

Sermon: I, Witness

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31**

‘The End.’ Fini.

We just heard the end of John’s account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Throughout his Gospel, John’s major concern was to bring people to have faith in Jesus. For him, salvation came from *believing* and *receiving*. Early on in chapter one, he wrote:

‘To all who *received* [Jesus], who *believed* in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God’ (John 1:12).

So, it’s no surprise to see the word *believe* pop up so many times at the end. John wanted us to get the point before he closed the book, and to leave us on a high note.

If you’re reading ahead, there is an epilogue to John’s Gospel, but it wasn’t written by him. Someone else added it sometime later. It does include the story of Jesus on the beach, cooking up a mess o’ fish served with bread, so we like it for that.

There is a lot to unpack in this reading. Naturally.

It was evening ‘on that day,’ the same day the women discovered the empty tomb. In the same house and in the same room where the disciples had shared a last meal with Jesus, the disciples met behind locked doors because they were afraid that they were next.

All four Gospel accounts tell us that the Pharisees, priests, and scribes had all targeted Jesus. Except for maybe Peter in the courtyard when he denied Jesus three times, none of the disciples seem to have been in danger. But they didn’t know that, and John ends his Gospel without mentioning any further trouble.

We have to go to other writings, to books such as Luke’s *Acts of the Apostles* and to a letter called *Revelation* to hear about later persecutions.

The point is, the disciples were gathered in fear, so it must have come as quite a shock to suddenly realize Jesus had come to stand among them. Difficulty recognizing the risen Lord is a theme in both John and Luke’s Gospels. It was only after they saw Jesus’ hands and his side did the disciples actually *see* the Lord, and *then* they rejoiced.

But Thomas was not with them, and this is where the story becomes a lesson.

First, 'Thomas' is not a proper name but a nickname that means 'twin' in Aramaic. So, as the Gospels tend to tell us only what they want us to know, we might well ask, whose twin is he? Some people feel that since Thomas comes to his faith reluctantly, then perhaps he is *our* twin.

But that might be reading too much into the story.

Thomas only wants to see what the others have all already seen. Fair enough.

The real problem is that Thomas will not believe what the others have told him. Compare this to the disciple who reached the tomb first, went in, saw, and believed – *even though there was nothing for him to see as the tomb was empty* (John 20:8).

Not believing what the other disciples told him was potentially damaging to the faith community, or at least to John's community.

Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me (just as the rest of them have)? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Which brings us to us. John implies that maybe we should not count Thomas among the blessed. But every Christian since Thomas has been one who has not seen and yet has come to believe.

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 personal experience of God and to share it, to give each other strength.

Faith gives us plenty of room for questions. We like to say that theology is 'faith seeking understanding.' More than that, faith seeks understanding *restlessly*. Christians, like anyone else, want to understand what we believe, what we can hope for, and what we ought to love.

Having a Christian faith means putting one's trust and reliance 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; he taught us to pray; he showed us a new way to be human. 'Follow me,' he said. He showed us what he meant and now we follow, in faith.

Why, then, does it often look as if things are getting worse, not better? What are we doing wrong? Do we fail to see Jesus among us? Do our fears make us blind?

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

This is not the kind of peace we are used to. To us, peace means the absence of war, and this is what we hope and pray will occur someday soon in places like Ukraine, Syria, and Yemen, to name just a few. There is conflict all around the world these days.

The Hebrew idea of peace means *shalom*: healing, wholeness, and restoration. When war ends and peace returns, it is *shalom* that we need. When Jesus points to his hands and side and says, "Peace be with you," maybe he's saying that in him, we are made whole again; that through him, we are rejoined with God.

Shifting gears, the book of Revelation is so notoriously complex that a fourth-century church father named Jerome said that "it contains as many mysteries as it contains words." The third-century theologian Origen asked, "Who can read the revelations granted to John without being amazed at the hidden depth of the ineffable mysteries, a depth apparent even to the person who does not understand what the text says?" And D.H. Lawrence wrote, "When we read Revelation, we feel at once there are meanings behind meanings."¹

There is nothing in this book that is self-explanatory. Not everyone wanted the Bible to include what is really a strange little letter. It was meant to be read aloud from start to finish as part of a church service. And it is a little freaky.

And yet, it reminds us that God is in charge and that God will have the last word, despite the world's current difficulties.

The author writes to seven churches and offers them grace and peace from 'him who is,' saying, in Greek, God's name from Exodus 3:14, meaning the steadfast God of Israel, the fully present God who is merciful and faithful and victorious even now.

But God's victory is not complete. The promise of Easter is that Christ is risen. We might lock the door against trouble, but Jesus will find a way in. He grants us peace to share God's victory and eternal presence as faithful witnesses.

Amen.

¹ Coogan, M. D., Brettler, M. Z., Newsom, C. A., & Perkins, P. (2001). *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books*. Oxford University Press.