

The Last Beatitude
John 20:19-31
Colebrook Congregational Church
April 3, 2016 / 2nd Sunday of Easter

Chapter 20 of the Gospel of John starts off on the morning of Easter Sunday and recounts how Mary found the empty tomb, retrieved Peter and the Beloved Disciple to show them, and then Jesus appeared to her after the others had left, making her the First Disciple to see the resurrected Jesus. Our selection is the second half of that chapter, picking up in the evening of the same day.

The Story of Doubting Thomas is found only in the Gospel of John. All four Gospels recount how Jesus appears among them and gives them some final powers and lessons. All except Matthew include an element of doubt among the Disciples, but only John puts all of it onto one Disciple, Thomas the Twin. John's Gospel is different from the other three, remember. Where the others are telling a story like storytellers or historians, John is more concerned with spirituality and theology and the mystical elements. This may be the reason why in this Gospel, Jesus' wounds are only shown to the Disciples, whereas in the others, the Disciples physically touch them.

According to John, there are an unnumbered amount of Disciples locked away in that upper room of the Last Supper, except to say that Thomas was not there...for obvious reasons; while Luke actually takes the time to specify who was there. Either way, imagine what it must have been like for them. Their friend and Messiah executed, and they have all gathered in the night, frightened, not knowing if they will literally follow Jesus to the cross.

Then Jesus miraculously appears amongst them in a locked room. If this was a different Gospel, one where Jesus' humor and fun side are shown, I could almost see Jesus appearing like Roberto Benigni in the middle of them, waving His arms about and saying, "Here I am! Why so sad? I told y'all this would happen, and I'd be right back!"

In John's Gospel, He greets them with the words recalling the Last Supper that they shared. He breathed upon them, recalling Genesis 2:7 where the Creator breathed life into us, and now Jesus is breathing New Life for a new

day into us all. And then, He bestows upon them the Gifts of the Spirit. In the other Gospels, this is described as helping them to understand all His Teachings.

What Jesus does next has been a source of controversy for millenia in the Church. He tells them that if they forgive a sin, it is forgiven; and then retain sin if they retain it. It is paralleled in Matthew, sort of. Jesus first directs it towards Peter alone, then to the group of believers. However, John goes further. While judgment is reserved for God alone, the Church is given the authority to forgive.

But Thomas missed all of this. Thomas has appeared before in John. He was courageous, though pessimistic during the Raising of Lazarus; and as an honest skeptic during the Last Supper. If any of the Disciples was going to question something that was not seen with his own eyes, it has been set up that it would be Thomas! It seems fully in line with his personality! When he is told what happens, he says that he needs to see Jesus and touch his wounds for himself.

A week later, Jesus reappeared before the group and offered Himself to Thomas, to answer his doubts. Jesus even uses the same words that Thomas used when he expressed his doubts. Jesus was willing to let Thomas touch his wounds. But, it would have better if he just believed. This is the last Beatitude of the Gospels. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Thomas' position here is understandable. Any one of us, put into his position, having been absent from something that happened, returning from whatever errand, to find your buddies all claiming that your friend and messiah, who had been crucified, had somehow been resurrected and had appeared to them, would probably doubt, or even think they were pulling a horrible prank. Or were hallucinating. It was completely reasonable for him to doubt.

Jesus' lesson here is Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Thomas was presented with an opportunity here to have faith and believe and be blessed. But Jesus knew how Thomas was, so He knew that

He would have to come back for His Doubting Disciple. So, Thomas got his blessing and then he believed. But Jesus reminds him that while it was okay that He had to do this for him, it would have been better the other way around. If he just had faith and believed, he would be blessed.

My time in AmeriCorps was financially difficult. The pay was barely enough to get by. And the city of Worcester did not maintain their roads, so I found myself frequently having to call AAA for a tow and having to buy new tires. It was unbelievable the number of times that happened.

One time, it was late at night, it had been a long hard day, and I was on my way home. I was exiting one of those rotaries that Massachusetts loves building, and it happened again. I do not even know what I hit. I was already at the end of my tether. I was emotionally and physically drained by constant stress and now I needed to find a way to pay for replacing another tire. I called AAA...again. And then it got worse.

I didn't know where I was in a way to tell the AAA Dispatcher where to send the tow truck. There were no street signs! I started running around the nearby streets looking for any type of reference marker that I could relay, but there was nothing. I learned later that the road I was on truly wasn't even named anyway. I told the Dispatcher that I am facing the parking garage for the DCU Center. That's when I learned that my call was not to a local person, it was sent somewhere in Missouri, so she had no idea what I was talking about. I described where I was and asked that she just relay that to whomever she sent. She told me that it's going to be three hours before anyone gets to me.

That done, I returned to my car and I was not in a good place. I wanted to scream and destroy something in my frustration. But instead, I remembered to have faith, and I turned to Jesus and said a prayer. I laid it all out to Him, relieving myself of my burdens. And once I was done, I finally felt at peace. I looked around a couple times, wondering what I was going to do for the next few hours, and then I was blinded by bright lights behind me. The tow truck had arrived.

I was in shock. I got out of my car and spoke with the guy. He was the guy who was sent for me. He told me that the AAA Dispatcher called them and relayed my description to him, then he looked out his office window and saw me. His service garage was 150 yards behind me on the other side of the rotary. He was in sight! I returned to my car and thanked Jesus. I felt blessed by Jesus for believing and having faith.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” That was Jesus' lesson for the Disciples when He appeared to them in a locked room, frightened, with words of peace on His lips. They were in a time of trouble, as I was. But by remembering to have faith in Jesus, no matter what, we will be blessed.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

Life-giving God, we give You thanks, for Jesus has risen and He comes to us with words of peace. He comes to us whenever we are afraid and whenever we are in need; come to us now as we pray. Despite the strong and solid doors we lock, to protect ourselves or to shut out the world, Jesus will come to us with words of peace. This Easter season, breathe on us again with your Spirit, for you have overcome evil. Renew in us the power of your Spirit, blessing us as we believe without having seen, that we too may open the doors, and go out into the world, bringing words of peace to the people we meet. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

O God, your Son remained with His disciples after His resurrection, teaching them to love all people as neighbors. As His disciples in this age, we offer our prayers on behalf of the universe in which we are privileged to live and our neighbors with whom we share it.

We give you thanks for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

We pray for the forgiveness of sins known and unknown, for falling short of how we should be towards ourselves, towards our fellow humans, and to all of Your Creation. May we reassured of Your forgiveness, so we may try to do better and make amends as we move forward.

Into the light of Easter morning we raise those who are struggling with illness, with despair over their lives, or with the breakdown of relationships. We raise up those places in our world where war, violence, poverty and need are the experiences of everyday life. We hold in our hearts the pain of those suffering violence, bereavement or conflict. May the light of Christ shine upon them, and may you fortify us to better serve you through our service to our neighbors.

We pray for ourselves. We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to live up to the standard Jesus set for us. We pray that we recognize your messengers and those You send to help us and redirect us for who they are, and that we show the wisdom to heed them.

We especially pray for:

Open our hearts to your power moving around us and between us and within us, until Your glory is revealed in our love of both friend and enemy, in communities transformed by justice and compassion, and in the healing of all that is broken. Amen.

Psalm 118:14-29

118:14 The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

118:15 There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

118:16 the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly."

118:17 I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

118:18 The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.

118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

118:20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

118:21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

118:22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

118:23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

118:24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

118:25 Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

118:26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.

118:27 The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

118:28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

118:29 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were 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 his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had 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 retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt 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 come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.