

PUTTING A FINGER ON FORGIVENESS

Sermon preached by the Rev. Barbara E. Davis

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Scripture: 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:1-2)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the Word was life... (John 1:1-4a)

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. (John 20:19b-20)

These last verses from John chapter 20 may not contain the phrase “in the beginning” but as John’s prologue connects creation with Jesus’ ministry, John’s unique perspective on Jesus’ resurrection clearly marks another connective beginning. John’s gospel gives us some of the most memorable resurrection appearances. You remember. First, John’s gospel tells us of how Mary stood outside the tomb weeping, sure that Jesus’ body had been stolen, and how she mistook Jesus for the gardener. You remember, he says to her, “Do not hold on to me.”

Then there is the time on the Sea of Tiberias, where the disciples are fishing and Jesus is on the shore, “standing on the beach,” John’s gospel says. The disciples haven’t caught any fish and Jesus, calling from the shore, tells them to cast their net on the other side of the boat and there are so many fish they can’t even haul the net in. Who told me that story? Was it you? No, that’s right, it was Simon Peter and Thomas, or maybe Nathaniel and the sons of Zebedee who John’s gospel says were all there. Anyway, the disciples shared breakfast on the beach that morning, for Jesus had built a little fire and cooked a few fish. After breakfast Jesus had a conversation with Peter, and Jesus kept asking Peter if he loved him? And every time Peter responded, “yes” Jesus told him to feed his sheep. You remember that time on the Sea of Tiberias.

In between the garden and the sea, Jesus appears in the house where the disciples are staying. You remember that time. Not only because you just heard Jon read it a few minutes ago. You would have remembered without hearing about it again. You remember Thomas. Doubting Thomas? Thomas, who had to see Jesus and put his hands on Jesus’ hands and on Jesus’ side to believe that Jesus was alive, you remember him. Thomas, the one who set the example of what not to do, the one on whose shoulders the centuries old burden of helping us to understand that faith is believing what we cannot see. Thomas, you remember him.

John's gospel is the only gospel to tell us much about Thomas. Thomas is listed among the disciples in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but it is only John's gospel that tells this story of Thomas and the risen Jesus. Only John's gospel mentions Thomas interacting in Jesus' ministry; we hear about Thomas in two other places. The first is in John 11, when Jesus, after having delayed his departure to go and help his friend Lazarus who was ill, Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus is dead and that it is now time to go to him. It is not Peter, it is not the beloved disciple, it is Thomas, called the Twin, who says to the disciples, *'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'* (John 11:16)

A little later in John's gospel, in chapter 14, Jesus is assuring the disciples with a teaching that is still familiar today as a word of comfort at memorial services or in our prayers with the dying, Jesus tells his disciples: *'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.'* It is Thomas who asks Jesus: *'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'* (John 14:1-5)

Thomas, as he is portrayed in John's gospel, is as courageous and committed as any of the disciples, and yet it is his doubting that remains the trademark of his discipleship. Poor Thomas. If the gospel writers had gone out of their way to tell us as much about Thomas as they did about Peter, we might have a fuller picture of his discipleship and a deeper appreciation for his response to being told he had missed seeing the risen Jesus.

It's easy to slip into Peter's shoes. Each of the gospels mentions him at least a dozen times, and regardless if our personality matches Peter's, we can all relate to his brash, arrogant, stubborn side. We can understand being overly confident and then disappearing and denying at the precise moment when we wanted to be strong and present. The attention Peter receives in the resurrection stories is a comfort to us; despite all of his foolish pride, he is clearly sought out and forgiven. The second chance he receives is what we long for, a chance to affirm, "I love you" so many more times.

Thomas is more ambiguous and the gospel of John seems to be less forgiving of him. Yet, forgiveness plays a big role in Jesus' resurrection appearances. Peter we know about, but listen again to what Jesus says to the disciples when he appears to them in the house:

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.' (John 20:19b-23)

Did you hear that? Jesus gives a commission and breathes the Holy Spirit onto the disciples. Scholars have dubbed this verse the "Johannine Pentecost" and it is indeed much like what happens in Acts when the Holy Spirit comes upon the people who are gathered, but this event in John's gospel is private. This commission is different than the "great commission" in Matthew's gospel – *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age"* (Matthew

28:19-20)—this commission in John’s gospel, is about the ability and power to forgive. Poor Thomas, he wasn’t there. Of all the times to be out on an errand, of all the moments to be away, Thomas misses a chance his colleagues are afforded – a chance to see Jesus’ hands and side without asking. Poor Thomas.

Remember, when Jesus appears in the house to the disciples, the only one who had seen him raised was Mary. The other disciples had not seen Jesus, they had not talked to him, they had not looked at his hands and side. Of all the things that happen in those moments the disciples have with Jesus in the house – the commission, the receiving of the Holy Spirit, what is it that they report to Thomas? “We have seen the Lord!” What is exciting and mind-boggling to the disciples who see Jesus that evening is that he is alive! “We have seen the Lord!”

Poor Thomas. When someone we love dies, our memories of them often become like a movie reel playing over and over again in our head. Special moments, then something we regret, a birthday, a misspoken word, a long-awaited vacation, a phone call never made, a kindness offered, an apology forgotten.

Poor Thomas, now he adds to his memories missing that moment among the disciples when they first saw the risen Jesus. If he had any regrets, if he wanted to set anything right between himself and Jesus, the news that he had missed Jesus among them must have felt like forgiveness had just slipped through his fingers. Poor Thomas. No wonder he wants to see the mark of the nails, and put his finger on Jesus’ wounds, Thomas knows where forgiveness can be found!

In his poem “Did This Ever Happen to You,” Franz Wright, puts the power of forgiveness into these words:

A marble-colored cloud
engulfed the sun and stalled,

A skinny squirrel limped toward me
As I crossed the empty park

And froze, the last
Or next to last

Fall leaf fell but before it touched
The earth, with shocking clarity

I heard my mother’s voice
Pronounce my name. And in an instant I passed

Beyond sorrow and terror, and was carried up
Into the imageless

Bright darkness
I came from

And am. Nobody's
Stronger than forgiveness.¹

Lucky Thomas. He knows the power of the resurrected Jesus saying "Peace be with you" is an instant that transforms sorrow and terror by replacing them with forgiveness. Putting his fingers on Jesus' hands and on his side, Thomas knows for certain that nobody is stronger than forgiveness.

We confess our doubts and our need for forgiveness every Sunday, but I'm not sure that it helps us fully understand how powerful forgiveness is. Matthea Harvey, a poet, writes, in a poem titled "Ode to the Double-Natured Side of Things," of God who "invents a more flexible forgiveness."² That phrase is probably the best summation of the Easter season I can imagine. When Thomas puts his finger on Jesus' hands, and puts his finger on Jesus' side, he does not need to see to believe, he just wants to know, like all of us, that God forgives us. Thomas puts his finger right on the flexibility of God's forgiveness. Lucky Thomas. He reminds us today of the power of forgiveness.

It seems appropriate today to close with a prayer, a prayer of confession from last Easter Sunday morning's early communion service.

If, at times, we deny you: God forgive us. If, at times, when the risks of discipleship are high, we are nowhere to be found: God forgive us. If, at times, we wash our hands of responsibility: God forgive us. If, at times, we cast our lot with powerful oppressors and seek to buy freedom with silver: God forgive us. If, at times, fear keeps us from witnessing to your truth, or prejudice keeps us from believing it: God forgive us. In the bright light of Easter morning, our sin is exposed, but your grace is revealed.

Tender God, we are bold to come before you and ask you to forgive us. Help us to leave behind our foolish doubt so that with joy we may witness to your awesome deeds in Jesus the Risen One.

God forgives us, you remember.

¹ Wright, Franz. God's Silence. (Knopf Publishing: New York, NY, 2006).

² Harvey, Matthea. Modern Life: Poems. (Graywolf Press: St. Paul, MN, 2007).