

THE RESURRECTION, PART II
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Text: 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.

WE CALL THE GOSPEL STORY THIS morning the story of doubting Thomas, and that is what it's about—doubt. But it's also about fear. This story is filled with fear, some of it right on the surface, some of it under the surface. The surface layer doesn't take a whole lot of explaining. John spells it out for us. Jesus has been dead for three days, and the disciples are holed up in a house, hiding behind locked doors, "for fear of the Jews," John says—for fear that the same authorities who put Jesus to death are going to start rounding up his followers next.

So the disciples are afraid for their lives, plain and simple. But that's not all they're afraid of. There's a deeper layer of fear that takes a little more digging to get to. We have to put ourselves in the disciples' shoes and try to imagine what they must be feeling. There's a lot of confusion going on inside that house. The disciples are hearing lots of different things, and they don't know what to believe. Early in the morning, Mary Magdalene came back from the tomb and reported that Jesus' body was missing. Then two of the disciples, got up, ran to

the tomb, looked inside, and saw for themselves.

So something happened to the body. That much is certain. But beyond that, things get pretty murky. After those two disciples returned to their homes, Mary stuck around for a while outside the tomb, and she came back with a wild story. She said while she was standing there weeping, Jesus appeared and spoke to her, and they had a whole conversation. So was she hallucinating? Did she see a ghost? Could Jesus have somehow survived? The disciples don't know what to think. But one thing they do know, if Mary saw what she said she saw, and Jesus really is out there somewhere, that's bad news for them—which might seem kind of strange. Wouldn't the disciples be overjoyed to hear that Jesus is alive? Wouldn't this be cause for celebration? But think about it from their perspective.

They haven't exactly been model disciples lately. At their last supper together, when Jesus washed their feet and called them his friends, they swore up and down they'd never turn their backs on him, and then they turned around and did exactly that. That very night, Judas sold him out for a few lousy pieces of silver, Peter repeatedly denied knowing him, and the rest turned tail and fled. And the next day, when the Romans took Jesus outside the city and crucified him, the only ones who were there, the only ones who stood by him, were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary Magdalene, and the disciple Jesus called Beloved. No one else had the guts to show their faces. I bet they were already sealed up inside that house, wondering what was going to happen to them. I bet they were already locking the doors and drawing the curtains.

When Jesus needed them the most, the disciples completely failed him. After all they'd been through together, when

the moment finally came, and his hour finally arrived, they chickened out and left him to the wolves. So yeah, the thought of running into him now must be terrifying to them. The thought of facing him after all that must make their stomachs turn. And that's something we can all relate to.

Have you ever let someone down—someone close to you? Have you ever disappointed someone—someone who believed in you? Have you ever hurt someone—someone who loved you? Of course you have. We all have. Because we're all human, and we all have moments of weakness and selfishness—moments that later on we're ashamed of; moments that later on we wish we could go back and do over. But we can't go back. We can't change what we've done. We have to live with it. And the thought of facing the ones we've wronged fills us with dread. Are they going to lash out? Are they going to stand there and say nothing? Are they going to refuse to forgive us? Are we going to walk away feeling worse than ever?

Those are the thoughts that eat away at us, and those are the thoughts that are eating away at the disciples. You know that bumper sticker that says, "Jesus is coming back, and he's ticked"? Well, the disciples are afraid Jesus is going to be ticked at them. They're afraid he's going to look them in the eye and say, "Where were you? I trusted you, and you left me there to die."

But that's the surprising and wonderful thing about this story: Things don't go the way the disciples fear. When Jesus appears among them, he doesn't add to their burden of guilt. He takes that weight from them. He doesn't yell and scream and point his finger. He says, "Peace be with you." He doesn't refuse to forgive. He breathes the Holy Spirit on them.

That's why I think of this story as "The Resurrection, Part II." In part I, Jesus is raised from a tomb. In part II, the

disciples are raised from a different kind of tomb. That's what the house where they're hiding is. It's a different kind of tomb. It's a tomb made of fear, and it's a tomb disciples put themselves inside. No one did that to them. They went in there because they were afraid of being arrested, and they stayed in there because they're afraid of something much, much worse. They're afraid of having to look at themselves through Jesus' eyes. They're afraid of what they'll see—people who are irredeemable; people who've done things that are unforgivable; people who are unworthy of being loved and accepted. But when Jesus shows up, all those fears evaporate. Instead of condemning them, he wipes away the past and gives them a fresh start. He literally breathes life back into them and invites them into a whole new future.

So you can call this the story of doubting Thomas if you want. I prefer to call it the story of the doubting disciples. And it's not Jesus they doubt. It's themselves. They have a hard time believing God can raise someone from the dead, that's true. But what they absolutely cannot believe is that God can raise them from the dead—at least not until they meet the risen Jesus.

That's why we can't just read part I of the resurrection story, but we have to read part II along with it. On Easter, we hear the good news that Jesus has been raised from the dead. On the Sunday after Easter, we hear the good news that we have been raised with him. And every Sunday after that, we strive to claim that good news for ourselves—to be a community in which we know that God loves us and accepts us, and to turn around and share that love with the world. Amen.