

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

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April 28, 2019

Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:24-29
Leviticus 9:1-5

Reboot

Today's Gospel reading from John reflects a combination of Jewish theology and an anticipation of what is to come. Additionally, it is a passage designed to welcome the newest of newcomers into the church, regardless of where those newcomers are on their faith journey, as long as they are committed. This passage is a reboot of old thoughts incorporating the new truth revealed in Christ. This story encourages the future generation of Christians and further to recognize that those Christians who "believe without seeing" are truly blessed.

In examining this story, it is important to consider the strong possibility that the community that gave rise to the Gospel of John had Jewish roots, yet was now excluded from the synagogue.¹ It reflects the difficult untangling of Christianity from Judaism. Further, the tradition passed on in the fourth Gospel is attributed to a witness (John 21:24). Given that many of the historical details found within John's Gospel have proven to be archaeologically correct², there is reason to attribute accuracy to the events depicted within the Gospel.

This story occurs shortly after most of the disciples have experienced the risen Christ. On Easter evening, the disciples, behind locked doors, were greeted by Jesus with a Shalom, they took in the Holy Spirit through Christ's breath, and were empowered to forgive sins. The disciples have encountered Jesus and they are the first generation of believers. This story provides a connection between the first set of believers and those who come afterward.

In the opening verse of today's passage, we learn that Thomas was not with the Disciples on Easter evening when Jesus appeared to them. Where Thomas was, the gospel is silent. I have imagined Thomas may have been out getting groceries, trying to find out what happened to Jesus, scouting a safe passage out of Jerusalem, who knows? But Thomas has returned and is now in the midst of the disciples.

Thomas is an interesting figure in John. Outside of the Gospel of John, the only mentions of Thomas are in the lists of the Apostles found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts. In those writings, Thomas does not speak nor does he act independently. In John's Gospel, Thomas is depicted as being very committed, but not always entirely sure to what he is committed.

For example, in the story of the raising of Lazarus found in John chapter 11, Thomas makes his first appearance. After hearing about how the impending death of Lazarus will glorify God, Thomas boldly proclaims, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (v. 16) Thomas is committed to God to the point of being willing to die for God. But brave Thomas does not anticipate that it is not in the dying of Lazarus but in the resurrection of Lazarus where the glorification is found.

Another encounter of Thomas in the Gospel of John is found in chapter 14. Jesus in explaining what is to come and how Jesus will prepare the way to his father's house has left Thomas confused. Thomas'

1 Ehrman, Bart *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings, 6th Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press 2016) p. 186-188

2 Charlesworth, James H. "Reinterpreting John." *Bible Review* 9.1 (Feb 1993) 18-25. retrieved from <http://members.bib-arch.org/publication.asp?PubID=BSBR&Volume=9&Issue=1&ArticleID=14> (accessed 4/11/2015)

understanding is literal. "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"(v. 5) To which Jesus responds: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life..." Thomas may not be the most cerebral fellow as he needs everything spelled out for him.

In today's reading, Thomas is informed by the other disciples that they have been visited by the risen Jesus. Thomas cannot bring himself to believe that the story is true. Thomas creates conditions upon which he will believe. Unsurprisingly, Thomas says he won't believe unless he touches the very marks left upon Jesus' body. The English word "believe" is a translation of the word "πιστεύω" (pist-yoo'-o) which has a connotation which goes beyond believe, and includes the idea of "trust."³ . By making this statement, Thomas has articulated a common sentiment, "I'll believe it when I see it."

While it is common to pick on Thomas, as it is this story which grants him his nickname of "Doubting," we have to ask "would we be any different?"⁴ and note the disciples (other than the beloved disciple who saw and believed in verse 8) were not acting like they believed in a risen Christ until Jesus showed himself to them.⁵ Thomas gets the bad rap for behaving in the same way the rest of disciples did – they all had the luxury of seeing first.

Verse 26 opens with, "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them." The translation is not entirely accurate in the NRSV and in many other translations (though some get it right!) I believe this might be colored by the Christian predisposition to have great moments occur on Sunday. But if Easter is on Sunday, this story occurs on a Monday. The Greek is very clear, "μεθ' ἡμέρας ὀκτώ"⁶ literally "after days eight." Some experts attempt to make this eight days inclusive⁷ to get the narrative back to Sunday, but I feel this is stretching.

What is more, eight makes far more sense in the John community. Something almost new is going on, a reboot! If the John community is establishing something new, or renewed, eight days makes far more sense. A new covenant is being established. And when we are talking about covenants and temples Eight is a prominent symbol.

For the old covenant was testified to by the circumcision required in Genesis 17:12 - "Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old," As I read earlier from Leviticus, the first officials of the mosaic covenant had their ordination completed when "On the eighth day Moses summoned Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel." (Lev 9:1.) In Ezekiel's vision of the restored, or - possibly in light of this story from John - the rebooted, temple, God returns to the people in the temple "... from the eighth day onward the priests shall offer upon the altar your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being; and I will accept you, says the Lord GOD." (Ezekiel 43:27) Eight would resonate with a community rooted in Judaism, but now looking for something a little different.

As we return to our Gospel lesson, let us remember that Leviticus informs us God appeared on that Eighth day, when the ordination was complete and the Israelites first began using the tabernacle. as, their first place of worship. EIGHT days later, Jesus appears before the disciples. This time Thomas is present. Thomas again exhibiting his commitment to that which he does not truly understand is still with the group, even though he does not yet believe. Jesus greets the disciples with the same words, "Shalom" or "Peace be with you."

3 McReynolds, Paul R. *Word Study Greek-English New Testament with Complete Concordance* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1999) p. 1592 and Vine, W.E., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1996) p. 61

4 Hoch, Robert "Commentary on John 20:19-31" found at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2808 retrieved April 7, 2016

5 Bruce, F.F. *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1983) p. 393-4

6 McReynolds, Paul R. *Word Study Greek-English New Testament with Complete Concordance* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1999) p. 410

7 Bruce, F.F. *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1983) p. 393-4

In Verse 27, Jesus lets Thomas know his challenge was heard⁸ by offering Thomas the opportunity to conduct his test.⁹ Thomas does not touch the marks. Thomas no longer needs to test. Doesn't this say something about the petty tests we can come up with compared the magnificence of God's demonstrations?!?!?

It should be noted that there is no rebuke to Thomas for being an unbeliever.¹⁰ This is an important acknowledgment for a fledgling religious movement formerly grounded in an ancient scripture but now looking to reboot their understanding. Being an unbeliever is not a deal breaker in this new community, try get on board, listen with an intent to commit and you will get to belief and trust.

Rather than test, Thomas answers Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" an unequivocal proclamation about the divinity of Jesus Christ. This statement wraps back to the point John makes in the very opening of the Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Thomas' remark is the essence of what the rebooted faith is all about, Jesus as Lord and God.

"My Lord and My God" is the confession of the rebooted church.¹¹ While spoken later in the reading, it is stronger than anything the disciples are reported as saying so far¹². It marks Thomas' actual entrance into the faith community.¹³

Jesus brings the scene to a close by recognizing that most believers will never have an opportunity to witness the magnificence of the physically resurrected Christ in their lifetime. His benediction, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" affirms those who have come to believe without witness. It also helps those who come into the community after the passing away of the first generation of believers. Many of whom will be welcomed into the conversation and community with a disposition similar to Thomas, "I'll believe it when I see it." which will hopefully grow into faith and commitment.

This story affirms the rebooted John Community and those joining it. It reflects a Jewish understanding of covenant, leadership, and temple, but in an entirely new way. It also speaks to those who are on the outside, considering taking the plunge into this faith.

This story is also rooted in Judaism. The eighth day invokes images of circumcision, the sign of membership in the covenant, new priests or religious leaders being installed, and a new temple. All of this speaks to a rebooting of what it means to be a follower of God.

Thomas is the perfect every man for the occasion. He is committed, and yet not even sure what he is committing himself to at times. And even though he was left out on Easter experience, he is still with the group. He struggled, like many faithful followers would and still do. But then he has a "come to Jesus" moment and recognizes Christ as God. This is an experience some might have, but most won't. In recognition, Jesus blesses those who come to this rebooted faith and understanding without having an explicit experience with the risen Christ.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

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- 8 Bruce, F.F. The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1983) p. 393-4
 - 9 Haenchen, Ernst Hermenias – John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7-21 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) p. 211- 212
 - 10 Wiesbe, Warren W. The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament Vol 1 Matthew-Galatians (Colorado Springs: David Cook Publishing, 2008) p.391-394
 - 11 Haenchen, Ernst Hermenias – John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7-21 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) p. 211- 212
 - 12 Bruce, F.F. The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1983) p. 393-4
 - 13 Gruenler, Royce Gordon The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary on the Fourth Gospel (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1986) p. 138