

Second Sunday of Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
8 April 2018

John 20:19-31

There is an old saying that says, “Those who choose a life of science choose a life of endless insanity.” By this the saying meant that those who choose science choose a field where there are no answers, but questions. Even when there appears to be answers, often those answers lead to more questions, which then lead to more questions. For many, science is a life of particular obsessions and unrest. For the scientist seeing is believing. Belief comes as a result of constant experimentation, testing and re-testing of hypothesis, trying constantly to understand the subject matter. Today, in Thomas I believe we have a scientist, so rather than calling Thomas “Doubting Thomas” I think we need to call Thomas, “Thomas the Scientist”. But before we speak more about this fascinating Apostle, let us set the stage.

This, the second and third of Jesus’s apparitions, take place the evening of the Resurrection and a week later, while the disciples are in a closed room for fear of the Jews. This tells us something about Jesus’ new, post-resurrection state. Whereas before his resurrection Jesus could not go through walls or be in two places at once, the post-resurrected Jesus is not confined by time or space. He simply appears in their midst and tells them, “Peace be with you.” After he greets them this way he shows his hands and feet to them. Jesus hoped that the showing of the scars would lead them into peace and Joy. These disciples have had a horrendous weekend. They have seen their friend die, they are terrified that they will be next, they are forced to finish the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in hiding, and they are demoralized and exhausted. It would have been normal for the scared disciples to think they are seeing a ghost of some kind. As they see the scars up close and personally, however, they experience great joy.

The realities of peace and joy are often prophesied in the Old Testament as the conditions that would come as a result of the Messiah. The Messiah would bring joy to the world, and he would bring a time of endless peace. Now, Jesus is greeting his disciples with a gift of peace that leads them to great joy. John confirms this by saying, “The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord”. The prophesies are being fulfilled. Christ has risen, and because he has risen the peace and joy of God has now become a reality for these terrified disciples. I find it interesting that Christ announces his peace three times in this short passage: When he first appears, after he shows them his hands and feet, and a week later when Thomas is with the disciples. Is this just a common greeting or is Jesus making an important point here? I believe it is the latter.

Peace in the Old Testament means more than internal tranquility. It also means the restoration of a relationship between two enemies. It means concord, as in a peace treaty. This is what Christ wants them to understand. Now that he is risen, the relationship between God and humanity has been finally restored and, because of this, there is peace between God and them. The gulf has been breached, the wall of separation has been destroyed, the blameless Lamb has been sacrificed. It is finished! Now, there is peace between God and humanity. The peace Christ proclaims today is the other side of the "It is finished" of Good Friday. This is why the greeting is repeated three times. Then, after Jesus declares that the relationship has been repaired through his death and resurrection, Jesus says, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you." It is important that they understand that they are forgiven because their mission for the world is to be witnesses of that forgiveness.

In the same way Christ was sent by God, he now sends his disciples. It is very clear that mission is at the heart of God. We have seen in Scripture how it is the Father who sends the Son, the Father and the Son who send the Holy Spirit, and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who send the Church into the world as a witness of Christ's resurrection. The church is to go into the world to preach reconciliation in Jesus Christ. The disciples themselves are to be resurrection witnesses. In the same way that Jesus was totally obedient to the Father, even unto death, the church is called to be equally as obedient to Christ. "As the Father has sent me..." is used here as a comparison. God's sending of the Son and God's sending of the Church are similar. The Church is to go into the world and die for the world, if necessary, that all might come to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection, that they "might come within the reach of his saving embrace" as the 3rd collect for missions tells us in the BCP.

The mission of the church might lead to death! It is potentially dangerous and yet incredibly necessary. It is for this reason that Christ knows the disciples need the gift of the Holy Spirit. He breathes on them as he says, "Receive the Holy Spirit". The word used here for "Breathed" is the same used in Hebrew in the book of Genesis when God gave life to Adam. So, in a way, Christ breathes new life into his community today. New life in Jesus Christ can only come as a gift from the Holy Spirit and this new life is required if we are to do God's will for us, the Church, in the world. This gift of the Holy Spirit is a preparatory gift, it is not the gifting of the Holy Spirit that will take place at Pentecost, but it is a taste of that most powerful gift that will be given once Christ ascends to the Father. In a way, this preparatory gift marks the beginning of an intense time of teaching and preparation into which the resurrected Christ will lead them for the next forty days. A time of preparation that will form this community into the most powerful missionary force the world has ever seen. After Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them, he gives them a commission to go into the world to forgive or retain sins. It is the Job of the Church to bring sinners to Christ. In this sense, the biggest sin is to

refuse to accept Christ once one has been introduced to him by the church. Those who accept Christ will have new life. This new life will be a life of peace and joy, even in the midst of adversity and persecution. This will be a new life that will bring meaning, even in the midst of a hostile world. The disciples are to bear witness to Jesus by being the presence of Jesus in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, John tells us that Thomas was out when the spirit was given to the disciples. Thomas lacks the “New Life” given to the rest. He lacks the certainty given to the others. He lacks the Holy Spirit that leads into all truth. Our passage tells us that the other disciples kept telling him throughout the week, “We have seen the Lord” and Thomas kept saying, “Unless I see... I will not believe”. The next week Jesus appears to Thomas and shows his scars to him. Then Jesus tells him, “DO not doubt but believe”. The word “doubt” bothers me here because I don’t see it in the original Greek. Rather the word used is related to faith, belief, certainty, trust. It is not that Thomas doubts, he may in fact believe to a certain degree, but he wants proof. He wants certainty. This is where the scientist in Thomas resides. In fact, what Jesus tells Thomas may be more like, “Do not become unbelieving, but believing. Do not become unfaithful, but faithful. Do not become uncertain, but certain. Do not become distrusting, but trusting.”¹ In other words, it is as though Jesus is telling Thomas, “Thomas, there is a place for questioning and for science. But there are things about God that science can never prove. If seeing is believing for science, believing is seeing for all spiritual matters. You can never dissect God and place him under the microscope. You must choose to believe, even in the absence of proof”.

It is only when you accept to believe that you will have the peace and joy that Christ can bring into your life. But, remember that Jesus is “sending us out” today. In a very real way, the peace Christ gives us is not just for us, but for the world. The Church is to proclaim Christ’s peace to the world from every rooftop and from Market Street to Wall Street. This peace is not just for us but for the world. This joy is not just for us, but for the world. Jesus will spend the next 40 days preparing them to go into the world. Everything that happens in this church every Sunday has a purpose and that purpose does not lie within these four walls. The purpose is out there. The purpose is mission on behalf of God’s people. We are to be peace in a world of conflict. We are to be joy in a hopeless world. We are to preach forgiveness in Jesus’s name to a world engulfed by guilt and sin. I pray today that you will accept this commission and that you will join Christ in his mission for the world. Amen!

(I used Whitacre’s excellent commentary for this sermon and some of the exegesis comes directly from the book. I strongly recommend his work²)

1 Stoffregen, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john20x19e2.htm>.

2 Whitacre, John A. John. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 478-488.