

Second Sunday of Easter

April 12, 2015

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John 20:1-18, 19-31

“Congratulations!”

What do the disciples “see” when they see the Lord?

Mary Magdalene at first did not see what was going on. Someone moved the body; the tomb is empty, she doesn't recognize Jesus. Until he speaks to her, and then she sees for real. When she reports to the others, “I have seen the Lord,” she is making a statement of faith—not just “I saw him” but “I have seen.” For John this means, “I believe.”

Peter runs to the tomb and looks, but it's not clear what he sees, besides that it's empty. He goes home.

The beloved disciple, who is the one who does everything right in John's gospel, sees and believes, though we're not told exactly what he sees.

But a week later, the disciples have gathered again in the upper room, with the doors locked, for fear of the authorities. (We understand John says “for fear of the Jews” as a kind of symbolic opponent, because in the time John's gospel is written down, the people who believe Jesus is the Messiah have parted from the synagogues. In reality, the disciples had much more reason to fear the Roman occupiers, who quashed any possible uprising with crucifixions to terrorize anyone's followers, and did not hesitate to send soldiers in to take care of the rest and burn the village they all came from.) So anyway, with good reason to fear, the disciples have retreated into the fearful ways of the world. They are afraid, and they are hiding out. Whatever they have seen a week ago, it is not sustaining them now.

And suddenly Jesus is among them.

He blesses them. He breathes on them. He lays peace upon them.

They know this is the same Jesus because they can see his wounds. And, John says, they rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Not just when they caught a glimpse of him, but when they saw that it was Jesus. Not dead, but real, wounded—and alive. Insight, and therefore joy, has come to them. They rejoice when they SEE the Lord.

But Jesus is not done with them yet. The party is not complete with Jesus arriving and breathing on them (yes, just as God breathed life into creatures in Genesis 3.) “As the Father has sent me, perfect tense, effects continue; so I send you.”

Congratulations! You may already be a winner!

A winner? A bunch of powerless, illiterate fishermen, tax collectors and sinners, people who ran away from the crucifixion and denied even knowing Jesus? winners?

And yet Jesus comes in without a hint of blame, not even a disappointed look at Peter, and blesses and commissions the whole bunch of them. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain them, they are retained.

The reality that is already true in God’s realm, that sins are forgiven those who ask, is now to be made true in the workaday world—by these winners! Jesus has made them into a community of faith and power. They have seen and believed. And, I don’t hear this commission about forgiveness to be one of judgement, that now the community of faith, the church as it will come to be, gets to decide whom to forgive and not. It’s that they have the awesome responsibility to OFFER forgiveness to everyone.

But more on that another day.

So, congratulations , disciples, hangers-on, women, you who have been through trauma together and witnessed miracles together—you have been blessed and empowered and made a community. Peace be with you—wholeness, health, welfare, peace, be with you.

And then there’s Thomas.

John the gospel writer has included Thomas’s questions in this story. Thomas has been called the doubter, but, we are reminded by Martha Spong, he was as loyal as they come. He is the one who said, “We don’t know the way you are going, how can we come with you,” not because he wanted to avoid going with Jesus, but because he wanted to go with him. He is the one who, when they were preparing to go to Bethany to see about Lazarus, and were waffling because it was dangerous for Jesus to show up there where the authorities were watching out for him, who said, “I will go with you to the death.”

Perhaps, Spong says, it’s that Thomas learns differently from some of us. He is the facts man, who has to have the evidence in front of him. He is the kinetic learner, who has to handle the evidence himself and touch it. He wants to have the same assurance as everyone else, and he wants his own chance to grasp it in the way he learns best.

And Jesus, perhaps we should not be surprised, accommodates him. He comes back a week later when Thomas is present and says, OK, put your hands on my wounds. “Do not be unbelieving, but believe!”

Though the gospel does not record that Thomas actually reached out and touched Jesus, it must have been enough that Jesus came back and gave him the chance. And the command—do not be unbelieving, but believe. He falls to his knees and confesses, “My Lord and my God.”

Do you believe because you SEE? Jesus says to them. (Hear the echoes from the earlier parts of the chapter? Yes, we’re meant to—I have seen the Lord. They saw and rejoiced.) Blessed are those, Jesus goes on, who have not seen, and yet believe.

NT scholar Richard Carlson says this is better translated, congratulated are those who have not seen, and yet believe.

So now the congratulations are for us. We have not seen the one in the garden whom Mary thought was the gardener until he called her name. We have not seen the tortured body, laid in the tomb, now standing among us in spite of locked doors.

But we too have been recipients of that spirit that Jesus breathed on the disciples. The comforter, advocate, helper, which Jesus sent back to heaven when he breathed his last and said “IT is accomplished” (not finished). That same spirit now dwells in the community of faith, among us, within us, through us. Congratulations, those who were not eyewitnesses, and yet believed. However we came to that belief, congratulations to us.

Some of us came to trust in the reality of the risen Christ because we had a moment, maybe more than one, when we were grasped by that reality in a moment of conversion.

Some of us came to trust in that reality in the midst of the community of faith where we were raised and nurtured. We too came to SEE—to believe—that death is not the last word, and God’s love for us is infinite and unshakeable.

Perhaps some of us are still trying to decide if we really believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and that it makes a difference.

Some of us needed only to read or hear the Gospel good news; some of us needed to count and account for it; some of us needed to touch and feel; some of us needed to move and dance; all of us need to claim it again and again.

Because, we too have been blessed by the Holy Spirit, drawn into community, empowered to serve our neighbors. As God has sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us. And here we are, striving to live out our commission to make disciples, to forgive, to serve, to live an example of a believer's life. Congratulations to us, who have not seen, and yet in some measure have believed. The Holy Spirit and the world await us. Congratulations! You are already a winner! O happy day!

And thanks be to God for this good news from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.