

## Sermon

April 16, 2023 [Gospel : John 20:19-31 ]

(Re)Opening Our Doors  
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace from God the Father,  
and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ; Amen.

Our Gospel reading for today raises so many questions:

Why did the disciples, who themselves are Jews, hide for fear of the Jews, according to verse 20?

Why does John's Gospel single out Thomas for his lack of faith, when in Mark 16 Jesus chastises *all* of the disciples, not only for their lack of faith, but also for their stubbornness?

Why do we hear nothing else about Thomas in the other Gospels, apart from the fact that he is one of the original twelve?

Why do we call him "Doubting Thomas" when the Greek word for "doubt" never appears in the text?

What prevented Jesus's open wounds from getting infected?

And why would Jesus tell Thomas to put – or as the King James translation has it, to "thrust" – his entire hand into his side? How gross! how disgusting! right?

Well, setting aside these questions, several of which I have addressed in previous sermons and one or two of which are not quite so serious, another question stands out to me from today's reading:

Out of all the other stories about Jesus circulating at the time, which John acknowledges at the end of our reading for today, why did John include *this* story? Why did John include the story of Thomas, and why would this story have any relevance or matter to us today? What in short, can we learn from it, 2,000 years after it was written?

Well, to answer why John chose to include the story, that is, why he felt it was important, we need to know a little about the context. So pardon me for a moment; I'm going to get in the weeds slightly. But it is to serve a point I wish to make.

Of the four Gospels, as you may know, John was written last, hence why scholars creatively referred to it as "the fourth Gospel." Indeed, scholars identify the time at which John was most likely written somewhere between 90, of the first century, and 105, of the second. They have lots of evidence from the text to support their claim. Consider for example, John 20:13–16. There we read about Mary Magdalene and her experience of the risen Christ after discovering the empty tomb.

<sup>13</sup> [Two angels say] to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup>Jesus

said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “*Rabbouni!*” (which means Teacher).

Notice here the last clause, “which means Teacher.” Why would John have to explain to his audience the meaning of a Hebrew word?

Answer: because they didn’t speak Hebrew! John was not written for Hebrew-speaking Jews like Jesus who lived in Palestine. Instead, John wrote for a Greek-speaking audience. Since Greek, moreover, was the language of trade or commerce, many scholars think John was written for a community at a seaport, like Ephesus. (A few of you have been to Ephesus, right? It’s one place I’d love to go someday.) A seaport like Ephesus where – listen closely – there would have been an exchange, not only of goods, but also ideas. Which explains, incidentally, why we find the language of Greek philosophy unique to the Gospel of John, unlike the earlier Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

John’s audience was also unfamiliar with Palestinian geography. They’d do terrible on it as a “Jeopardy” category, as well as Jewish Custom. Listen to John 11:54:

“Jesus, (after having learned that he was going to be put to death, at least according to Caiaphas the high priest) Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim, in the region near the wilderness, and he remained there with the disciples.”

Why would John have to say “a town called Ephraim” and then specify its location, namely, “the region near the wilderness”? Because *his audience was unfamiliar with Palestinian geography*.

Note again, John 4:7- 10. You recall the story from several weeks ago:

A Samaritan woman came to draw water and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” His disciples had gone to the city to buy food (and get coffee from Starbucks). The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman from Samaria?” Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.

Notice that last sentence: it’s a parenthetical explanation of Jewish custom, which shows us that the audience to which or to whom John was writing *was unfamiliar with Jewish custom*.

Now, why do all these details matter?

Because **they answer the question of why John alone included the story of Thomas and the risen Christ**. John was written, again, for a Greek-speaking audience unfamiliar with the language of Hebrew, Jewish custom, and Palestinian geography, all of which points to a significantly later publication date.

Why? Because it took decades for the Jesus movement to spread from Palestine to a culture with language and customs fundamentally different than those of Jesus and his contemporaries.

John includes the story of Thomas, therefore, to reach people who live relatively long after the historical Jesus. These people had no direct access to the person and ministry of Jesus. They had no first-hand experience of Christ, risen or otherwise. And so – here’s the result of our hard work – and so, to encourage and bolster faith, the Thomas story concludes with Jesus

saying, as you heard, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen – namely, John's audience – "and yet have come to believe!"

This message, which was meant to invite people living long after Jesus died into the fullness of his life and resurrection, has motivated and inspired millions of Christians ever since.

Now, when I was in seminary, and before that in graduate school, I was taught about how to read these texts. And I remember, as I'm sharing with you now, how important those parenthetical explanations were in the Gospel of John, because they offer us clues as to when and to whom the text was written.

I don't know about you, but I find that fascinating.

Having said all that: Who cares? What about *us*? How does this story, how does our Gospel reading for today speak to *us*, speak to *our situation*? What does it mean to a people, to *us*, who live in a place full of what a friend of mine likes to describe as "the nicest people you'll never meet" – Seattle, Washington, a place where – and this gets really sobering really fast – you are *more likely to die alone due to urban isolation than any other major US city west of the Rockies*.

Isn't that something? Now, that's kind of depressing, right? (Don't move to Washington DC – that apparently is "the loneliest city in America.")

Now, how do we address this problem of isolation, finally, on the other side of a pandemic that made the isolation even worse? Our Gospel reading for today, I believe, offers three answers to our problem. Let me sketch them briefly.

First, the Gospel reading for today spoke to our situation while in the midst of a pandemic, while we were experiencing extreme isolation. Like the disciples huddling together in the upper room or "the house," as John puts it, we, at least some of us, were in the grip of fear. Quite understandably, some of us feared being exposed to the virus. Quite understandably, some of us feared going out to complete the most routine of tasks, including walking the dog or going grocery shopping. (Do you remember those days?) And quite understandably, some of us feared returning to everything, from work to worship. And yet it's *here*, right here in the midst of fear, that Christ appears, when disciples, who were at their most fearful, at their most isolated, suddenly experienced His presence. What does he say to them, moreover?

"Peace be with you."

Peace be with you. Peace be with you. This I believe, is God's way of saying, "I am with you in your fear and isolation. I am in your midst. When things seem dire, when things seem terrible, when things seem hopeless, I will not abandon you. I will breathe new life into you," just as Jesus breathed new life *in* to those disciples.

And I think that's important: the preposition here is often translated, breathed *on*, but in the Greek it's more likely breathed *in to them*, *inspired* them, just as God inspired Adam, giving them new life in the midst of the Christ presence.

That's number one, that God meets us in the place of fear and amidst isolation.

Point Two: Our Gospel reading for today speaks to our situation by stressing – and I want everyone to hear this very closely – by stressing *the importance of community*. Notice Thomas's circumstances according to verse 24. He wasn't *with* the other disciples. He was separated

from them. He was isolated. Only when Thomas is brought back into *community* does Christ appear to him.

That's no accident. That is no coincidence. Like Thomas, God in Christ calls us, too, out of isolation and into fellowship, where we can experience the living Christ not only *among us*, but *as us*, namely, his body resurrected in the world. You know my favorite scripture here, maybe, it's Matthew 18:20: "Where two or more are gathered in His name, there He promises to be."

So, Christ with us, in community, drawn out of isolation – Point Two.

Third and finally, our Gospel reading for today gives us confidence to go back out into the world and live what we've experienced and practiced in Christian fellowship. Why? Because Jesus has given *us* the Spirit, too. Jesus has given *us* peace. Jesus has given *us*, as the second reading says, a living hope. Jesus has given *us* a rebirth, as the second reading also says, one that opens us up as we, going out into the world, *thaw* that horrible Seattle freeze – by seeking Christ in our neighbor, by greeting the stranger, by acknowledging and helping the less fortunate, by visiting the homebound, by sharing our faith in thought, word and deed such that Christ lives in us when we live for others.

Amen! Full stop there!

Several days ago, on behalf of the congregation, I greeted someone experiencing homelessness who was right outside of our chapel. I saw Christ in that person. I got him coffee. I got him food. We allowed him to use our facilities. And when the night came, I said, "Is there anything else we can do for you?" And he said, "I want a blanket." And I said to him, "Well, I really can't encourage you to sleep on the church grounds." But I thought about it as I went home, and I realized given how cold it was, this stranger needs warmth. And so, I took one of my coats from home, brought it back and gave it to him.

And that doesn't make me a better person than anyone else here. It just goes to show how, inspired by the living Christ as we gather in community, we are sent out to the world, even if it's on our doorstep, to be Christ to others. By sharing our faith, again, in thought, word, and deed, such that Christ lives in us when we live for others.

Dear Friends in Christ, God was with us in our fear and isolation during the pandemic. Christ is with us when we gather in His name, and the Spirit is with us when we take what we have hopefully experienced here – fellowship, kindness, new life – out into the world and share it with others.

It's true, our Gospel reading for today raises many questions, but it also offers an answer to the problem of isolation. God did not make man to be alone, as Genesis 2 says; God wants us to thrive, and we do that in fellowship with one another.

And all God's people said, "Amen."