

Narrative Lectionary- Thomas

April 8, 2018

You've probably had somebody say to you, You've got to try this restaurant. The food is incredible. Or somebody says, I just saw this movie; it's terrific. Or maybe somebody says to you, Do you like mysteries? Check out this writer.

And you think to yourself, Well, I don't know if we have the same taste in food or movies or writing style. And it's not that you don't believe your friend. You just need to see it or try it or taste it for yourself.

In the Gospel of John, there is a pattern of people meeting Jesus and then recommending him to somebody else, but this other person has to see for him or herself. Philip starts to follow Jesus, and he really likes Jesus, and he finds his friend Nathanael, and he says, You've got to meet Jesus! He's the one we've been waiting for. And Nathanael says, Nothing good comes from that town. But when he meets him, he says, You're the Son of God!

The Samaritan woman at the well meets Jesus, and she is convinced that there is something special about him. When she goes back into town, she says, You've got to meet this guy! And some of her friends and family believe in him just because of her story and some because they meet him themselves.

The disciples had believed in Jesus, for the most part, but when he died on a cross, their faith was shaken. At least they were thinking he wasn't the type of Messiah we thought we were getting. So it's the evening of that first Easter Sunday, and they locked themselves in a room. They've heard some rumors of resurrection, but mostly they are afraid and they've locked themselves away. They are afraid any minute the police will knock on the door to take them away.

But I wonder if they aren't also ashamed....they hadn't protected Jesus. They had denied him; they had fled from him, everybody but John. They are ashamed at having let him down. They find themselves hiding behind locked doors.

But notice that Jesus will have none of this. *He pursues his disciples*. Christ comes looking for us! The resurrected Christ comes through the locked door and finds the disciples in their fear, and says, That's no way to live! Instead, Jesus declares,

Peace be with you. When you say “peace” to someone in the biblical languages, you mean a lot of things, not just a good feeling. If I offer you peace, it means I want wholeness for you, and reconciliation, and forgiveness, and justice.

I’m offering that peace to the world that needs justice and reconciliation. Peace isn’t just a good feeling; it’s when people are in right relationship with each other and with God. Peace happens when creation is looked after.

Jesus again says to his followers, Peace be with you. He is saying to them: you deserted me, you denied me, but I am offering peace to you. Notice he doesn’t scold them. He says, I am giving you a new chance. I need you on the team. As the Father sent me, so I send you. Jesus says: I won’t let you stay here in this room captive to your fears and your shame, and tied to your past. I’m sending you out! I’ve got a mission for you. I’ve got a purpose for you. The resurrection isn’t just about me; it’s about the whole world!

Jesus says, You can’t do this on your own. So he breathes on them, and says: Receive the Holy Spirit. Here’s the power to do what I’m asking you to do. You’ll need my help letting go of grudges, letting go of your ego, letting go of your need to control things, letting go of your limited vision of things. Here’s the Holy Spirit.

Notice he breathes on them. Do you remember way back in John chapter 1, when the Gospel writer starts out by saying, In the beginning...and we think, In the beginning God created...But this time, it’s: In the beginning was the Word...it’s as if John says, God is starting something new again in Jesus.

Do you remember that the Gospel writer John is the only Gospel writer who shares that the tomb is in a garden? And when Mary Magdalene sees Jesus on the morning of the resurrection, she wonders if he is the gardener? John implies that this resurrected Christ is the gardener growing a new creation in us and in our world!

And when Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit, I wonder if John wants us to think of that second story of creation, when God forms the first human out of the clay, and bends down and breathes life into him. Jesus is breathing new life into these anxious disciples.

And then he gives them a purpose. He says, If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. Why is forgiveness so central to good news? Because if there is no forgiveness, then we are locked in the past. If there were no forgiveness, we would continue to be separated from God and from those we hurt. And God says: I want to break down the walls. I want to bring you back to me and to each other! And to do that, I will forgive you, but you need to forgive each other as well. That's how we are able to let go of the past, and move into a new future. It happens with forgiveness.

Craig Barnes says, We have a choice. We can be a priest, or we can be a victim. We can be a priest, a bringer of forgiveness every day, or we can be a victim, locking away the hurts and not giving up the past. And because we walk over each other and hurt each other so often, every day we have that choice: Will I be a priest today, and offer forgiveness, even if I offer it just in my mind and heart? Or will I be a victim, and nurse the grudge, and maybe even figure out how to retaliate?

Will I be a priest or a victim today? There really is no middle ground, no sideline to stand on. Forgiveness isn't easy. It's a process. Sometimes we need to forgive somebody again and again for the same act, because we find ourselves holding onto the feelings, and we need to let it go again.

Corrie Ten Boom, the Dutch Christian who was a prisoner of war during World War II, told a pastor about not being able to forgive a wrong that had been done to her. She had forgiven the person, but she kept rehashing the incident over and over, and she couldn't sleep. She cried out to God for help, and then approached this pastor.

The pastor said, Up in the church tower there is a bell that is rung by pulling on a rope. But after the bell ringer lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging, slower and slower until there's a final "dong" and it stops. The pastor said, I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hands off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, those old angry thoughts are going to keep ringing for a while.

Notice that Corrie Ten Boom, when she needed to forgive somebody who had hurt her, cried out to God for help. It's why Jesus breathes on the disciples the Holy

Spirit. We can't forgive in our own power; the Spirit of God within us empowers us to forgive.

And it's not saying that what somebody did to us was OK. It wasn't OK. But I'm not going to continue to let the past come between us, I'm not going to keep reliving the past, I'm not going to be captive to the hurt. At some point, I might even pray a blessing on that person. I'm going to want God's best for them.

It's only by the breath of God that we are able to forgive. We can't do it alone.

But back to our story. Thomas hadn't been with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them, so they say: We have seen the Lord! And Thomas says his famous line: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark in his hands and in his side, I will not believe."

Thomas takes a bad rap for being a doubter. But I think we need to give him a break, because he's a lot like we are. Sometimes I need to see some evidence! There have been times in my life when I thought, God, where are you? I have been praying and praying about something, and I don't feel your guidance, I don't even feel your presence. What's going on? Show me a sign!

Let me say something about doubt. I believe it's healthy to have some doubts. If you don't ever doubt, don't ever question anything, then you'll never change. My faith grows by asking questions, by pushing, by arguing with God. Questioning some of our beliefs makes me own my faith.

And a week later, when Thomas came back to the community, Christ appeared again, and Thomas had a chance to see Christ in the community. Notice that Jesus doesn't condemn Thomas. Jesus says, Alright. You need some evidence. Put your finger here, Thomas, in my hands and in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.

If there's a reason to be part of Christian community, it's because Christ keeps coming to us as we share the Word together, and break bread together, and pray for each other, and forgive each other.

Let me share another insight into this story. The disciples leave this locked room, and they carry with them the wounds of their history, wounds of betrayal and

denial and desertion. But they will be able to say, Let me tell you a story of how God used those wounds to make me stronger.

Mark Buchanan, a pastor up in British Columbia, was asked to speak to a Twelve Step group. These people were dealing with a whole range of challenges from eating obsessions to obsessive fear to sexual addictions. The pastor was going to share with them a passage of Scripture and then talk about it. But he felt led to share with them from his woundedness instead.

This is what he said, and I use his words: “My father was an alcoholic. My mother was going to divorce him because of it. One Christmas, he got hired to play Santa Claus for a party, and he got so drunk he never came home. My mother had been fearing this...that night she bundled up and went looking for him. She found him crumpled up in a snowbank, his Santa suit soiled and reeking from his own vomit. She managed to get him home. But soon after that, while he slept off yet another hangover, she got up early and rode the bus to Calgary to see a lawyer, to seek a divorce.

“While she was gone, a Fuller Brush salesman came by, waking my father who was sleeping off his hangover. My dad told the man that his wife was gone, come back later. The man could see my dad’s condition, and said, I’d better come in for coffee. The man was a member of AA and had walked the steps. That day, my father started walking them as well. He never turned back.”

And then this pastor said to this group, “The twelve steps were steps out of sickness for him, for my mother, and for me. And if you could use a traveling companion, I would come along.” (Your God Is Too Safe, Mark Buchanan)

Notice how that works. Our healed wounds can become a source of healing for others. The risen Christ comes into our locked rooms of fear and hurt and pain, offers peace and healing, and then says: Your story can help someone else. I wonder who needs to hear your story. Would you join me in prayer?

Jesus, as you walked into the locked room of your followers and brought them peace, open our hearts to receive your peace today. And then call us out into our fearful world with a story of your faithfulness that you would have us share. Amen.

