

“Messengers for Jesus?”

Our passage today is about the appearances of Jesus to the disciples after the resurrection. The first appearance occurs on Easter Sunday evening when he presents himself to the disciples. During this appearance he gives them the Holy Spirit and commissions the Christian community to continue the work of making God in Jesus known to the world. The second appearance is a week later, when Jesus and Thomas meet and the so-called “Doubting Thomas” has his questions answered about whether Jesus has truly resurrected from the dead.

John writes that the disciples were behind locked doors when Jesus appeared to them Sunday evening. They were afraid of the Jewish authorities. These were the authorities who had Jesus arrested and condemned to death. Although we sometimes give the disciples a hard time because none of them except John showed up at Jesus’ crucifixion, we need to put their fears in context. The man they had followed for three years had been arrested and crucified. They had good reason to believe that because of their association with Jesus they might suffer the same fate. They truly feared for their lives.

Jesus provides a calming effect on the disciples. He says “Peace be with you.” They need to hear this assurance from their leader. Jesus had told them earlier in his farewell discourse in John 15:18-25 that they, the Christian

community, will experience the world's hatred and persecution. Jesus now assures them that they do not have to be anxious but can do their work with the peace of Jesus present.

When Jesus speaks to them, his greeting also means "May God give you every good thing." He then gives the disciples the commission which the church must never forget. As God has sent Jesus forth, so Jesus sends the disciples forth.

Jesus displays his wounds in his hands and his side to the disciples. This act on his part displays continuity between the earthly and risen Jesus. It confirms that he is not a ghost. Once the disciples see this display by Jesus, they are filled with joy. He once again says "Peace be with you." Their fear has turned to happiness at realizing they are in the presence of the risen Jesus.

Jesus then sends out the disciples to continue the work of making God in Jesus known to world. This is the first significant act of the Christian community. When Jesus says "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven," Jesus is talking about the commission to the disciples to bring the world to the moment of decision and judgment in regard to sin. In John 3:16, John has written that each person has to make a decision in regard to whether they will believe in God's saving grace through Jesus. The

disciples will bear witness to the love of God in Jesus. They will tell the world how those in it can have eternal life.

As discussed by the commentator William Barclay, Jesus' commission means three things. First, it means that Jesus needs the church. Jesus has a message, but now he is going back to his Father. The message cannot be taken to all people unless the church takes it. The church has to be the mouth to speak for Jesus and the hands to do his work on earth. Jesus is dependent on the church.

The second meaning is the church needs Jesus. One who is to take a message needs an authority and a power to back his message. He needs someone to whom he may turn when his is in doubt and in difficulty. We have Jesus. The Church needs Jesus, so the church is dependent on Jesus.

The third meaning is that the sending out of the church by Jesus is parallel to the sending out of Jesus by God. The relationship between God and Jesus was continually dependent on Jesus' perfect obedience, perfect submission and perfect love. It follows that the church is only fit to be the messenger of Christ when she perfectly loves him and perfectly obeys him.

The church should never be out to follow its own man-made policies. She should be out to follow the will of Christ. The church fails whenever it tries to

solve some problem in its own wisdom and strength, and whenever it fails to seek the will and guidance of Jesus Christ.

In his sending out of the disciples, we also read that Jesus breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Jesus empowered his disciples with the Holy Spirit. He had told them earlier in his farewell discourse that he would not leave them alone, that he would give them the Paraclete, the one who would stand alongside them and would guide them in all truth. When John writes that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples, this describes a new, second creation for those who receive the Holy Spirit. The verb used for breath in this passage is described as the same verb used to describe God breathing the breath of life into the first human in Genesis 2:7. What John shows by his description of Jesus’ act is those who believe in Jesus receive life as children of God and the Holy Spirit is the breath that sustains new life.

John makes clear that the gift of the Holy Spirit and the articulation of the faith community’s mission are intimately tied to the cross, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. When the church celebrates Easter, it must also celebrate the beginnings of its mission. When the disciples receive the Spirit from Jesus, they are commissioned with the authority to bring his forgiveness and reconciliation to the world.

We then read about Jesus' appearance to Thomas. The story of the commissioning of the faith community now functions to showcase the question of faith in the resurrection. For some reason Thomas was not present at Jesus' Easter Sunday appearance. The other disciples tell him that they have seen Jesus. Thomas states that unless he sees the nail marks in Jesus' hands and touches his wounds, he will not believe Jesus has risen. For his reaction, he has traditionally been called a "Doubting Thomas" and used as a figure of speech.

Thomas has been unfairly characterized as "doubting." How many of us in his position would have done the same thing? In my opinion, I believe just about all of us would have reacted in the same way. As discussed earlier, Thomas was in fear for his life because of what had happened to Jesus. He was probably absent on Easter Sunday because he really went into hiding. Why should he risk his life based on the sayings of others? It was perfectly reasonable for him to demand actual proof of Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus makes available to Thomas exactly what he needs for his faith. He tells Thomas he can put his finger in his wounds, his hand in his side. He can look at his wounds. Jesus does not chastise Thomas. The offer of Jesus' grace leads Thomas to a confession of faith. It is another demonstration of Jesus' care for his sheep.

Thomas then makes one of the most powerful confessions of faith in the Gospels, “My Lord and My God.” Thomas acknowledges that God is fully revealed in Jesus. He reaffirms John 1:1, “the Word was God.” Thomas recognizes that the risen Jesus is the incarnate Logos, the divine Son of God. What is important to remember is that it is not touching Jesus that leads Thomas to this confession of faith but Jesus’ gracious offer of himself.

Thomas has two virtues we should follow. First, Thomas refused to say what he believed when he did not believe it. There was an uncompromising honesty about him. Thomas was not the kind of person who would recite a creed without understanding what it was all about. Do you understand the message you are taking to the world about Jesus Christ? Do you truly believe it?

Second, when Thomas was sure of his belief, he went the whole way. There was nothing halfway about Thomas. Do you give your complete allegiance to Jesus and the message of salvation, or do you just do it halfway?

So, what does these resurrection stories mean to use today? As Jesus says to Thomas in v. 29, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Seeing Jesus is not required for faith in the resurrection and new life in Jesus. Jesus provides a blessing for those who have yet to come in the faith. The next generations of believers will not be able to see Jesus himself. John, in writing

his gospel, draws explicit attention to the role of resurrection stories in bringing people to faith, and he suggests that the Gospel narrative itself gives its readers the words that make faith in Jesus possible for those who live after the first generation of disciples.

What John writes in v. 31 presents the Gospel narrative itself as the focus of revelation to later generations. These verses suggest that an engagement with the biblical text, with its offer and interpretation of God, is vital to the life of faith. What we realize is that, in preaching and teaching these texts, in meditating on them, and in prayer, it is, indeed, possible to believe without actually having seen the risen Christ in person.

In closing, let us remember that we, just like those believers on Easter Sunday night, have been commissioned to tell the story of Jesus and what he did for humanity. We like Thomas, know Jesus is God and is Lord of our lives. We also know that the Holy Spirit has been breathed in us and the revelation of God in Jesus is ever present because of the Holy Spirit/Paraclete being at our side and showing us the truth. We can truly sing the words of the song “I serve a risen Savior, he’s in the world today.”