

**Sermon: Who Are You Going to Believe...?**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31**

The lectionary gives us a series of readings from John's first letter, and today, we begin at the beginning. John's Gospel and his letter date from about the same time, anywhere from the late 80s to the beginning of the second century. The theme of light and dark is shared with contemporary Jewish documents and can be found in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The letter, which is something of a composite, explains some basic truths about Christian life. John also shows concern that the church should continue to proclaim 'the word of life' that 'was from the beginning.'

If you decide to read ahead, bear in mind that the lectionary skips over chapter two which has a lot of talk about antichrists and a possible split in the community, but the rest of it is all about love. More or less. Here's a hint: even Martin Luther liked this letter.<sup>i</sup>

In John's Gospel, we know how the Jesus story goes, but the disciples in today's reading have no idea how things will turn out. They are locked away in a room somewhere in Jerusalem, hiding from a world they thought was out to kill them, in the evening of what we now call Easter Sunday.

At the moment we meet them, their most overriding emotion must be grief. Three scriptural days ago, they had witnessed the gruesome murder of their leader, now revealed as the Son of God. They're on their own now, so naturally they went home and locked the door. Who wouldn't? They learn that you might lock the door against trouble, but Jesus will find a way in.

And when Jesus did come and stand among them, he offered them peace, a reassurance that all was well, despite recent events. Jesus didn't blame the disciples for what happened; nor did he single out Peter, who had denied him, nor did he have anything snarky to say to those who *just couldn't stay awake* as Jesus prayed in the Garden. Jesus refuses to exact revenge.

The writer of John's Gospel knew that future hearers of the story would want actual, physical proof in order to really, truly believe, but he also knew that that would be impossible. In describing Jesus' conversation with Thomas, John anticipates a time when the disciples will

be gone and there will be no one left who knew and followed Jesus, and had witnessed his ministry, death, and resurrection.

Thomas' problem is that he preferred physical proof to the testimony of his fellow disciples; the witness of the church wasn't enough – he had to see it for himself. It's almost as if he were channeling Chico Marx, who inspired today's sermon title. The other disciples doubted too, until they saw Jesus among them. It's a normal reaction. Even then, Jesus understands: he grants shalom to Thomas too.

It was only after Jesus showed them his hands and his side, proving that he was with them in both the flesh and the spirit, that the disciples actually *saw* Jesus, and *then* they rejoiced. Perhaps fear or grief prevented them from seeing him clearly the first time, so Jesus reassured them again, and then breathed the Holy Spirit into them. Word and Spirit are one.

Notice that the signs of Jesus' suffering persist. When he shows us the marks on his hands, it's a reminder for us that our scars also persist, reminding us that what happens to us in life makes us who we are, and that despite our misfortunes and troubles, we can still carry on. The body keeps score, if you will.

Jesus knows the disciples are afraid, so he brings them peace. He knows they need his continued presence and power, so he gives them the Holy Spirit. He knows they've lost their sense of purpose, so he commissions them to a ministry of witness and reconciliation. He makes sure he appears to every disciple, excluding none. And he forgives them their sins. Verse 29 might be Jesus' final beatitude when he says, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Hopefully, that blessing extends to all of us too.

By directly addressing the reader in the Gospel passage's last two verses, John reveals his concern that the first generation of Christians is getting older and is beginning to fade away, but he also removes the distance of the centuries and puts us in the room with Jesus and the disciples when he says these things are written so that we may come to believe too, despite never having seen Jesus for ourselves. And what we are called to believe is that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that, through him, he gives us life.

The promise of eternal life is a theme in John's letter too, which seems natural.

For John, Jesus is our key to a common life with each other and with God. When we acknowledge – or 'confess' – our sins and our faith in Jesus, we become a community, and the

community stays together as long as it shares that common relationship. That's as relevant to us now as it was to John in terms of the future of the church.

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Paul Tillich once said that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. It may be that coming to faith is not an individual struggle or achievement. Maybe faith is something we come to together, to trust in our experience of God and to share it, to give each other strength and to minimize our weaknesses.

And faith gives us plenty of room for questions. One classical definition says that theology is 'faith seeking understanding.' More than that, faith seeks understanding *restlessly*. Christians, says St. Augustine, want to understand what we believe, what we can hope for, and what we ought to love.

Having faith means putting one's trust and reliance in *something*, in this case, in Jesus as Messiah. But it also means trusting in his ministry, in his teachings, and in his example. He taught us how to live a spiritual, religious, moral life; he taught us to pray; he showed us a new way to be human. 'Follow me,' he said, 'Do what I do.' And then he showed us.

Why, then, does it sometimes feel as if we're running in place? Why does it often look as if things are getting worse, not better? Why does it seem as if so many people live without hope? Do we fail to see Jesus among us? No wonder we lock our doors.

On the night Thomas rejoins them the doors are shut but are no longer locked. The locked doors were never a problem. Jesus was always with the disciples, in their grief and in their rejoicing, just as he's with us whenever we gather to share in the bread and the cup. We are *meant* to be a community at peace. We worship together as a congregation, as a church in fellowship centered on, and invited by, God: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Here, we can speak our mind. Here, we can rest and be restored.

Today's story isn't really about Thomas. It's about accepting the testimony of others, to hear their stories and experiences of God, to share ours in return, and, in that way, to grow.

Like Thomas and the disciples, we tend to want living proof. Jesus wants a living faith, and it begins with the love, compassion, and peace that Jesus gave the disciples on that first Easter Sunday. The truth is, we don't know how the story turns out either, but it's up to us to write the next chapter, and we'll write it together.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> See the foreword to Luther's "Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John" (1527).