

When Will We See the Risen Lord?

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John 20: 19-31

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. . . Well, there's a whole lot in that sentence. What they have seen has caused them to retreat to this house where they were meeting and take refuge in their fellowship together. And we know what they've seen, of course. They've seen an angry mob turn on Jesus. They've seen the deadly politics and plotting of the religious leaders. They've seen the iron fist of Caesar and the way anyone who appears unpatriotic or questioning of his authority is dealt with. And, of course they've seen their own complicity in their lord's death. They've seen their abandoning of him. They've seen their failure to be able to follow him when the going got tough.

Now, believing as I do that John in writing his gospel had almost no interest in just providing an objective account of events that happened, but instead only writes because he wants to bring a word of God to his community, I think there's even more in that opening sentence. I think John has his church in mind. See, in this story, the disciples are *already* believers. What has happened just before today's text begins is that Mary Magdalene, on the heels of her encounter with the risen Jesus outside the tomb, has announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and witnessed to the things that he'd said to her. And so, as opposed to Thomas who when told the same thing by the disciples did not believe, *they* had by all accounts believed her! You remember, when Jesus comes to them and shows them his hands and his side, they didn't make a confession of belief, as Thomas later did, they simply "rejoiced when they saw" him.

I think John is talking about his church. First of all, it's the first day of the week, he says. Sunday, the day his church meets for worship, the day when the "peace" of Christ is passed among them, the day when gathered together they feel his presence. I think John has his church in mind, a group of believers, a group of disciples who meet together for worship, but who, because of what they see in the world around them, have really retreated to the safety of their fellowship together. It's understandable, things being what they were in Rome. Already, some Christians had been martyred. It's easy enough to see why they would take solace in the blessedness of their fellowship together away from the "world."

It's still pretty tempting for church to become that for us, what with nasty political races going on, people pushing drugs and shooters on I-64, not to mention terrorism and innocent people dying in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Congo, Darfur. And then there are just the everyday tragedies and hassles that are part of our lives, car accidents, things going wrong at work. Certainly, we need a respite sometimes. So, it can be tempting to make church all about that respite together, all about us, all about our fellowship together, all about the type of worship and music we enjoy: All about just being together with our brothers and sisters in Christ for an hour on Sundays. I mean, it's pretty good stuff, really when you consider everything else we see around us. And so, we might even think, you know it's too bad there are all those others out there who just don't get it, you know secularists and Muslims, democrats and republicans and Oriole fans.

But, we're here and we believe that Jesus is risen and sometimes we even feel his presence among us, and it's great. Church can become that, can't it? And we forget what all this is really supposed to mean for how we live our lives, beyond these walls? Church, our church, just like John's can become that. Listen to this story. The risen Jesus comes into that place where the believers are meeting with a message and for a specific purpose. He comes and stands among them and says, "Peace be with you." Now, going right along with our other temptation to make church our nice retreat from the world, we may also be tempted to hear those words of peace as

Jesus wishing and bringing for us, inner tranquility. But, the Greek verb form that is used by John here, doesn't refer to inner tranquility. It always refers to relationships between people. It doesn't mean having this place of spiritual respite inside us, or even together as a fellowship. It refers to the way we relate to each other and to creation. And, that makes complete sense in the context of the rest of what the risen Lord says to them. He says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And then he breathes the Holy Spirit on them and immediately talks about forgiveness. The Holy Spirit gives them the ability to forgive, all those people who don't think the same way they do, all those people doing terrible, despicable things.

Even to forgive Thomas, who was one of their own, but who was refusing to believe like them, even though they kept telling him over and over. See, I think, as Thomas saw it, he may have had good reason not to be believing. See, I think in his desire to touch Jesus' wounds, Thomas was right. Thomas had made the connection that really following Jesus would involve woundedness and perhaps death. Maybe he wasn't believing what the others were telling him because he wasn't seeing that in their lives. They were just being a club together. But, when the risen Lord shows up among them again and Thomas touches Jesus' wounds, he makes the most radical confession of faith in the whole New Testament. "My Lord and my God!"

You see, Thomas knew if this Jesus is God, then there is no sitting around behind locked doors just enjoying each other! See, when we talk about Jesus as being the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, we don't start with some supposed abstract attributes of God (you know, all-knowing, all-powerful, etc.) and then attribute those to Jesus. We start with Jesus! We say what we know and see and hear from him *are* the attributes of God and there is no *other* abstract notion of God. And this Jesus, whom Thomas confesses as God, comes speaking peace as a way of living with one another, across all the differences. This Jesus comes giving the ability for and demanding the practice of forgiveness, even of our worst enemies. This Jesus comes sending his disciples out to the world to touch his wounds by ministering to wounded people.

Friends, that's why we gather together here. That's why we need to be in worship and in bible study. It's not because doing those things are what constitutes Christian behavior. It's because *faith*, the kind of believing, the kind of trusting in who God really is that makes living in the world in a different way, possible...*faith* comes by hearing. It comes by hearing the truth of the Gospel story, because the fact is, that may be very different from what our eyes tell us is the truth. And without being here to hear the truth of this story over and over again, we will start trusting our eyes. And, as Stanley Hauerwas has said, faith which doesn't result in living a kind of life that would *make no sense unless this* Jesus is risen, is not Christian faith.

So, when will you see Him and know that He is the Truth? When you start living your life trusting in what you've heard. When you speak and live peace with those different from you. When you forgive enemies. When you go out and touch Christ's wounds by serving the least and the last, the hurting and the outcast, and those who try your patience. Says Jesus, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That's you and me folks, if we step forth trusting in what we've heard. This Jesus is risen. God loves all flesh without partiality. Trust it. Live it. Believe it. And, here's the promise: Believing is seeing. May we find it so.