

John 20:19-31
April 19, 2009

South Plains

The Church Of The Second Chance

If it's true that raising questions is often more important than providing answers, these verses from the gospel according to John take the prize. Are you curious about thin places between heaven and earth? Then, you will want to ask about that room where Jesus walked through a locked door, and "What kind of body did the risen Jesus possess?" Do details bother you? Then, you will wonder why Thomas was not with the other disciples. When Thomas does appear in this story, someone always wants to know, "Did he actually touch the wounds of Jesus, or not?" If not, "Exactly what changed his mind and made him a believer in the resurrection?" But, in the meantime, during that week between Jesus' first appearance to the disciples and his second appearance, "What in the world were those disciples doing? Did they fall into doubt about what they had seen on Easter? Or, did they celebrate? Or, did they just wait to see what Jesus would do for a second act?"

I have no answers to these questions, but my suspicion is that the disciples needed more than a week to process the resurrection. Remember that they are grieving more than the death of their friend and leader. When Jesus died on the cross, their hopes for Israel died too. The Roman government was more firmly in control than ever. The kingdom of God would have to wait. And,

Judaism, the faith that had nurtured them, the faith of Jesus, had turned against them in the person of the high priest. They were grieving; and I suspect the grief continued for a while, even after the resurrection.

A very wise elder once pointed out to me that Easter is a time when the preacher has permission to speak openly about death as well as resurrection. Indeed, if the church does not consider the passion and death of Jesus, we have not really celebrated Easter at all. Therefore, my friend reminded me, we can expect that some people will remember at Easter not only the hope of the resurrection, but also the suffering and death of loved ones. Easter unsettles our memories.

The church sets aside the next seven Sundays to process the events of Holy Week. It took the disciples at least that long. According to John's gospel, the followers of Jesus experience hope and joy, yes. They also experience doubt, puzzlement, sadness, perplexity, disbelief and confusion. If Easter unsettles our soul, perhaps we are in the right frame of mind to meet the resurrected Lord.

The greeting of the risen Christ is nothing like, "Happy Easter!" When he comes to the disciples he says, "Peace be with you." He finds them locked inside the house, fearful of the Jewish authorities who had been so successful in putting an end to their dreams. They knew by this time that the tomb was empty. They had heard that Mary Magdalene had seen Jesus alive. They

had the facts. As with some of us, they wondered what they should do with this story of a resurrection.

As it had always been, Jesus guides them. He arrives with a word of peace. Three times in this passage he says, "Peace be with you." By the third time, the disciples are transformed from fearful to joyous. They realize that death is not the end. They have a second chance. Thomas, the one who is missing at the first appearance of Jesus, hears that greeting and moves from doubtful to adoring. He exclaims at the climax of the Gospel according to John, "My Lord and my God!" Doubtful Thomas is given the punch line. They were all coming to faith. But they needed that word of peace, even with the facts of the resurrection right in front of them.

At the beginning of Luke's account of the life of Jesus, some shepherds are sitting on a hillside, terrified over the appearance of angels. How do the angels respond to that fear? "Do not be afraid," they say... "and on earth peace (Luke 2:9, 10, 14)." It seems that it doesn't matter how good the news might be in some official, doctrinal sense, we still need to hear a word of peace. Easter, like no other season in the Christian year, confronts us directly with the question that everyone must deal with eventually, Is there peace in the face of death?

When we lose someone to death, we experience the same sense of loss felt by the disciples. It doesn't matter what we believe. Like us, they knew about the

resurrection of the dead. They had heard the arguments between the Pharisees and the Sadducees about resurrection. Earlier in John's gospel, Martha professes her belief in the resurrection even before her brother Lazarus is raised from the dead. Despite all this, the mood in that roomful of Jesus' disciples was fear and sadness. Is there hope in the face of death? Jesus' answer is YES.

It's not just physical death we fear. We die in many ways. The jilted lover plunges from the ecstasy of feeling like the center of another person's universe into a dungeon of despair when the break-up occurs. It doesn't help to be told that there are other fish in the sea. The one that mattered is gone. But there is hope.

Sometimes according to Jesus we must die to our old selves. After her divorce, a woman told me, "I had to start all over." She had to find a new identity. The same feelings can come with a business failure, an arrest by the police, a mental illness. Is there life after such setbacks? The gospel says unequivocally, YES.

A private sin can have the same effect. We doubt the possibility of forgiveness. We loathe ourselves for weakness. And, because the sin is private, we have created a very personal hell. Is there hope in the face of such sin and guilt? Jesus' answer is YES.

The evidence for that resurrection hope can be seen in the hands and side of Jesus. I do not pretend to

know what we are going to look like in heaven, but apparently we will bear some scars, some token of the pain and sufferings we have known in this life. Jesus did. In the book of Revelation a voice from heaven says that God

Will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

Mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

For the first things have passed away (21:4).

But it does not say that the scars of our suffering will disappear. Jesus kept the print of the nails in his hands and feet. He continues to bear in his side the wound of the spear thrust that sealed his death once and for all.

Over twenty years ago, I was cutting a limb on an old cherry tree. When the limb broke unexpectedly, I fell out of the tree, breaking my wrist in what the surgeon described as a devastating injury. For eight weeks, my bones were held in place by an ugly contraption called a Hoffman External Fixator. Getting rid of that device was an enormous relief since it marked me as something of a freak. My friends hated to look at it. Despite those memories, I kept all the pieces of the Hoffman External Fixator wrapped in my sling on the shelf of my closet. I'm not sure why except that it was the evidence for what I had been through, the proof of the grace I had received.

In a much more profound way, the hands and side of the risen Jesus proved that the suffering he endured on our behalf was real. The passion was over, but not erased. The wounds were healed, but the pain is

validated and remembered by the evidence. The redemption he purchased on the cross continues to redeem my life and yours. Something good was accomplished with that pain. Christianity does not forget pain, deny suffering. Eternal life is not an escape from this world, but an affirmation of the life in which Christ was incarnate, the life Christ gave up, the life God restored for Jesus and for us.

If you want evidence of the hope we have in this life, look at the hands and side of the risen Jesus who has overcome his wounds.

Jesus does not stop with providing evidence of hope. The peace and hope of the gospel are more than good feelings like the sweet, empty calories of jelly beans. Having spoken peace and given hope, Jesus also empowers. He sends his disciples to take up his mission in the world. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you (20:22)." In a scene reminiscent of the creation of Adam in Genesis, Jesus breathes the breath of life into his followers and they are filled with the Holy Spirit.

They now have a job to do. The job description ought to intimidate and humble anyone who calls himself or herself a Christian. Here it is in Jesus' own words:

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (21:23).

What an awesome responsibility. You hold the power of forgiveness. That's why we include confession and forgiveness in worship. It gives substance to our life as a community of faith at South Plains. The music we make is praise and prayer for the forgiveness of our sins. The fellowship we enjoy is founded on a common experience of forgiveness. The service we render to meet the needs of the world is motivated by our gratitude for having the burden of sin lifted and taken away. Jesus sends us to the far corners of the world to proclaim forgiveness.

When the Titanic began its fateful last voyage, one of the passengers was a Roman Catholic priest, Father Brown. The pictures he took of the ship, its cabins and staterooms, have survived to tease our curiosity. But, Fr. Brown was only scheduled to be on board for the first leg of the journey. When the ship left England for the Atlantic crossing, he was getting off. However, he had met an American couple who enjoyed his company so much that they wanted to pay his passage to New York. He needed permission from his bishop. Together they all went to the radio room of the Titanic where he took a picture of the radioman sending his request to stay on board. When the ship docked a day later for its last stop in England, Fr Brown found a telegram waiting for him with a short message: "Get off that ship."

Because a priest is under orders, he obeyed. He later joked that it may have been the only time his vow of obedience saved anybody's life. We also are under

orders. This is the meaning of the term "ordination," by the way, if you are an elder. Our orders send us into the world to announce the forgiveness of a loving God. That is a message at the same time unsettling and soothing. It unsettles when we cannot face the fact that we need forgiveness for anything. It soothes when we accept forgiveness.

The facts of the resurrection are there for all to see. The forgiveness we want in our heart of hearts is available. The evidence we see in the body of the risen Jesus testifies to the hope and peace he brings. The resurrection is ours.

Easter unsettles us because it offers a second chance. We cannot dodge the issues of sin and death. Life keeps us off balance, and, praise God, that is one way we know we are alive. The other way we know we're alive is by trusting Jesus who brings us peace and hope and forgiveness, the new life of the resurrection. That's our second chance. Take it!