

The Second Sunday of Easter



The Incredulity of Saint Thomas by Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi), c. 1602 | Public Domain

John 20:19-31 ¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ (Jesus) said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit. ²³ Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” ²⁴ Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples said to him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” ²⁶ Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered and said to him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.” ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of (his) disciples that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

Context

In the Johannine narrative our gospel occurs on what has been a full day: “On the evening of that first day of the week.” It was only that morning that Mary Magdalene had visited the tomb and confessed, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him” (20:2) – ironically echoing one the decisive misunderstanding of Jesus’ ministry: from where did Jesus come and where is he going (e.g. 7:33-36, 8:21-23). Mary became the first disciple of the good news of the empty tomb

conveying the word to Peter and *“the one whom Jesus loved.”* Slowly the implications of the empty tomb and the burial linens come to the disciples and they begin to understand – each in differing ways and to varying degrees. The disciple whom Jesus loved *“saw and believed”* (20:8), however *“they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead”* (v.9).

At this point, it is perhaps that their faith is as complete as faith in the empty tomb can be, but as many commentators have noted, to assign to the disciples a full belief in the Resurrection is to rush the story. Resurrection faith begins when Mary encounters Jesus in the garden and he is revealed as the Risen Christ and Good shepherd – he knows his sheep by name and they respond to his voice (10:3-4, 12, 16, 24; cf Is 43:1). In telling Mary *“stop holding onto me”* (v.17) Jesus lets Mary (and the reader) know that the unfolding of the events of the *hour* are continuing.

Like us, these first believers need time and opportunity to let the stories rummage around and then to encounter the Risen Christ. The Johannine narrative clearly shows the “empty tomb” – as amazing as it is – is in its own way a preparation for encountering the Risen Christ. The gospel telling the story of “doubting Thomas” makes clear the impact and consequences of that encounter.

Peace be with you

The disciples, still reeling from the events of the last three days, gather in the upper room. In Matthew 28:8, Mary Magdalene’s reaction to the encounter with Jesus was *“fearful but overjoyed.”* Perhaps this too is the experience of the disciples. All John tells us is that they were gathered together, hiding as it were, *for fear of the Jews* (v.19)

Even though it is not a good practice to “harmonize” the gospels, one can not help but wonder about the disciples who were on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). After their experience with the Risen Christ, *“Then they said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?’ So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven”* (Lk 24:32-33). Were they present or arrived soon after?

In any case, in the upper room are gathered disciples who scattered and fled at Jesus’ arrest, who stood at a distance from the cross, and in the case of Peter denied Jesus. These are disciples that upon seeing Jesus appear within the room would have likely experienced shame as they remembered all they had done and failed to do. Yet Jesus’ words are not words of recrimination or blame, his first resurrected words to the disciples as a group is *“Peace be with you.”*

What is this “peace” (*eirēnē*)? Often we assume “peace” describes either an absence of conflict or an inner personal tranquility, but one should note it most often describes the relationship between two people. The verbal form (*eirēneuō*) always refers to relationships between people in the NT (Mk 9:50; Rom 12:18; 2Cor 13:11; 1Thess 5:13). Given John’s emphasis on the disciples’ love for one another (John 13:35), a communal meaning is highly indicated. It is also possible that the meaning of *eirēnē* refers to messianic salvation, since “peace” is an essential quality of the messianic kingdom. Still, this does not suggest that the “peace” of the kingdom is primarily a personal, inner tranquility, but the way people and all creation and God will relate to each other in whole and complete ways.

This greeting of peace (v.19) is the word of reconciliation and wholeness for the disciples. They are forgiven for their failings and are brought back into relationship with the risen Jesus. Their experience of Jesus is “seeing” but at the same time a moment of graced restoration; these cause the disciples to rejoice (v.20).

Between his greetings of peace, Jesus shows his hands and side to the disciples. Like the earlier encounter with Mary, this action stresses the continuity between the “earthly” and the resurrected Jesus – yet at the same time, the fact that Jesus can enter the locked room also shows there is something new here – death has been conquered and more.

In the beginning was the Word

Jesus and the disciples were not born into a time of theological vacuum. Jewish theology was robust and with a history of succeeding and competing rabbinic schools. The followers of Jesus and the people of his time were Jews who were raised and lived this theology. It provided the framework for their daily lives and shaped their expectations about the Messiah, the Anointed One, who was to come. Among the gospels, John's is the writings whose work expresses the fulfillment of those expectations and provides the theology for those that would follow Jesus. The basis of the theology is evident from the opening:

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God..."

The Greek word used for 'Word' is *logos*. Many commentaries on this topic discuss this passage in terms of *logos*, Greek for reason and speech. When this is viewed from a Greek philosophical point of view, it is explained that Jesus was by reason the very idea of God and by speech, the very expression of God. If this gospel is attributed to John the Apostle, the approach suffers from the fact John was a Jewish fisherman whose family had connections to the high priestly families of Jerusalem. He is more likely to have used his Jewish background as a basis for the philosophical opening.

This basic Jewish theology was important because it is by understanding the background that the fullest sense of the meaning of Jesus can be obtained. The introduction to John's gospel, when viewed from the existing Jewish theology, provides continuity from the Old Covenant to the New. It shows that the Messiah existed from before creation and sets the theological basis for the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy through Jesus, and the forming of a new creation.

The Targumins

A great deal of our understanding of the Jewish theological interpretation of the Old Testament comes from original writings of the Hebrew scholars. The Old Testament was originally recorded in Hebrew and then translated (with interpretative embellishment) in Aramaic - known as the *Targumin*. For example:

- *Isaiah 52:13 (Hebrew) "See, my servant shall prosper.."*
- *Isaiah 52:13 (Targumin) "See, my servant the Messiah shall prosper.."*

In fact most of the OT citations in *John* are taken, not from the Hebrew or Septuagint (Greek language; LXX) Scriptures, but from the *Targumins*. From study of the *Targumins* we can begin to understand the full nature of Jesus.

The Word

In Jewish theology, the *memra* - Aramaic for the *Word* (*dabar* in Hebrew) - had several characteristics. It means more than "spoken word"; it also means "thing", "affair", "event", and "action". Because it covers both word and deed, in Hebrew thought, *dabar* had a certain dynamic energy and power of its own. When connected to Yahweh it took on the divine. Its energy and power were from God. The Targumic reflections on *memra* (*Targum Onkelos*) offers some insight into the meaning of the *Word* in Jewish theological thinking:

The *memra* was highly personified (e.g., *Isaiah 9:8, 45:23, 55:10; Psalm 147:15*)

When the word of God came to a particular prophet (*Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1*) it challenged the prophet to accept the word; when he accepted it it impelled him to go forth and give it to others and it became the word that judged men.

The memra was a means of making a covenant (e.g., *Genesis 15:1; Exodus 34:10*).

The word was is described in the OT as a light for men (*Ps 154:105, 103*)

The memra was life-giving (e.g., *Dt 32:46-47*)

For the Psalmist the memra has the power to heal people (e.g., *Ps 107:20*)

Salvation was by means of the memra (e.g., *Wis 16:26*)

The revelation of God to his people came through the memra as His agent (e.g., *Genesis 15:1; Ezekiel 1:3*)

The memra was an agent of creation (e.g., *Psalms 33:6; Is 55:10-11; Wis 9:1*). In *Is 40:11* God says, "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty. Rather it shall accomplish what I want and prosper in the things for which I sent it."

The memra was bearer of the judgment of God (*Wis 18:15; Hab 3:5*)

The memra was the agent of the theophany, or visible manifestations of God's presence (*Gen 3:2*). John uses this thought (*Jn 1:14*) in the use of the term "dwelling", which loses something in the translation. The Greek literally reads "pitched his tent/tabernacle", describing the place of God's presence among His chosen people. The Greek word for dwelling uses the same/near equivalent consonance sounds as the Aramaic word, *Shekinah*, meaning thiophene.

From the opening of John's Prologue we see the portrait of Jesus as the fulfillment of all of these Targumic themes. Jesus is personified (vv. 1-2), the agent of God and creation (v.3), the life-giver (v.4), the source of life and knowledge (vv.4-5), the maker of covenants (v.12), the means of salvation (v.16), the same as God and different (God and human natures), and the visible presence of God on earth.

The *memra* describes the very nature of why Jesus was sent. It is this background that gives deep shape and meaning to the simple verse: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21)

The Fourth Gospel often speaks of Jesus being sent into the world by the Father: to do his will (6:38-39; 8:29), to speak his words (3:34; 8:28; 12:49; 14:24; 17:8), to perform his works (4:34; 5:36; 9:4) and win salvation for all who believe (3:16-17).

That these same actions would be expected of the disciples, continuing the words and works of Jesus, is foreshadowed at various places in the Gospel. Jesus had urged them to see fields ripe for harvest, and told them he had sent them to reap where others had labored (4:35-38). Jesus told them that those who believed in him would do the works he had done and greater works than these because he was returning to the Father (14:12). The charge to bear fruit was made clear: "I ... chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you" (15:16). When Jesus prayed for his disciples he said to the Father, "As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world" (17:18). All of this points to a post-Resurrection mission that was larger than simply the confines of historical Israel, but rather a mission to the world.

Receive the Holy Spirit

The sacred writer had already introduced the giving of the Holy Spirit in John 7 in a scene during the Feast of Tabernacles in which the Spirit is promised at a future time when Jesus was glorified. In the Fourth Gospel it is at the crucifixion that Jesus is glorified in that his willing obedience manifests the nature of God, which is love. It is there on the cross that Jesus delivers the Spirit into the world (19:30), symbolized immediately afterward by the flow of the sacramental symbols of blood and water.

And now, at his first encounter with the believing community, Jesus breathes the Spirit again as a re-creation (*cf.* Gen 2:7) of God's people. The word used for 'breathe' is *emphysaō*, which, though found only here in the NT, occurs several times in the LXX where it refers to God breathing life into the man formed from the dust (Gen. 2:7; *cf.* Wisdom 15:11), Elijah breathing into the nostrils of the widow's dead son while calling upon the Lord to restore his life (1 Kgs. 17:21 LXX), and Ezekiel prophesying to the wind to breathe life into the slain in the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:9). The allusions to the life-giving work of God in creation seems clear.

In many places in the Fourth Gospel the promise of the Spirit is foreshadowed (1:33; 4:10, 13–14; 7:37–39; 14:16–17, 26, 28; 15:26–27; 16:7–15). Could it be that v.22 is the fulfillment of these promises? There are scholars who have identified 20:22 as the Fourth Gospel's equivalent of Pentecost, but there are problems with such a view. Thomas was not included (20:24), nor was there any great change in the disciples' behavior—they were still meeting behind closed doors when Jesus next appeared to them (26). Others have suggested it constituted a lesser bestowal of the Spirit to be supplemented with a greater endowment at Pentecost, or that what Jesus was bestowing was not the personal Holy Spirit but some impersonal power/breath from God. There is little to support either of these views in the Fourth Gospel. Finally, there is the view that Jesus' action was symbolic, foreshadowing the bestowal of the Spirit to take place on the Day of Pentecost. But then these problems mainly arise as people attempt to harmonize the gospels. There are many scholars who suggest that we simply leave John to narrate the gospel as the Spirit inspired him.

"Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

As the noted Johannine scholar, Fr. Raymond Brown, notes in his magisterial work on the Gospel of John, how one understands and accepts these words will (a) depend on your denominational affiliation (b) sacramental view and (c) roll of the priesthood - and there is no end to the debate. What I would simply offer is always pay attention when the breath of God is at play. The breath/spirit of God hovered over the *tobu w'hofu* - the great formless void before Creation - and what came to be was life. Of all the many things that Jesus could have said following "*Receive the Holy Spirit*" there is none more profound than the core mission - forgiveness of sins - would continue in the Sacramental presence of Reconciliation. As Catholics we trust God's Word and we celebrate the Sacrament.

Thomas

Although many translations include "doubt" in v. 27 -- and thus lead to the phrase "Doubting Thomas," but there is no Greek word for "doubt" in the verse. The phrase *do not be unbelieving, but believe* contrasts *apistos* and *pistos* -- the only occurrence of both these words in John. Simply put, the word does not mean "doubt" and Greek does not lack the equivalent words: *diakrinomai*, *dialogismos*, *distazō*, *dipsychos*, *aporeō*, and *aporia*. Lowe and Nida (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*) give three definitions for the adjective - *pistos*.

- pertaining to trusting -- *one who trusts in, trusting*
- pertaining to being trusted -- *faithful, trustworthy, dependable, reliable*
- pertaining to being sure, with the implication of being fully trustworthy -- *sure*

Thus *apistos* would be "not having trust or faith or certainty."

Questioning God is an aspect of faith. If one is asking God questions or seeking answers from God, there is an intrinsic faith present. To ask the question implies a fundamental trust that if an answer is given that it will be correct. Similarly, to ask the question can point to a desire to be sure. All this points to a “becoming” (a valid translation of the verb being used). Thomas seems to be at a crossroads in his life. What will he become? What adjective will describe him: trusting or not, faithful or not, certain or not?

John Westerhoff III in his book *Will Our Children Have Faith* offers a model of becoming in faith that may shed some light on Thomas’ evolving faith (found in Brian Stoffregen’s text)

- (1) EXPERIENCED FAITH (preschool and early childhood) -- imitating actions, e.g., a child praying the Lord's Prayer without understanding the meaning of all the words -- "This is what **we** do. This is how **we** act."
- (2) AFFILIATIVE FAITH (childhood and early adolescent years) -- belonging to a group, which still centers on imitating what the group does -- "This is what **we** believe and do. This is **our** group/church."
- (3) SEARCHING FAITH (late adolescence, young adult) -- asking questions, "Is this what **I** believe?" Thomas is our example of this. He will not blindly accept what others have said, but needs to find certainty for himself. This stage of faith is adding the "head" to the "heart" of the earlier stages. This is a point at which many young adults drop-out as well as when many are recruited to causes and cults
- (4) OWNED FAITH (early adulthood) -- this stage comes only through the searching stage. After exploring the question, "Is this what I believe?" one, hopefully, discovers a Christian answer that declares: "This is what I believe."

The Thomas scene ends with an “owned faith” and a personal confession: "*My Lord and my God*" -- a confession we don't hear from any of the other disciples who did not go through the same questioning as Thomas. However, this is the strong, personal faith that one witnesses to and one is willing to die for.

...that through this belief

In response, Jesus told Thomas, *Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*. Thomas came to believe because he saw the risen Lord, but Jesus did not praise Thomas’ pathway to faith; rather, he pronounced a blessing upon those who have not seen the risen Jesus yet have believed in him nevertheless. These are those who hear or read the witness to Jesus borne by the disciples and confirmed by the Spirit (15:26–27). This is the second pronouncement of blessing by Jesus in the form of a beatitude in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 13:17: “*If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it.*”). There are people who refer to this as the 9th beatitude.

“*Now Jesus did many other signs*” Verses 30–31 form a conclusion, the ending to the original edition of the Gospel. What the evangelist has written — which is not all that he could have written — is meant to urge and strengthen belief in Jesus as the Christ — and as the Son of God. John has already given us this profession in 11:27 on the lips of Martha in the context of another raising from the dead. To live, to really live, is to believe this: that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Messiah. *Vere homo, vere Deus*. Truly man, truly God.

John’s theology becomes evident through observing the reactions of the participants. How do they arrive at belief in the risen Lord? In the opening scene, Mary, a minor character, sees the stone moved from the tomb. Her reaction is the natural one: “They have taken the Lord from the tomb” (v. 2). She does not yet believe.

Peter and the Beloved Disciple, the central actors, proceed to the tomb with haste (and hope). They see the burial clothes and head wrapping. Peter remains perplexed, but the response of the Beloved Disciple is one of faith. “He saw and believed” (v. 8). This loved and loving disciple saw only the minimum yet believed.

In the following scene (vv. 11–18), Mary now becomes a major character. She still holds the natural explanation (vv. 13, 15 repeat the substance of v. 2). She comes to faith only when she has heard (v. 16) and seen the Lord (v. 18). Jesus’ sheep recognize his voice (10:4).

The disciples, introduced in Scene 2, become central in the scene that follows (vv. 19–25). Beginning in a state of fear, they pass from fear to joy “when they saw the Lord” (v. 20). For them, too, faith comes through seeing.

Thomas, a minor character in verses 19–25, becomes central in the final scene. His stance is one of extreme incredulity. He will not believe unless he sees and touches (v. 25). And so Jesus invites him to faith through sight and touch (v. 27).

The evangelist is reviewing all these varying reactions and possibilities *for people of his own time*. What will be their reaction, continued reaction, to the resurrection? Will it be the perplexity of Peter? Will it be that of the Beloved Disciple, who, united so intimately with his Lord in love, believed immediately with minimum evidence? Will it be that of Mary Magdalene and the other disciples, who believed only when they saw and heard? Will they be like Thomas, who refused to believe unless he saw and touched, unless placed in a position in which unbelief became impossible? The evangelist is saying to his own fellow Christians: “Those first disciples were by no means exemplary, nor was their situation so fortunate. Faith was almost forced upon them. That is not something to be envied. Our own situation can be more positive, more profitable, more Christian. Let us follow the example of the Beloved Disciple, who believed with such little evidence. We can be gifted with the “ninth” beatitude: ‘Blest are they who have not seen and have believed’ (v. 29). And indeed, blest are we who, without seeing, *believe in the risen Jesus, our Lord and our God*.”

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