

Recognizing Jesus in Reconciliation

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Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! 'Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among you. You yourselves know this. In accordance with God's established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. God raised him up! God freed him from death's dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him. David says about him, I foresaw that the Lord was always with me; because he is at my right hand I won't be shaken. Therefore, my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced. Moreover, my body will live in hope, because you won't abandon me to the grave, nor permit your holy one to experience decay. You have shown me the paths of life; your presence will fill me with happiness.

"Brothers and sisters, I can speak confidently about the patriarch David. He died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this very day. Because he was a prophet, he knew that God promised him with a solemn pledge to seat one of his descendants on his throne. Having seen this beforehand, David spoke about the resurrection of Christ, that he wasn't abandoned to the grave, nor did his body experience decay. This Jesus God raised up. We are all witnesses to that fact. Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Praise the Lord! I thank the Lord with all my heart in the company of those who do right, in the congregation. The works of the Lord are magnificent; they are treasured by all who desire them. God's deeds are majestic and glorious. God's righteousness stands forever. God is famous for his wondrous works. The Lord is full of mercy and compassion. God gives food to those who honor him. God remembers his covenant forever. God proclaimed his powerful deeds to his people and gave them what had belonged to other nations. God's handiwork is honesty and justice; all God's rules are trustworthy, they are established always and forever: they are fulfilled with truth and right doing. God sent redemption for his people; God commanded that his covenant last forever. Holy and awesome is God's name! Fear of the Lord is where wisdom begins; sure knowledge is for all who keep God's laws. God's praise lasts forever! Psalm 111

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven." Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe." After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!" Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe." Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name. John 20:19-31

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

Good morning and welcome back to Eastertide, or the season of Easter. Yes, that's right, this is an entire season! This is the most important feast of the entire year and it's still going! This is such a big deal, in fact, that the early and medieval church recognized the "octave of Easter," or the first 8 days of the season, as a time when fasting was illegal. Yes, the church said that you could NOT fast during this first week of Easter and although we don't have quite the same rules, I'm grateful for that because all I've done this week is feast.

During this glorious season, the lectionary gives us a few intentional things. One is that the first lesson, usually a reading from the Hebrew Bible (what we used to call the Old Testament), is substituted with a reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. This allows us to see how the Church really began to develop after the resurrection of Christ. And then the Gospel readings show us encounters that the Risen Christ has with various people. And what is interesting about these encounters is that these folx often don't recognize Jesus. Even though he isn't dressed up or hidden, they can't recognize him when he's right in front of them. And as I was thinking about this season, I started to think about just how often that's the case for us. That we can't recognize the Risen Christ around us, not because he's hiding, but because our vision is blurred.

So, during this season, we're going to look at these stories and ponder what was blurring the vision of these people and how we can work to recognize Christ around us. This first week we see St. Thomas the Apostle and his interaction with Jesus.

The Gospel places us in a room that absolutely is full weight of everything that has happened over the last few weeks. The disciples are gathered together, but the doors are locked. They are not out in the open, living as though resurrection has changed anything about their situation. They are afraid, and that fear is not generalized. It is directly from what they have witnessed and to what they assume could happen next. Jesus has been executed by the state, publicly, decisively, in a way meant to send a message. And there is no reason for them to believe those powers will stop there. So they gather, they close the doors, and they try to hold themselves together in a moment that has unraveled nearly everything they thought they understood about following Jesus.

What I think is also present in that room, whether it is spoken out loud or not, is the memory of what happened between those followers and Jesus in those final hours. These are the ones who walked with him, learned from him, ate with him, and promised to stay with

him. And when the moment came, they did not stay. St. Peter denied even knowing him. The others scattered. When Jesus was arrested, they ran. When he was crucified, they were not there in any visible way. So, the room is filled not only with fear of what is outside, but also with the grief of what has already happened within the group itself. They are carrying the knowledge that when everything was on the line, their faith did not hold in the way they thought it would.

Into that room, the Risen Jesus comes and stands among them. And the first thing he says is, “Peace be with you.” I love that there is no introduction, no commentary, no explanations. He doesn’t begin by naming what they did or asking them to account for their absence. He does not revisit their promises or compare them to their actions. He speaks peace directly into a room that is still filled with fear and unresolved failure. It is spoken before anything has been addressed at all.

Then he shows them his hands and his side. The wounds are still there. The marks of crucifixion have not been removed as part of the resurrection. The body that stands before them is the same body that was nailed to the cross. The violence has not been hidden or erased. The suffering has not been undone. It is present, visible, undeniable. And it is held together with the word peace. The past is not denied, and yet it does not determine what is being spoken in the present moment. What happened is not forgotten, but it is no longer the only thing that can be said.

The disciples respond with joy, which is understandable given what they are experiencing. But even that response sits inside a larger movement that is still unfolding. Jesus speaks again, repeating the same, “Peace be with you.” And then he connects that word to what comes next, “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Peace is not a just passing greeting but is the foundation for what follows. The ones who ran away are now being sent. The ones who could not remain are now entrusted with continuing the work. It is given to

them as part of this moment of reconciliation. Their past is not ignored, but it does not disqualify them from their future.

Liturgy, or the things we do together in worship, isn't created in a vacuum. This moment is why we share the peace of Christ together. You often hear me introduce it by saying, "as loved and reconciled children of God, let us offer one another a sign of Christ's peace." This is the same thing that Christ did. Offered us a peace that came from God with a message to send and pass that forward.

Then Jesus breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This echoes creation itself, the breath of life given at the beginning. Something is being restored that had been fractured. And immediately, that gift is connected to forgiveness. "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." That statement is often pulled out of this passage and treated as a separate teaching, but here it is inseparable from what has just taken place. The disciples have just been reconciled without condemnation. They have just been addressed with peace while their failure is still unresolved. They have just been restored into relationship without first repairing everything themselves. And now they are sent to live that same pattern into the world.

This is where the recognition of the risen Christ begins to take shape. It is not located in spectacle or in public display. It is located in the restoration of relationship with those who abandoned him. The presence of Christ becomes recognizable in the act of reconciliation itself, in the refusal to let failure have the final word, in the decision to speak peace where there is every reason to speak something else.

I find it difficult to hear "peace" without noticing how far it stands from the way the world operates today. The conditions in that room are not so different from the conditions people experience in many places now. There are still powers that rely on fear and threats to

maintain control. There are still systems that use violence to make their point. There are still communities that find themselves closing doors, trying to protect what is inside because what is outside feels so unsafe. War continues around the world, a daily reality for people who wake up not knowing what the day will bring. Families are displaced. Cities are destroyed. Lives are wastefully lost in ways that cannot be easily measured, nonetheless repaired. And even in places that are not directly experiencing that kind of violence, there are divisions that deepen quickly, relationships that fracture easily, and conversations that break down before they begin. The instinct to protect, to withdraw, to draw sharp lines between who is inside and who is outside, is not difficult for us to understand.

In this kind of world, the word peace can begin to sound thin, as though it belongs only in certain spaces and not in others. It can feel disconnected from the realities people are facing. But the peace spoken here is not offered in a calm or stable environment. It is spoken into fear. It is spoken into a room filled with people who have already failed one another and failed him. It is spoken into a world where the same Empire that carried out this crucifixion is still present and active. Which means peace confronts it directly. It does not deny the presence of violence or failure but refuses to let those things determine everything that follows.

St. Thomas enters our story from a different position, but he is still part of the same movement. He is not present for this first encounter, and that absence shapes his response. When the others tell him, “We have seen the Lord,” he does not accept their testimony as sufficient. He names clearly what he needs in order to recognize what they are describing. “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.” That response reflects the fact that he has not yet been part of what has already taken place. The others have seen and heard and been reconciled. St. Thomas has not. His words are not a rejection of the possibility so much as a somewhat reasonable refusal to claim this experience that is not his.

A week later, the disciples are gathered again, and the doors are still locked. The fear hasn't disappeared. The world outside the room has not changed in any obvious way. But St. Thomas is with them now. And again, Jesus comes and stands among them and says, "Peace be with you." The word is repeated in the same conditions. It is spoken into the same kind of space. Then Jesus turns to Thomas and addresses him directly. "Put your finger here. See my hands. Bring your hand and put it in my side." The same wounds that were shown to the others are now offered to him. The same presence that restored the group is extended to him. He is drawn into it.

His response is immediate, "My Lord and my God." Recognition follows encounter, just as it did for the others. What he needed in order to recognize Christ is given to him, and he responds accordingly. I don't believe this story presents his need as a failure. It shows that the same Christ who restored the others is committed to restoring him as well. He's gotten a bad rap as Doubting Thomas.

Jesus then speaks exactly to this, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That statement opens this story outward. It acknowledges that not everyone will have the same kind of encounter that the disciples have had. The recognition of the risen Christ will continue in different ways, in different contexts, without the same kind of physical immediacy. But the pattern established here remains. Recognition is tied to the presence of Christ in the work of reconciliation, in the restoration of relationship, in the ongoing refusal to let fear and failure determine the future.

The story ends here, without resolving every tension. The doors are still locked. The world outside the room is still what it is. But something within the room has shifted. Peace has been spoken. Relationship has been restored. A future has been given that was not secured

by the past. And the responsibility to carry that forward has been placed in the hands of those who were once defined by their failure.

Next week we'll see about an encounter of the Risen Christ in a meal at a table. But this is where our journey to recognition begins today. Not in the removal of uncertainty, and not in the absence of conflict, but in the presence of Christ within the ongoing work of reconciliation, forgiveness, and commissioning. Amen.