

John 20:19-31

We usually reduce this passage to just the story of “Doubting Thomas.” And that’s kind of a shame because, really, there’s a lot more going on in here. There’s some important things about what it means to be the Church. And maybe Thomas gets a bit of a bum rap, too.

It begins, “That evening.” This is “Easter night,” the day of the resurrection. The disciples are meeting behind locked doors. Most likely, they are back in the “upper room,” which seems to have been the home of John Mark’s family, the Mark who wrote the second Gospel and accompanied Paul and Barnabbas on Paul’s first journey.

So they are still in Jerusalem. Maybe they wanted to get out of town after Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, but they couldn’t do that without attracting attention. Passover was followed by the week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread. They need to wait for the feast to end, and then there would be a lot of people leaving the city.

The locked doors show that they are afraid. They certainly aren’t in a position to go and steal Jesus’ body for a resurrection hoax, as some have claimed they did.

Now, some of them, Mary Magdalene, Peter, the two on the road to Emmaus, have seen Jesus risen from the dead. But most haven’t. And I think it’s fair to suggest that most of them don’t really believe it yet. Or at least there is still a lot of doubt.

Suddenly, Jesus is there among them. Now, John doesn’t outright say it, but it seems as if Jesus suddenly appears in their midst, like he came through the locked door. That might suggest that he is only a spirit, a ghost. But we know from the resurrection appearances that Jesus had a body. He was touched by people. He ate food. At one point he cooked breakfast for the disciples. So how does he simply appear among them? There is a mystery here to the resurrection body, that is for sure.

One suggestion I heard one time is that the risen Christ could pass through a locked door not because he was less real than the door, but because the door was less real than him. Is that true? I don’t know. But it sounds kind of cool!

1 Corinthians 15 says the resurrection body is glorious, powerful, and spiritual. And yet, Jesus retains the marks of the cross. I think in general we understand that the resurrection body is perfected. If you lose your right arm in this life, you don’t expect to be resurrected with the nickname “Lefty.” Well, Jesus bears the marks of the cross because they are his glory. He is perfected through suffering.

In any case, we are going to have to be content with a certain level of mystery about the nature of the resurrection body. We just don't have enough information to understand everything about it.

Jesus says, "Peace to you," a standard Jewish greeting. But it is the first of three gifts Jesus gives the fellowship of believers: Peace, joy, and the Holy Spirit. And if you go back and read Jesus' Last Supper discourse in John's Gospel, chapters 13-17 basically, he foretells that they will receive these three gifts.

They are filled with joy when they see him risen. Joy comes from the resurrection. It is a settled optimism and confidence from seeing how the story ends. The journey may be hard, but in the end, God wins and death is defeated. In the hardest of times, we know the end of the story is good. That is joy.

And then we get John's rather truncated version of the Great Commission and Pentecost. He just sticks them right in here, in about three sentences and one occasion. There's no 40 days of resurrection appearances, no Ascension, no Pentecost as we know it. That seems odd to us. Well, in Hebrew story-telling, the what and the why are more important than the how and the when. They felt more free than we do to rearrange the details of the story to convey the message. These things are important to say, and John doesn't want to leave them out.

It's important for us to see that these things are not separated from the resurrection. There is no "gap" in John's Gospel. The Church's mission is the work of Easter.

It's also a "succession narrative," which is something we see other times in Scripture. Joshua succeeds Moses and carries on his work. Elisha succeeds Elijah and carries on his work. The Church succeeds Jesus and carries on his work.

Jesus needs the Church. We are the Body of Christ. We do his work, so Jesus needs us. Just as we need Jesus. He is the source of our power, the Holy Spirit, and our authority. We are sent by Jesus just as he was sent by the Father.

In ancient Near East thought, a messenger carried the full authority of the one who sent them. So we carry the authority of Jesus. This is why the Church is able to announce the forgiveness of sins. We are not actually doing the forgiving, but we are proclaiming it with the full authority of Jesus and the Father.

And Jesus breathes on them. This is reminiscent of Genesis 2:7, where God creates human beings and brings them to life with a breath. But it's also reminiscent of Ezekiel 37, the valley of dry bones vision. The wind, which is the same word as breath in

Greek and Hebrew, blows, and the dead come to life. The Church receives new life by the Spirit of God, just as Jesus was raised to new life.

But as we know, one of the disciples was not there that day, poor “Doubting Thomas.” He is always remembered for this story. He did seem to have a certain pessimistic outlook on life, even if he was brave and loyal to Jesus. In John 11:16, when Jesus is going back to Jerusalem for what would be the last time, Thomas says, “Let’s go, too, so we can die with him.” Brave, but pessimistic.

But Thomas was also honest about his doubts. Many people are not. Thomas wouldn’t “go along with the crowd.” He had to be satisfied for himself.

The question is not, “Will we have doubts?” The question is, “What will we do with our doubts?” Doubts can push us to seek out the truth. Or they can harden our hearts. It’s okay to be skeptical as long as we do not become a skeptic. A skeptic is someone whose heart is hardened. They’ve chosen doubt as a way of living. They won’t change their mind even if the truth is in their face. Thomas was skeptical, but not a skeptic. When he sees Jesus, he immediately renounces his doubts and believes wholeheartedly.

If Thomas had a fault, I think it was this: He separated himself from the fellowship of Jesus followers. He wanted to suffer alone, as many of us are prone to doing. And while that’s understandable, we shouldn’t do it. Suffering is when we need fellowship the most. And if we want to experience the presence of Christ, then we should be in the Body of Christ because it is the place where he is most present.

Verses 30-31 are really the conclusion of the Gospel of John. Chapter 21 reads more like a postscript than anything.

“Blessed are those who believe without seeing.” That’s us, right? “These things are written that you might believe.” The Gospels are not simply biographies of Jesus. They are appeals to faith. Their purpose is not informative as much as transformative. We meet Jesus in the Gospels.

We are not at a disadvantage versus those first generation believers. We may not see Jesus alive in the resurrection body, but we can certainly see Jesus. The Spirit reveals Jesus through the Word. And we can “see” Jesus in the Body of Christ. Jesus didn’t leave us after his resurrection. He is with us in the Holy Spirit, in the Word of God, and in the Church, the Body of Christ. The Church’s work of the resurrection is to be the presence of Christ in the world, to carry on and complete his mission.