

John 20:19-29

John 20:19-23

When 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.' 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.'

Now let me read you another passage:

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

You see what John is doing here? He's retelling the Genesis story, except this time it's going to turn out different. This time it won't end with the fall and the alienation of all humanity from God. This is the time when God almighty reaches down into the abyss, the formless void, the place where we are all lost in our sin and pain, and draws out new life. He draws life from the void. Where there is no life, where there is nothing but darkness God creates life and a beautiful new world. That is the significance of Jesus' resurrection, foreshadowed from the beginning of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

John 20:19-29

Jesus is the author of this new genesis, this new life not just for the disciples, but for all of us. And he confirms as much with his first words to the disciples, to us, “Peace be with you.” His first words aren’t a rebuke for having failed him, which the disciples, and we have surely earned (detail the disciples’ sins and ours – particularly the way we personally betray Christ). He already knows about that, he’s already suffered for that, he has entered the abyss of sin, the formless void where we are so distanced from God, and he has destroyed it as surely as the sun destroys the night. That’s how it is that he can say, “Peace be with you” giving us his blessing.

And that’s how he can follow that blessing up with a command, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”
“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

I don’t know about the rest of you, but that phrase conjures up a few images in my mind, select snapshots and memories from my childhood. In particular it makes me think of pickup football games me and the rest of the kids from the neighborhood would play. And there were some pretty talented athletes in the bunch who could outrun, outcatch, outthrow, outstrategize the rest by miles. I know, I was one of the rest who usually ended up matched up against one of those superstars. “Matched up”, that’s not quite accurate, “set up” is more like it. And some days that was more evident than others. Some days we didn’t have enough kids show up to play a regular game so we improvised. The idea was pretty simple, three kids would line up to receive and everybody else would line up on the kicking team. The receiving team would then have one chance to run the ball back down the field and try for a touchdown. Inevitably it was three of the superstars who would end up receiving the ball. And then whichever of the superstars were on defense would urge the rest of us to “Go get that guy! Come on knock the ball out of his hands! Don’t let that blocker knock you down! Go for the legs, the legs!” Easy for them to say, they were good at the game, they had tasted victory, they weren’t the rest. Because for the rest of us short, scrawny, uncoordinated, rubes, every runback was a potential journey into the heart of darkness. Not only were we going to get pounded, not only were we going to look foolish, not only were we going to fail, but we knew it, everybody on the field knew it even before the play began.

John 20:19-29

But we played anyway, and we loved it. Why?

Thomas. Thomas would understand why. Thomas gets a bad rap for saying “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.” Now some folks interpret that to mean that Thomas is simply responding out of fear, he’s afraid to get back in the game now that the other team has destroyed the superstar, Jesus. But I don’t think that’s it. I think to Thomas the cross was only what he had expected. When Jesus had proposed going to Bethany, after the news of Lazarus’ illness had come, Thomas’ reaction had been: “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). Me and the rest on the football field used to say that to ourselves on a regular basis. Thomas never lacked courage, but he was the natural pessimist, like each of us. There can never be any doubt that he loved Jesus. He loved him enough to be willing to go to Jerusalem and die with him when the other disciples were hesitant and afraid. What he had expected had happened, and when it came, for all that he had expected it, he was broken-hearted, so broken-hearted that he could not meet the eyes of the other disciples, his teammates, but must be alone in his grief.

Thomas had to face his suffering and his sorrow alone. So it happened that, when Jesus came back again, Thomas wasn’t there; and the news that he had come back seemed to him far too good to be true, and he refused to believe it. Belligerent in his pessimism, he said that he would never believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he had seen and handled the print of the nails in his hands and thrust his hand into the wound the spear had made in Jesus’ side.

I can remember kids taking an especially vicious tackle, rolling around on the ground spasming in pain, or worse yet laying still for a minute too dazed to get up, but the worst of all was when it happened while the other team was running up the score on them. Sometimes they’d just hobble off in the middle of the game, not looking back, usually tears coming down their dusty faces, having had enough humiliation for one day. It had ceased to be fun to play anymore. There was no redeeming quality to their humiliation and pain.

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Thomas does the same. He withdrew from the Christian fellowship. He sought loneliness rather than togetherness. And because he was not there with his fellow Christians he missed the first coming of Jesus. We miss a great deal when we separate ourselves from the Christian fellowship and try to be alone. Things can happen to us within the fellowship of Christ's church which will not happen when we are alone. When sorrow comes and sadness envelopes us, we often tend to shut ourselves up and refuse to meet people. That is the very time when, in spite of our sorrow, we should seek the fellowship of Christ's people, for it's there that we are likeliest of all to meet him face to face.

In these weeks after Resurrection Sunday you may find yourselves feeling more in common with Thomas' pain, and dejection. As the trumpets of Easter morning fade, and timpani becomes a distant, albeit happy, memory, as the victory of Jesus Christ is hard to recognize in the hospital wards, at a crummy job, in paying insurmountable bills, in fighting with your spouse, in feeling the loss of a loved one – consider Thomas. Because Jesus comes to each of us in the midst of this sorrow, this loss, this frustration, just as surely as he did to Thomas, saying "Peace be with you." "Receive the Holy Spirit." "Do not doubt, but believe." And believing we are restored, resurrected with faith, hope and love. Sent back into the huddle, this holy huddle of the church, to experience the love and encouragement of Christ from each other, and to go out into the world ready to play again for the love of the game, for the love of the Word, for the love of our savior, redeemer and creator Jesus Christ.

My you be able to say the same as Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" and know that he is risen.

Amen.