

Seeing Is Believing
John 20:19-31
April 23, 2017

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Every year the church celebrates Easter, and every year the reading for the Sunday after Easter is the text you just heard. This Sunday should be called "Pick on Thomas Sunday." Thomas was late for Sunday worship, so Thomas missed Jesus. Since Thomas missed Jesus he issued his now-famous challenge: Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.

We know how that turned out. Jesus showed up the following Sunday and answered Thomas' challenge: Then he said to Thomas, "*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*" So, Thomas believed and everything proceeded hunky-dory ... well, not quite.

We pick on Thomas because of his unbelief, but Thomas wasn't alone in his skepticism. None of the disciples believed Jesus would rise until he showed himself to them. Listen to how the disciples first reacted to the news of the resurrection: *When [the women] came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.*

Nonsense! None of the disciples believed that Jesus had risen. None of them! That's one of the things that makes the Resurrection account believable. The disciples didn't believe what Jesus had told them about his dying and rising. That's how we know the Resurrection accounts are not just human fiction.

If the disciples had dreamed up the story of the Resurrection, it would probably have sounded more like this. *We, the loyal followers of Jesus, fully understood what he told us about his rising from the dead. That's why we faithfully stood by Jesus when he was arrested, during his mock trial, and throughout his suffering and crucifixion. That's why we carefully took his body from the cross and laid it in the tomb. That's why we held a vigil at the tomb while we waited for him to rise, singing psalms and praying.* That's how a human fictitious account of the Resurrection would sound.

What actually happened was Jesus told his disciples he would suffer, die, and rise in three days, but they didn't get it. They were more interested in arguing over who was the most important. When, at Gethsemane, they figured out that trouble was brewing, they ran like scared sheep.

When the women told the disciples that Jesus had risen, they thought those women were hallucinating. The disciples didn't just doubt, they flat out didn't believe. When the truth is revealed, we see the disciples as cowards who refused to believe the best news in the world.

While Jesus lay in the tomb, the disciples were unbelievers; held in the grip of unbelief just like any pagan. They weren't just doubting they were unbelieving, and their unbelief was sin.

Now, before we get too hard on the disciples, Thomas included, we need to remember an important fact. We all came into this world as unbelievers. In the rite of baptism we hear this: *We learn from the Word of God that we all are conceived and born sinful and are in need of forgiveness. We would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. But the Father of all mercy and grace has sent his Son Jesus Christ, who atoned for the sin of the whole world that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Because we were all born as enemies of God, it's important to hear the words from today's text: *Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"* The disciples were hiding behind locked doors – afraid – hopeless – unbelieving. However, Jesus came and declared his peace to them. Jesus wasn't angry over their lack of faith. He was kind and patient. He gently restored their faith. Then they knew that Jesus didn't just die, but he also rose.

Three times Jesus announces peace to his disciples. Jesus' primary mission on earth was to restore peace between God and man. Thousands of years before, Satan has seduced people into being enemies of God. Enemies who didn't deserve peace.

But Jesus came into the world as one of us. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God's will. He allowed himself to be crucified as full payment for the sins of all people. He literally took the punishment we deserve. Then he rose from the dead to defeat death itself. He earned our forgiveness. He restored peace with God, and that is the peace he extended to his disciples; the peace he gives to us.

The peace Jesus gave to the disciples took a very specific form: *Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.* With those words, Jesus changed his disciples into his apostles. The word apostle comes from the Greek meaning: to send. As the Father commissioned Jesus to be his apostle (sent one) to the world, Jesus now commissions those disciples to be his apostles. The mission of these new apostles: take the peace of Jesus and proclaim it to the whole world.

Sounds a little crazy, doesn't it. These are the men who worried so much about who was the most important they didn't have time for what Jesus said. These are the men who abandoned Jesus in his hour of greatest earthly need. These are the men who thought the news of the Resurrection were just urban legend. These are the men who drew a blank every time Jesus told them what was going to happen. These were not the brightest stars in the sky; not the shiniest pennies in the purse, not the sharpest knives in the drawer.

So how could this lame group of misfits carry out the mission Jesus gave them? They didn't – God did. God worked in these men and changed them from disciples to apostles. These men who promised to show up ready for battle found out the battle had already been won. These men who wanted to be soldiers for Jesus learned their real job was to be witnesses for Jesus.

In his commissioning, Jesus gave these fledgling apostles some very special authority: *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.* Jesus gave them the power to administer the forgiveness he had earned on the cross – the forgiveness that brings us peace with a holy God.

Did all of this have a positive effect on these frightened disciples. Acts chapter 5: *They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ. On Easter morning they were cowardly unbelievers. Later, they rejoiced at being worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. Only God can bring that kind of change.*

The apostles have long since died and joined their Savior in God's eternal kingdom, but the mission continues. Jesus still sends men into the world to deliver his message of peace. The Holy Spirit worked through the apostles to establish congregations of believers.

The Holy Spirit also established the Office of Holy Ministry. As the apostle Paul writes: *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.*

Today's text shows the mind-boggling enormity of God's mercy and grace. Jesus

showed himself to a group of unbelieving cowards. He gave them the peace of God. He commissioned them to be his apostles. He breathed the Holy Spirit into them. He gave them the authority to administer the forgiveness he earned on the cross. They deserved none of this, but they received it as a free gift of God's grace.

Just like those apostles, you have received God's mercy and grace. You are in possession of God's peace. You have been sent into the world to tell the message of the Gospel. You have received the Holy Spirit. And all of this is a free gift from the God who loves you enough to die for you. The God whose peace passes all understanding, give you a peace that will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.