

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

And when he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again and Thomas was with them. Although 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, and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God! Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:19-31

"My Lord and My God!"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

Last Sunday, Jason Justinger left off in John's gospel with Jesus and Mary Magdalene ending an embrace in the Resurrection Garden, looking at that moment very much like the original Gardener in the original Garden with his original Bride. And there wasn't time for either Jason or I to note that all of old Israel's sanctuaries had been laid out in a garden motif. In Moses' desert tabernacle, there had been fruit trees woven into the tent walls. Likewise, in Solomon's mountaintop temple, the same sort of trees were carved onto the walls and covered with gold sheet so as to gleam in the light of the candelabra.

And in those garden surroundings, in both those sanctuaries, in a back corner, there was a small curtained off space, the Holy of holies, where one man, once a year, was allowed to enter, Israel's high priest, carrying in a bowl the blood of a sacrifice which he poured into a mercy seat, a small basin which sat under the wings of two carved, golden angels who gazed down at the blood and guarded the place where forgiveness was secured for all God's people once a year. So now, fast forward 1400 years and remember what Mary Magdalene saw when she stooped into the tomb, the small enclosed space where Jesus had been buried, "*two angels...on either side of where the body of Jesus had lain,*" John tells us. "No reason to cry!" the angels told Mary in so many words.

Because on that day forgiveness was secured forever for anyone, anywhere who wants it, and, even better, the Sacrifice was alive and well and roaming around the garden. At first glance, through her tears, Mary mistook the slain Savior whose body she had come to find, for a living, breathing ordinary gardener, but then Jesus called her name and she knew he was alive and hers and all would be well. So she grabbed on and held on till Jesus had to tell her to stop. Nothing wrong with what she was doing, it was a matter of time and place. "*For everything there is season and a time for every purpose under heaven.*" Jason told us.

You see, the garden where Mary and Jesus embraced was an echo of Eden and it looked forward to heaven, but right then, right there, it wasn't either. It was the place where Eden came back into reach, the place where heaven became possible, but before we could all go home, before we could all live forever, there was a kingdom to be built and many, many people to be reached and saved. So Jesus told Mary to "*...go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am going to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.'*" So it turns out that right there, right then, both Mary and Jesus had places to go, and things to do to move the kingdom toward heaven.

It would turn out to be a busy day for Jesus. He's just told us his first stop was with his Father. The ever faithful, ever obedient Son made his Father his first port of call that day. But then Leon Morris tells us that the gospels record five separate appearances to disciples around the holy city that day, some in groups, a few by themselves. But John's gospel moves next back to the Upper Room where the disciples were still gathering after dark and locking the doors so as not to get picked up by the Romans or the temple police.

Both in John here and in Luke's gospel, the disciples were in that room, involved in a lively give and take about who'd seen what and heard what about Jesus that day, when suddenly, despite the locked doors, there was Jesus standing among them. Luke records the incidentals, the excitement, Jesus explaining that he was no ghost, Jesus being famished and wondering if anything was left over from dinner. John goes more directly to the more serious things Jesus had to say. In both gospels, he calls attention to his wounds, wants them to know it's really him in flesh and blood. But in John, Jesus moves the story along toward kingdom and heaven

"Peace be with you!" Jesus says to them twice, and he starts talking about what's coming next. *"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."* The point being that what Jesus has accomplished is now the disciples' message to spread.

And then Jesus breathed," John tells us. The phrasing implies that he paused, and expelled air around the circle of disciples and then said to them, *"Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."* While these words are new in John's gospel. They are almost identical to things Jesus had said weeks if not months earlier in Matthew's gospel. So here, in John, on the night of the resurrection, Jesus once again speaks to the Apostles about them possessing "*keys*" to "*the kingdom of heaven*," that what they forbade would be forbidden in heaven, what they allowed would be allowed in heaven. And the point here is not that the Apostles will themselves define right and wrong.

Rather the promise is that God the Holy Spirit will guide the Apostles to what already has been bound and loosed, forbidden and allowed in heaven. If you follow the Greek tense here, right and wrong get decided in heaven before the Apostles speak or write a word. It is the Spirit who guides the Apostles so that what they teach always, only reflects what is true in heaven.

And, as if to illustrate the point, we are next told the story of Thomas, whose nickname was "*The Twin*." We last heard from Thomas some weeks before the crucifixion when Jesus was laying low so as not to precipitate a confrontation with the authorities before the time was right. And the disciples were all too happy to stay away from Jerusalem and trouble. But then word came that Lazarus needed Jesus, and Jesus reversed course and headed to where his enemies could grab him. And it was Thomas who stood up and told his friends that, if Jesus wanted to die, Thomas wanted to be there and die with him ...if that's what it was.

So Thomas is a brave man, if not particularly optimistic. He had missed Jesus in the Upper Room that first Sunday night, and he stubbornly refused to believe that his friends had actually seen Jesus in all the places they thought they'd seen him. His declaration that he would examine and probe Jesus' wounds before he'd believe any of their stories must have rankled the men and women who had so clearly and plainly seen and touched Christ. But somehow he was still welcome in their company, so he was there around a week later when Jesus once again burglarized the Upper Room without using the doors.

"*Peace be with you!*" were again the first words from his mouth. Then to Thomas in so many words, "Here I am. Here are the wounds. Touch what you want. Have at it. Just don't be an unbeliever, but believe." To his credit, Thomas bypasses any explanations or apologies and simply says what his heart told him was true, "*My Lord and my God.*" Of course, no one remembers Thomas as The Twin anymore. We call him Doubting Thomas, and yet out of all that doubt arises the clearest confession that Jesus is Lord and God that you can find anywhere in the gospels. The point being that the Apostles are human beings.

They are prone to sin and doubt and failure just like us, yet Jesus bestows on the Apostles the Holy Spirit, with a sort of power and authority that transcends their sins and faults and empowers them to get the gospel right despite themselves. And at the center of the formula is grace. When God calls someone to serve, he supplies the forgiveness, he purifies and strengthens and guides us so that we can do whatever he calls us to, whether it be great or small, dramatic or ordinary. To be sure, none of us here today are Apostles. We evangelists, pastors and teachers, leaders and organizers, artists and artisans can only follow the path the Apostles laid, live out the gospel the Apostles taught. And we too will be only human, prone to sin and needing grace.

I expect that John imagined Thomas, coming to his senses and calling Jesus Lord and God, would be the highlight of his gospel. Because he goes on next to a concluding word. He writes: "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" John seems to want us to come around like Thomas had, and find Jesus as our Lord and God. That would have been enough for John. But it appears that the Holy Spirit wanted one more story, one more example of Jesus conquering sin and failure with power and grace. So next week will find the disciples outdoors on a brand new day.