

A Storytelling Commentary on John 20:19-31

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

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."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve,
was not with them when Jesus came.
So the other disciples told 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 in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side,
I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house,
and Thomas was with them.
Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said,
"Peace be with you."

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands;
reach out your hand and put it in my side.
Do not doubt but believe."
Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples,
which are not written in this book.
But these are written so that you may come to believe
that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,
and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This story of Jesus' appearance to the disciples is the first appearance to the disciples in the Gospel of John. It follows the appearance to Mary Magdalene, which was a complete surprise to her. So also, Jesus' appearance is a complete surprise to the disciples. It confirms what Mary Magdalene had told them: Jesus was alive. That tone of surprise is essential to the telling of the story.

The context, both political and psychological, is named at the beginning of the story. The doors of the house where the disciples met were locked for fear of those who had killed Jesus, and who were quite possibly on a campaign to find, arrest, and execute Jesus' followers. In the midst of this fear, Jesus comes and says, "Peace be with you." Clearly, the disciples were afraid. But it is also very probable that they were angry. In the midst of what had happened they were angry at the death of Jesus and his being executed. Part of their fear was this complex of emotions.

Jesus' greeting is a response to their present emotional situation. In the midst of their anger, their fear, their terror, and their uncertainty, Jesus' first words respond to their situation: "Peace be with you." Peace be in you, peace be your response to this situation. Why? At one level it is because a possible response of theirs was the same response as at the arrest, which was to strike out and resort to violence. It was to try to respond to their anger and frustration with hatred. Jesus' words are a response. His greeting is also a wish for them as to how they can respond to what has happened. He does not respond with hostility or with expressions of vengeance for those who had killed him; rather, his first response is peace.

The sending of the disciples follows from the way the Father has sent Jesus on a mission of peace, love, and reconciliation. As the Father has sent Jesus, so also he sends the disciples. They are to extend this mission of peace and the extension of God's love in the world. The gift of the Holy Spirit is their empowerment. The Spirit is what will give them the energy, the inspiration, and the power to undertake this new mission. The Spirit is their authority.

Jesus' words are also a recognition of what in fact will happen. That is, they can either forgive the sins of those who have killed Jesus and who have persecuted them or they can hold onto them. Jesus' wish for peace means that they cannot hold onto them. This line is often heard as the church's authority to forgive sins or to hold onto them, and is understood as giving the church authority to send people to heaven or to hell. I don't think that's what is going on here. I think instead what is happening is simply that Jesus is describing the reality of the situation. In the aftermath of his death, his disciples can either forgive the sins of those who have attacked him and killed him and who will continue to persecute the followers of Jesus, or they can "hold onto" these sins, maintaining their anger and their fear and be paralyzed by it.

Thomas, the empiricist of the group, wants evidence. He's not going to accept these fantastic stories as factual without seeing the evidence for himself. The clear intent of the story is to invite the listeners to identify with Thomas, because he is the one who is tough-minded about all of this. When Jesus again comes a week later and appears to the disciples, he talks to Thomas. The beginning is first his greeting, "Peace be with you." His tone in addressing Thomas has no note of judgment or condemnation, but is rather a tone of understanding and compassion: "Put your finger here. See my side; see my

hands; reach out your hand and put it in my side. Don't doubt, but believe." Jesus' response is one of love, understanding, and compassion for Thomas.

It is in that context that the purpose of the Gospel is then identified. Just as Thomas was unsure and did not believe, so also the listeners throughout the whole of the Gospel have been torn between believing and not believing in Jesus as the Messiah. These things are written and, by implication, told. That is, when the Gospel was written it was meant to be *read from memory and told aloud in community*. Writing did not mean that it was going to be studied in silence, as we contemporary readers would now do. It meant that it was written so that these stories could be told in the manner in which John, the author of the Gospel, wrote them down. The purpose of the writing is that the listeners may come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. That's been the reason for the whole story—so that the audience may "come to believe." At the core of the possibility of listeners believing is the establishment of relationship with Jesus that has been invited throughout the whole Gospel.

The invitation to relationship has happened by hearing Jesus talk about the various issues that are present. This is the last of those issues. How is Jesus going to respond to the skepticism of Thomas, just as all of those who have been skeptical about him throughout the Gospel? Jesus responds with compassion and gives Thomas a decisive sign. Everyone who identifies with Thomas can receive this assurance, this sign from Jesus.