples that she "had seen the Lord" (20:18). If they had believed her, we can assume that their behavior would have been different. Or would it? Could the disciples also be concerned about how Jesus would treat those who had abandoned him when he needed them the most? He forgave them, but at this time, they didn't know that.

Can you just imagine yourself huddled with Jesus' companions, who were now grieving his death? The one you thought would save you—and the Jewish people—from the clutches of their Roman oppressors is now dead. What would you be thinking? I might be berating myself for having cast my lot wholeheartedly with Jesus, only to learn that my expectations have been dashed. Moreover, I'm petrified to open the door or even peek out a window, not knowing who might see me and drag me away. The tension in the air must have been thick enough to cut with a knife.

Everyone's nerves were frayed. A squeak of the door or leaves rustling in the wind could have sent everyone scurrying for cover.

Into this horror shows steps Jesus. There was no knock or squeaky door. He just suddenly stood among the disciples in the room where they were holed up. My head would have been spinning. We don't know exactly what he looked like, but his resurrected self must have resembled his mortal self enough so that his friends could recognize him. He was not a spirit floating by, but rather, an actual body. When we say in the Apostle's Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body," we are acknowledging that Jesus did appear in bodily form to his followers, not only on Easter but also many times later (for example, Acts 1:1-4).

If the disciples still had doubts about what they were seeing, Jesus' first words, "Peace be with you" (20:19) must have gladdened their hearts. Here they are quaking with fear, when suddenly Jesus appears and offers them his peace. And not only that. He also shows them the wounds on his hands and side. No doubt about it: This must be Jesus.

He again offers them his peace (20:21), but that's not all he says. He next commissions his disciples to carry the torch that he had brought from God. God had sent him, and now Jesus was sending his disciples out to be apostles. That is, they are now to go out as ones who are "sent" to spread the good news of Jesus to all who they will encounter. We might say they've been promoted from learners (disciple) to messengers (apostles).

Jesus is still not finished! He breathed on his companions, telling them to "receive the Holy Spirit" (20:22). Now this is a bit puzzling, because we're accustomed to hearing Luke's version of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. This is a big, public affair on the day when the Jewish people are celebrating their holy day of Pentecost. John's account of the disciples receiving the Spirit is quite different. There is no mention of speaking in tongues or doing any other kind of miracles. Instead, Jesus' followers now have the power to forgive sins. For John, "sin" is not a moral failing, such as stealing or lying. Rather, as Gail R. O'Day explains "To have sin is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus" (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, page 847). Wow! For John, then, "Sin" is a serious theological issue, not just a moral failing. We sin when we don't recognize who Jesus is.

Moving on to verse 24, we learn that Thomas had not been present when Jesus appeared to other disciples. No explanation is given for his absence. Everyone else was petrified, but here he was out and about. Was he buying groceries? Had he returned to his own home? Had he just gone for a walk to clear his head? We have no idea. What we do know is that he left the others and someone must have locked the door behind him.

When he returned to the hiding place, the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord” (20:25). “Oh, right,” Thomas must have thought, “I’ll believe that when you show me the proof.” He wanted to see tangible evidence of Jesus’ crucifixion, namely, nail prints. He insisted he would not believe their story until he saw this evidence for himself. And he didn’t want to just see it; he wanted to put his own fingers in the nail marks.

It’s this desire for proof that has earned this disciple the nickname “Doubting Thomas.” I personally think that moniker is undeserved. We all have doubts and questions about many things. For example, the story is told by Stephen Wright of a man living on Long Island in 1938:

He ordered a very fine barometer. When it arrived he was extremely disappointed to find that the dial was stuck, pointing to “Hurricane.” After shaking the barometer very vigorously several times, its new owner sat down and wrote a scorching letter to the store from which he had purchased the instrument, and on the following morning, on his way to his office in New York, he mailed the letter. That evening he returned to Long Island, to find the barometer missing—along with his house! The barometer had been right. There was a hurricane!

We don’t know anything about the conversations that may have transpired over the week behind locked doors, but we do know that the disciples who had seen Jesus were right. Jesus’ appearing to the disciples may have seemed as unlikely to Thomas as a hurricane hitting Long Island seemed to the man with the new barometer that he thought was not working. But witnesses testify to the fact that both of these events occurred.

We also know that the following week Jesus again miraculously circumvented the locked door and came to stand among the disciples. For the third time he said to them, “Peace be with you” (20:26). This time, Jesus specifically addressed Thomas, graciously inviting him to touch his wounds and encouraging him not to doubt but to believe (20:27).

Wow! Jesus doesn’t write Thomas off as a skeptic, and neither should we. Instead, Jesus does what he can to move Thomas toward belief. Note that Thomas doesn’t take Jesus up on his invitation to touch him. Rather, Thomas responds, “My Lord and my God” (20:28). Many commentators view this as the most powerful confession of faith in the entire New Testament. Thomas now knows that he has encountered the living Christ!

Jesus’ words in verse 29 are especially good news for those of us who did not live in first century Palestine. He said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Jesus is reaching far into the

future to address us! We have not physically walked with Jesus; we have not seen him; and yet we can believe that he is the only begotten Son who God sent into the world “so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Thomas, along with the other disciples, clearly casts his lot with Jesus and confesses his belief.

So what about you? Can you say “amen” to Thomas’ confession? If so, how did you come to believe? If you were baptized as a child, significant adults in your life were asked these questions (*United Methodist Book of Worship*, Baptismal Covenant II-A):

Do you confess Jesus as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races? (I DO.)

Will you nurture these children (persons) in Christ's holy Church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life? (I WILL)

The congregation is then asked if they will nurture those persons being baptized and “surround them with a community of love and forgiveness,” to which they reply “WE WILL.”

So, although we weren’t able to walk beside Jesus on this earth, significant adults in our lives, along with an entire congregation, pledge during the sacrament of baptism to help guide us in the faith. So that all may pledge their support to the child and his or her family, baptisms are only done during a worship service.

In The United Methodist Church, among other denominations, Confirmation provides the first opportunity for a baptized person to take on the vows spoken at baptism on his or her behalf. At that time, usually during the early to mid-teen years, one who was young at baptism can now, along with Thomas, confess his or her own belief.

We move now to the final segment of today’s Scriptures. We need to assume that John, the writer of this Gospel, is speaking with his own voice. He claims that the disciples witnessed many other signs, which are not recorded in this book. Recall that John’s Gospel doesn’t use the word “miracle,” but rather refers to “signs” Jesus does to show who he is. There are seven signs in John’s Gospel including, among others, Jesus turning water into wine at Cana, feeding 5000, walking on water, and raising Lazarus.

Some folks wonder why certain stories are told in one Gospel and not another, or why there are variations in stories told in multiple Gospels. The

answer is really quite simple: Each Gospel writer selected the stories and details that he felt were most important for his congregation to know. For John's community, for example, the church was beginning to tear away from the synagogue. Thus, we often see comments that put Jewish people in a negative light. What we really need to see is that John is putting Jews who don't accept Jesus in a negative light. As Christians, we don't always recognize that the Bible records intra-family squabbles. All of the earliest believers were Jewish, so their difficulties are akin to The United Methodist Church and what has become the Global Methodist Church fighting in-house with each other.

John concludes this segment by stating his purpose for writing: "so that you may continue to believe" (20:31). "Continue" is sometimes translated "come to," or just "may believe." We know that Thomas confessed faith in Jesus as his Lord and his God. His belief was solid.

As we reach the end of our time together today, we need to ask: What are you able to confess about Jesus? Is he your Lord and God as Thomas proclaimed? If not, do you view Jesus differently? Some would say that he's a great teacher or inspired prophet. These descriptions are true, but they don't tell the whole story. If we're going to claim that Jesus is Lord, we need to pledge our full allegiance to him and him alone. We need to recognize him as the source of our salvation. We have to be willing to put Jesus above all earthly rulers, for he is the creator and has full authority over all of heaven and earth. And we have to be willing to worship him and him alone.

If we are willing to confess Jesus as Lord, as Thomas did, we are blessed by having life in his name. This life is not just for the future. Rather, we recognize that as soon as we say "yes" to Jesus, we are now living eternal life with him. That's an overwhelming thought, isn't it? But it's true. We are living in the presence of our Lord right here and right now.

This week's challenge is to discern what you are willing to confess about Jesus in relation to your own life. Make a list. Pray over it. And offer words of praise and thanks! Your declaration of faith in Jesus is the most important confession you'll ever make! Love, Nan