

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL
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1 John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

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.

Last week I talked about how all the gospels except for Mark have what are called “post-resurrection stories”—stories about Jesus appearing to the disciples after he was raised from dead. This morning we have one of those stories—probably the most famous one of all. It’s usually called the story of “Doubting Thomas,” as if it’s all about that one particular disciple and the difficulty he has believing in the resurrection. But there’s another way to look at it. You can also see this as a story about the other eleven disciples and the difficulty they have proclaiming the resurrection.

The story begins on the evening of Easter Sunday, which is a really dark time for the disciples. Their leader was crucified only a few days ago, and they’re still reeling from it. Early that morning, a group of women came back from the tomb, claiming it was empty, but no one knows what to think. And everyone’s holding their breath, waiting for the authorities to show up at any moment and drag them all off to prison.

So there’s a lot of grief, a lot of confusion, a lot of fear, and the disciples have gone into hiding. They’re all holed up inside a house behind locked doors. All of them, that is, except for Thomas. He’s not there for some reason. We don’t know why. Then suddenly Jesus appears, breathes the Holy Spirit on them, and shows them his wounds, as if to say, “Look, it’s really me.” The disciples are overjoyed, Jesus has a few instructions for them, and then they go find Thomas and tell him what happened. “We’ve seen the Lord,” they say.

But Thomas doesn’t isn’t buying it. He needs more than just their word. He needs to see for himself. He needs proof. And we tend to judge him for that. We tend to think of him as the bad disciple—the one who doesn’t get it; the one who doesn’t have enough faith. And maybe he doesn’t. Maybe he is a bad disciple. Maybe he deserves to have that word “doubting” forever attached to his name. Or maybe he’s not the one we should be pointing our fingers at.

First of all, it hardly seems fair to compare Thomas to the other disciples. They have a huge advantage over him. They get a first-hand experience. All Thomas gets is a second-hand report. If this was a modern day trial, we’d call that kind of evidence hearsay. Second of all, maybe Thomas isn’t the problem. Maybe the other disciples just aren’t very good at sharing their experience. Even though Jesus has empowered them with the Holy Spirit, maybe they just don’t know how to tell their story in a way that’s compelling. They are new at this, after all. This is their first time trying to preach the gospel. Maybe they just haven’t gotten the hang of it.

So it’s hard to say who’s the good disciple and who’s the bad disciple. I don’t think any of them are perfect, to tell you the truth. I don’t think any of them are beyond criticism. And maybe that’s the whole point of the story. None of them are model disciples. None of them truly live up to their call. And yet, all of them receive nothing but grace and acceptance from the risen Jesus when he shows up the second time.

Jesus doesn’t look at Thomas and say, “What are you doing here? You had your chance, and you blew it. You had the opportunity to demonstrate your faith, and you refused to open your mind. You refused to even consider the possibility that I might be alive.” No, he doesn’t give up on him like that. He looks at Thomas with understanding and compassion. He knows what Thomas needs before Thomas says a word, and he gives it to him. He says, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

And it’s the same with the other disciples. Jesus doesn’t look at them and say, “You guys are pathetic. I come back from the dead, show you my wounds, fill you with the Holy Spirit, and you can’t even convince one of your own that I’m alive. What are you going to do when your audience isn’t so

friendly?” No, he doesn’t put them down like that. He says, “Peace be with you,” just like he did the first time around. And he stays with them for a while and does “many other signs” in their presence, so they can go out and witness with power and conviction and be the disciples he knows they can be.

It’s worth mentioning, too, that Jesus’ patience and nurturing is rewarded. When he tells Thomas to touch his wounds, notice that Thomas never actually does. He never goes that far. He immediately answers, “My Lord and my God!” He immediately grasps the truth that’s standing right in front of him. He immediately makes a leap of faith. And the other disciples may not be very good evangelists their first time out, but eventually they carry the gospel all across the ancient world. Their missionary efforts take them far and wide, and they establish communities of believers in many different places. You and I wouldn’t be here without them.

And speaking of you and me, Jesus’ willingness to overlook the disciples’ flaws, and his ability to see and develop their potential, is not only good news for them, it’s good news for us, too. Because none of us is perfect when it comes to following Jesus. None of us truly live up to our call. And yet Jesus never gives up on us. Time and time again, he shows up in our lives. Time and time again, he looks at us with understanding and compassion. Time and time again, he offers us whatever it is we need in order to believe that he is risen, that hope is not dead, that there’s always light, even in the deepest darkness. I think that’s the message here. I think that’s what this story is telling us. Despite who we are, Jesus sees who we can be. And even when we don’t believe in him, he believes in us.

So my last little bit of advice is, when you’re having trouble believing in Jesus, believe in each other. One of the reasons we come to church is to be part of a community filled with people who have their own stories like the story of Thomas—stories about

moments when their eyes were opened; stories about moments when God became real for them; stories about moments then they experienced resurrection. Hearing those stories from people we know, people we sit next to in church, people we have coffee with after the service, helps us in our own spiritual lives. It gives us what we need. It gives us support and encouragement.

So don’t be afraid to ask people to tell you their stories. And never be shy about sharing your own stories—what you have seen and heard, as 1 John puts it. You never know the impact you might have on someone. You never know the peace you might bring them. You never know how the Spirit might speak through your words. And you never know how your life might reveal the risen Lord. Amen.