

Text: Revelation 1: 4-8; John20:19-31

Title: Do You Believe?

Date: April 11, 2010

If you are anything like me, the first thing that you thought of as we read this passage was the “doubting Thomas Story.” You know, the one we have all been told since we were little kids. The moral of the story, at least the way I remember it was that we were supposed to have faith without asking for proof. Personally, I always thought that Thomas got a raw deal. All he wanted was the same experience as the other disciples. There is a lot more going on here than Thomas proving for himself that the Risen Christ is real.

Our passage covers 2 crucial appearances of the resurrected Christ. In this handful of verses, a lot happens: Jesus’ resurrection is made the focus of the future church. The gifts of reconciliation, salvation, and the Holy Spirit are offered to the church. A major shift in focus for all future believers- from “signs” to “the word”- is pronounced. There’s a lot more than the Thomas story going on here.

John agrees with Luke that Mary was one of the principal witnesses to Jesus resurrection at the tomb. She reported to the disciples, and while John doesn’t come right out and say it- they sure don’t as if they believe her. John tells us that they are huddling together behind locked doors because they are afraid that the Jewish leadership would sic the Romans on them too. This circle the wagons mentality is about to be overcome by Jesus..

First, Jesus walks right through the locked door. Its like that scene in umptey ump scary movies- when the lock turns by itself you just know that there is no earthly power on the others side. But John is doing something else with the locked door. Before Jesus appeared to them, they were doing all they could to keep the world out -- they are in full retreat. After Jesus appears to them, however, they receive both the Holy Spirit and orders to go out into the world. Jesus may "appear" behind closed doors, but when he leaves his disciples, the doors are blown wide open and those who believe are thrust out into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now Jesus outlines the future of the church. He starts with the standard greeting, "Peace (shalom) be with you" . But shalom is a term that means far more than "peace"

as in the absence of war or fear. Shalom means wholeness. Jesus' first words to his disciples are the fulfillment of the promise he made back in chapter 14: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.* This wholeness that Jesus gives is right relationship with God and others, this peace is none other than salvation itself.

Next, Jesus extends his own mission to the disciples, "as the Father has sent me, I also send you." We've got 2 Greek words for send here. first is ***apostello*** (which usually indicates transferred authority) and ***pempo*** (which usually indicates one who is simply "sent"). "As the Father has sent me (with his authority, or in his name) I also send you. Jesus is sending the disciples out with the authority to act in his name.

Jesus then gives the gift of the Holy Spirit by breathing on the disciples. Remember that breath and spirit are the same word in Greek. The picture here is the Risen Christ literally giving the breath of life (shades of Adam!) to his church (what else would you call this group of disciples if not the church) with the Holy Spirit, creating something new.

Jesus then gives them the authority to forgive sins- but this has to be seen in the context of being sent. They do not have the power to forgive sins, that is God's job; but they are charged with extending to others the same experience that they have- experiencing God's shalom through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This is what makes it possible for his disciples to offer Jesus Christ himself to those who never saw or heard him.

Enter Thomas. Contrary to my childhood "Doubting Thomas" understanding- Thomas is a good guy. This is the guy back in John 11 who urged the disciples to go with Jesus to Bethany, to Lazarus' tomb, even though the people there had almost stoned them the last time they were there. The other disciples were making lame excuses not to go; but Thomas says, "Let's go, so that we may die with him!" And because he goads them the disciples get to witness Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. This is the guy who, at the Last Supper keeps asking Jesus where he is going because we do not know the way; and because he does, we get "I am the way, the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Thomas is a good

guy- but because he was not in the room, Thomas becomes the other disciples test case. Will they fulfill the mission that Jesus gave them, starting with one of their own?

We don't know why Thomas wasn't there, maybe it was his turn to go and get groceries. But in any event, he is the guy that they have to convince. And Thomas is not an easy sell. It's not like he doesn't want to believe them, it's obvious that they have changed from the fear filled followers they were before. And it is not as if he doesn't want that experience for himself. It's just that he is stuck in "signs and wonders" mode. Prior to this, Jesus validated his claims of authority by signs and wonders. He healed people, he cast out demons, he fed the 5000, that sort of thing. Thomas hasn't made the mental shift yet that now it is the words of Jesus powered by the Holy Spirit that empower his ministry. All Thomas wants is what the disciples have obviously experienced- but he mistakenly assumes that he has to see Jesus in the flesh to make that happen.

So that is where Jesus meets him. Once again, Jesus walks through locked doors. Once again Jesus offers them Shalom. Meeting Thomas at his point of need- the need to see and touch, Jesus forces him to do just that. Thomas, to his credit, makes the mental leap- he can take Jesus at his word; he no longer needs to put his hands in the wounds. At last he is able to declare with the other disciples "My Lord and my God!" As if to emphasize this point, Jesus asks him if he believes because he has seen? Blessed are those who believe because they have heard.

John closes out our passage emphasizing this shift from having the Gospel validated by signs and wonders to having it validated by words and the Holy Spirit. This is good news for us, because, quite frankly, if we hold out for the experience of the first disciples, the ones who walked and talked with Jesus, we are going to be disappointed. Bottom line is, will we take Jesus at his word? Will we take on the mantle of ministry, empowered by the Holy Spirit? Or will we be stuck in whatever passes for the old ways?

You know, it is always dangerous to bash other wings of the church, for it leads to a sense of moral superiority- and that leads to self righteousness. On the other hand, we reserve the right to be critical- after all we are Protestants. Jesus is pretty clear, he wants his church to share the Good News of God's peace and model what it looks like

to be in right relationship to God and to each other. Yet, all too often than not, we are stuck in old, adversarial ways- ways that almost never lead to peace.

We are all familiar with the Religious Right- those folks who have devolved the Gospel into claims of moral superiority and the support of Right Wing political agendas. But there is also a Religious Left. I spoke with my son Ben last week and asked how Easter went for him. He said that first time in 22 years he didn't go to Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services, but thought that he should go Easter Sunday. So he went but, his words, not mine, "my time was not well rewarded." What's that mean? "Dad, I don't need to hear the substitutionary atonement every Sunday, but Jeez, this guy was preaching Harry Potter!" What Ben ran into was the Religious Left, who devolves the Gospel into namby-pamby feel goodism and support of Left Wing political agendas.

I don't have a problem with Right or Left Wing political agendas. Have your own political convictions and beliefs honestly; don't hide them behind the robes of Jesus! What I have a problem with is substituting politics, whatever color, for proclaiming and modeling the gospel.

John is interesting, when the other Gospel writers talk about the disciples, they almost always mean the 12-1. When John talks about the disciples he always means everybody who was following Jesus, not just his core followers. When Jesus entrusted to disciples with his mission to spread his peace, he was talking to the whole church. He was talking with us, all those who would come to believe in him as a result of the Word and the Holy Spirit. We are the ones who are blessed! And we, like the disciples before us are entrusted with the mission to extended forgiveness and reconciliation to others.

This is not as easy as it might sound. The reason that the religious right and the religious left are so popular is that we know how to do that, how to do politics. From tea parties to obamacare our media is filled with pundits who want to whip up a frenzy one way or the other. Our General Assembly is coming up in July and already I am getting emails and articles from those who intone, "this shall not pass!" to those who cry, "we need to be prophetic!" whatever that means. To the extent that we substitute politics for forgiveness is the extent that we display our unbelief.

Conversely, to the extent that we insist on forgiveness and reconciliation- those gifts of the Holy Spirit, that is the extent to which we will experience what Thomas and

the other disciples experienced, the presence of the Risen Christ. That is why I really don't get excited about denominational politics- it just gets in the way. We have things to do, people to help, and a covenant based on God's uncompromising grace to extend. Let us move forward together to that future and experience all that God has for us.

Let us pray.