

“Again and Again”

We don't do children's sermons at Plymouth, although every once in a while somebody suggests that we should. I did them for seventeen years in Omaha, and everybody seemed to like them; but they weren't really for kids. Most children's sermons take some concrete object and attempt to derive from it a terribly abstract concept that goes way over the kids' heads and hits the adults right between the eyes. Hey kids! How is this cardboard box like the love of God? Real children's sermons that connect with kids sound alarmingly like Mr. Rogers. Adults are understandably less than enthusiastic about that sort of thing week after week. (Although yes, I do like you just the way you are!)

An example of a children's sermon from my past went something like this. I would hold up a blank piece of paper and ask, “What is this?” The older kids would roll their eyes and sigh while some four-year old blurted out, “It's a piece of paper!” Then I would take a marker and draw something on it, like a star, and ask again, “What is this?” And some eager child would cry out, “It's a star!” I would say, “Does everybody agree that this is a star?” The older kids would roll their eyes and the younger ones would cry out, “YES!” And then I would say, “Really? What happened to the piece of paper?”

Great, huh? I forget what it illustrated then. But today it illustrates the second half of John 20. Once Doubting Thomas enters the room, we forget everything else.

This passage always comes up the Sunday after Easter. And over the years I've sent numerous sermons on it rattling around mostly empty sanctuaries. But I always focused on Thomas! The Disciple of Doubt is an irresistible figure for modern people. We feel his angst. His struggle is our struggle. We can't let him alone. But on closer consideration, Thomas is a fairly minor player in this lesson. If he's the star, everything else is the piece of paper. And it's the “everything else” that contains the real clue to the nature of Easter.

Scene One unfolds on Easter Sunday afternoon. Jesus' disciples are cowering in fear, perhaps in the same borrowed or rented room where they celebrated the Passover together a couple of days earlier. The doors are

locked for fear that the religious authorities, having disposed of Jesus, will next come after his followers.

Mary Magdalene had encountered the risen Christ earlier that same day, when she went to the garden alone while the dew was still on the roses and he walked with her and he talked with her and he told her who really knows what. When Jesus had left her, Mary went to tell the others. But if they believed her their anxious behavior gives no sign of it: they're in total lockdown mode.

Then in early evening Jesus comes and stands among the disciples. I always imagine him walking right through the door or right through a wall or something; but it doesn't actually say that. It does say what his words were: "Peace be with you."

That seems a rather strange and insipid thing to say given the circumstances. But in the context of John it is really quite a triumphant note. When last he was with the disciples, Jesus said to them, "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" So "peace" is a greeting offered in the face of persecution. That makes a big difference.

Jesus shows them the marks of his suffering—evidence both of his identity and his triumph over the world. They rejoice. And then he commissions them to be ambassadors of peace: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Witnesses to the resurrection are sent out into the world.

But they don't go on their own. "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus says. In the Pentecost tradition the disciples don't receive the Holy Spirit until fifty days later, at Pentecost. But according to John, Easter Sunday is the day. Jesus breathes on them—the same word means wind, breath and spirit in Greek¹—and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." We celebrate this tradition from John when we sing the hymn, *Breathe on Me, Breath of God*. With the Spirit come gifts for ministry, and in this case also the authority to forgive sins... or not. That's the end of Scene One. Easter marks a movement from fear toward empowered ministry.

But with Scene Two it starts all over again. Thomas wasn't there last time. He's also called Didymus, the Twin: and who among us doesn't have a doubting twin? We want to rush in and cling to him as a kindred spirit; but hold on just a moment.

¹ And in Hebrew, too! The Greek is *pneuma* (as in pneumatic tires) and the Hebrew is *ruah*.

Why wasn't Thomas with the others the week before? If they were cowering in fear for their lives, did he have any reason to be less fearful than the others? Why was he out and about while they were hunkered down? We don't know; but this question alone puts Thomas in a different light.

He seems defiant, I suppose; at least when I read this passage aloud I tend to voice him that way: "Unless I see the mark of the nail in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and in his side, I will not believe." That could sound petulant, I suppose. But isn't this just the same disbelief the others manifested when Mary tried to tell *them* about her experience of the risen Christ? Weren't they skeptical, too? If they believed her, it wasn't enough to make them brave enough to unlock the doors.

Speaking of which: it's a week later, *after* Jesus has appeared personally to the ten (twelve minus Thomas and Judas), but the doors are again locked—the same word in Greek as above in verse 19! We tend to contrast "doubting" Thomas with the "believing" disciples, but they're acting just as fearfully as they had the week before. And Thomas is asking only for what the others have already experienced: to see the risen Christ and to examine the marks of his suffering.

I don't know about you, but I have to keep reminding myself that Sunday was a weekday, the first day of the work week, not a day to lounge around watching golf and to fall asleep reading the Sunday Times. So on this first day of the work week, Jesus comes again to his disciples and says as before, "Peace be with you." Again it's the message of comfort, assurance and triumph over the world. Then Jesus addresses Thomas and offers him exactly what he has said he needs: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Thomas does not bother to touch Jesus. Instead he exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" This is the most complete faith confession in the New Testament, that Jesus Christ is Lord and God. And it comes from the one who has become the symbol of doubt. Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Blessed, happy, are those—like you and me—who come to faith through the testimony of others.

This cues John to offer a summary statement about why he has written a gospel in the first place: not to provide an exhaustive record of everything Jesus ever did, but to invite the reader to come to know Jesus as the Messiah

(the Christ), the Son of God; and through trust in him to know the full, meaningful and abundant life he came to offer to all people.

So there's a lot more here than Thomas. Let me lift up two themes in particular.

First of all, this passage suggests that Easter comes gradually. It dawns in our lives. John's take on this is that the risen Christ comes to his followers again and again; that the full impact of the joy of Easter is known over time. Even this morning's lesson is not the ending of Easter for John: there is a wonderful story in the next chapter in which Jesus reveals himself to the disciples who by this time have returned to their life of fishing in Galilee. After they have fished in futility all night, at daybreak Jesus—a mysterious figure in the dim light of dawn—directs them to a miraculous catch of fish. As they come to shore and he shares breakfast with them, gradually they realize that it is he; and then Peter affirms him three times, receiving absolution for the three denials of Maundy Thursday.

So the story continues. Jesus meets us where we are: not because of our courage or faith or merit—Lord knows more often than not he finds us cowering behind locked doors like the disciples; and nothing has bigger doors to hide behind than a church. Yet he comes again and again, each time we enact the drama of Easter, which is to say each time we gather for worship.

And he brings to us his peace: peace not as the world gives, but a peace that has within it God's power for life and new life. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (14:27) The world speaks of a peace built on the security of worldly power and things. But the peace of Christ is rooted in the full and abundant life for all that is God's gracious gift.

It is a peace that is also a summons to action: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." It is a peace that we come to know as we seek to live it day by day. Sometimes we almost get it.

This peace is the beginning of the benediction with which I close the service most times that I preach. It was originally written for an Easter Sunday service, and almost always seems appropriate.

"Go forth into the world in peace" recalls the words of the risen Christ commissioning his disciples for mission in the world. "With faith in God's power for life" is a reminder that we are resurrection people. "Hope for the

coming reign of God” points us toward the vision of justice and peace in which God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. “And love for all whose lives touch yours” speaks of our central purpose as Christians: love is the surest sign of the presence of God; it is how we are to live, seeking the deliberate well being of others in all the ways we are inter-connected. And finally the benediction asks that the blessing of the triune God go with us, abide in us and shine through us to the world.

Every week is Easter. Easter comes to us again and again, just at the risen Christ came to his disciples again and again; meeting us where we are in our mixture of faith and doubt, courage and fear; offering himself to us as living proof of the deathless love of God, calling us to let Easter become real in and through our lives. The truth of Easter arrives over time: but it comes with power to transform our lives and our world. Thanks be to God.

Amen

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