

## Easter Two Lectionary

**Christ Comes as Lord and God,  
yet not fully known (John 20:19-29)**

By Jerry Truex; April 11, 2010

**A. Introduction**

The text we read this morning is the second part of John's account of the resurrection of Jesus.

In part one, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid. When she got there, the large stone covering the tomb had been removed. In a panic, she ran and got Peter and John, who then ran to see for themselves. The tomb was empty. Only the linen wrappings remained. Peter and John returned home, but Mary stayed.

Eventually Mary looked inside and, when she did, she saw two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been laid. Turning around, she saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't recognize him. She thought he was the gardener. Only when Jesus addressed her by name, did she realize who he was. Jesus sent her to tell the other disciples, which she did.

Now we move to part two of the story, which has three scenes.

**B. Scene One: Jesus and the Disciples (19-23)**

<sup>19</sup> 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." <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (NRSV)

<sup>19</sup> Οὔσης οὖν ὀψίας τῆ ἡμέρα ἐκεῖνη τῆ μιᾷ σαββάτων καὶ τῶν θυρῶν κεκλεισμένων ὅπου ἦσαν οἱ μαθηταὶ διὰ τὸν φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων, ἦλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἔστη εἰς τὸ μέσον καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· εἰρήνη ὑμῖν. <sup>20</sup> καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν ἔδειξεν τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τὴν πλευρὰν αὐτοῖς. ἐχάρησαν οὖν οἱ μαθηταὶ ἰδόντες τὸν κύριον. <sup>21</sup> εἶπεν οὖν αὐτοῖς [ὁ Ἰησοῦς] πάλιν· εἰρήνη ὑμῖν· καθὼς ἀπέσταλκέν με ὁ πατήρ, καὶ γὰρ πέμπω ὑμᾶς. <sup>22</sup> καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν ἐνεφύσησεν καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· λάβετε πνεῦμα ἅγιον· <sup>23</sup> ἂν τινῶν ἀφῆτε τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἀφέωνται αὐτοῖς, ἂν τινῶν κρατῆτε κεκράτηνται.

In scene one, there are four things to notice.

### 1. Setting (v. 19a)

Notice the setting. The disciples are in a locked-down situation. Jesus had been executed as an insurrectionist. Now the disciples are afraid that certain Jewish leaders might encourage the Romans to search for, and then execute, them as well.

### 2. Jesus reveals himself (vv. 19b-20a)

Then Jesus reveals himself. He reveals himself at will. He comes in a mode beyond comprehension. He appears in the middle of the room. We are not told how.

The doors are locked. The disciples are shut in. They are turned inward toward their own misery. They're sulking, distressed, fearful. And suddenly Jesus is standing there. No one can lock Jesus out.

Why does Jesus show his hands and his feet?

- On a literal level, we are led to believe that the disciples did not recognize him. There was something different about him. Something unrecognizable. So Jesus shows the marks of crucifixion. The crucified Jesus is the resurrected Jesus. They are the same, yet Christ exists beyond the physical.
- On a metaphorical level, we are invited to see that Christ might appear to us in an unrecognized form. Our fears cannot lock Christ out, but how he appears might not be initially recognized. He comes to us unknown, in unexpected ways. He especially appears to us as unknown when we are in fear, when we have shut ourselves in, but Christ comes nevertheless.
- How do we recognize the Risen One? We discern the coming of Christ by certain marks. The marks of suffering. The marks of crucifixion. Notice that scars of suffering are not left behind, not forgotten, but taken up, transcended, and integrated into Christ's new existence, new life. In the same way, when we retain the marks of our suffering and integrate them, and yet transcend them, we have experienced Christ Risen in us.

### 3. Disciples rejoice (v. 20b)

So what happens when Jesus reveals himself? The disciples rejoice. "Joy is a fundamental blessing of the kingdom of God (e.g., Isa 25:6-9; 54:1-5; 61:1-3)."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Vol. 36 Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987) 379.

#### 4. Jesus commissions the disciples (vv. 21-23)

At this point, the Risen One commissions the disciples. The commission has four parts.

##### a. "Peace to you" (v. 21a)

First, when Jesus gives a greeting or blessing, "Peace to you" (εἰρήνη ὑμῖν), he is saying two connected things.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, when Jesus says, "Peace to you," he is saying that God's Kingdom or God's Righteousness is at hand. In Hebrew thought, Peace or *Shalom* is synonymous with the socio-political justice or righteousness of God's Reign or Kingdom. In this way, Jesus announces that salvation has come.

On the other hand, when Jesus says, "Peace to you," he is commissioning the disciples to live peaceable lives. The Kingdom or Reign of God has dawned, but it is not yet fully arrived. The peace, justice, and righteousness of the Kingdom of God has dawned, but it is not yet fully consumed.

Nevertheless, the disciples are to live within the dawning Kingdom of peace, they are to promote peace and justice, no matter how much peace and justice seems unrealistic to the rest of the world. Jesus tells them "Peace has come to you."

##### b. "I send you" (v. 21b)

Second, in verse 21, Jesus commissions the disciples with the words: "Just as God has sent me, so I send you." This is the Jewish law of agency: "The one who is sent is as he who sends him." Just as Jesus is God's Agent in the world, so Jesus' disciples are his representatives in the world.

This Johannine commission in verse 21 parallels the "Great Commission" in Matthew 28:19-20.

**Matt 28:19-20.** <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (NRSV)

Everyone baptized in Jesus' name, everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord, receives this commission to go into the world and continue his mission with his authority and his power.

<sup>2</sup> This is a common Middle Eastern greeting—Arabs say, *As-Salāmu `Alaykum* (السلام عليكم) and Jews say, *Shalōhm ah-lay-chem* (שלום עליכם).

### c. "He breathed on them and said, *Receive Holy Spirit*" (v. 22)

Third, Jesus adds a gesture symbolizing the divine power that his disciples receive: "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'<sup>3</sup> There are two parts: (i) the breathing and (ii) the receiving.

#### (1) The breathing

With the phrase, "He breathed on them" (ἐμφυσάω; *breathe upon*) we hear an echo of the story of creation where God breathed life into Adam.

**Gen. 2:7.** Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. (NRSV).

In this way, in this scene, we see "starting over, the beginning of the creation of a new humanity."<sup>4</sup>

**2 Cor. 2:17.** So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

#### (2) The receiving

Next, notice the phrase, "Receive the Holy Spirit." It is a command. It is an aorist imperative. This means that although the Spirit is given freely, it is something that we must embrace or accept.

Our part is to be open and receptive to the Spirit/Wind of God (Jn. 3:7-8), which we do not control, but submit to. To receive the Spirit is to submit to God. "Receive the Holy Spirit," is a command to submit to God. But more than that. The Holy Spirit in the OT represented the authority of God to speak for God—the Spirit of Prophecy, which the prophets in the OT received and spoke out by saying, "Thus saith the Lord."

### d. Giving authority to the disciples (v. 23)

Fourth, Jesus gives explicit authority to his disciples. Jesus authorized his disciples to do many things on his behalf. But John's Gospel focuses on two. His disciples are given the authority *to forgive or to retain sin*. Jesus' disciples have Jesus' authority to forgive sin.

The text says, "If you forgive," but it could also be "When you forgive." The initial Greek particle an (ἀν), could be translate by an "if" or "when."<sup>5</sup> So I would say we can translate it "when you forgive."

<sup>3</sup> This giving and receiving of the Spirit is John's summary of the "Pentecost" event in Acts 2. So Beasley-Murray, *John* (1987) 382.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 343.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *The Gospel of John XII-XXI*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1970)1023.

But there is one more thing. The verbs are 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural—"you forgive" (ἀφῆτε) and "you retain" (κρατήτε). It is not the action of a single individual. This is the action of the community of disciples.

The saying verse 23 parallels Matthew 18:18

**John 20:23.** <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (NRSV)

**Matt. 18:18** Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (NRSV)

*Forgiving sin = loosing*

*Retaining sin = binding*

The reference to "binding" and "loosing" comes from Jewish law. It refers to a judge declaring a person to be guilty ("bound") or innocent ("loosed") from charges made against them. It is the power to make judicial decisions on behalf of God.

John 20:23 and Matt 18:18 tells us that Jesus' disciples have authority "to bind" (pronounce guilty) or "to loose" (pronounce forgiven); they are given divine authority.

### C. Scene Two: Thomas and the Disciples (24-25)

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> 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." (NRSV)

<sup>24</sup> Θωμάς δὲ εἷς ἐκ τῶν δώδεκα, ὁ λεγόμενος Δίδυμος, οὐκ ἦν μετ' αὐτῶν ὅτε ἦλθεν Ἰησοῦς. <sup>25</sup> ἔλεγον οὖν αὐτῷ οἱ ἄλλοι μαθηταί· ἑωράκαμεν τὸν κύριον. ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ἐὰν μὴ ἴδω ἐν ταῖς χερσίν αὐτοῦ τὸν τύπον τῶν ἥλων καὶ βάλω τὸν δάκτυλόν μου εἰς τὸν τύπον τῶν ἥλων καὶ βάλω μου τὴν χεῖρα εἰς τὴν πλευρὰν αὐτοῦ, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσω.

In John's Gospel, Thomas is depicted as a loyal, but pessimistic follower of Jesus, ready to die for Jesus, but slow to understand (11:16; 14:5).

In Scene two, Thomas refuses to believe. He wants to see and feel tangible evidence. It is likely that Thomas was not the only follower of Jesus that found it hard to believe Jesus was alive.

### D. Scene Three: Thomas and Jesus (vv. 26-28)

<sup>26</sup> 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." <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and

<sup>26</sup> Καὶ μεθ' ἡμέρας ὀκτῶ πάλιν ἦσαν ἔσω οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ Θωμάς μετ' αὐτῶν. ἔρχεται ὁ Ἰησοῦς τῶν θυρῶν κεκλεισμένων καὶ ἔστη εἰς τὸ μέσον καὶ εἶπεν· εἰρήνη ὑμῖν. <sup>27</sup> εἶτα λέγει τῷ Θωμᾷ· φέρε τὸν δάκτυλόν

see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> 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." (NRSV)

σου ὠδε καὶ ἴδε τὰς χεῖράς μου καὶ φέρε τὴν χεῖρά σου καὶ βάλε εἰς τὴν πλευράν μου, καὶ μὴ γίνου ἄπιστος ἀλλὰ πιστός. <sup>28</sup> ἀπεκρίθη Θωμᾶς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου. <sup>29</sup> λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ὅτι ἐώρακάς με πεπίστευκας; μακάριοι οἱ μὴ ἰδόντες καὶ πιστεύσαντες.

### 1. Setting (v. 26a)

Now we come to the third scene. It is a week after the first Easter. The setting is the same as the first—the disciples are in the house, hunkered down, door shut—except this time Thomas is with them.

### 2. Jesus reveals himself (v. 26b)

As before, Jesus reveals himself. Suddenly, Jesus appears standing in the middle of the room. The way John depicts it, the Risen Jesus is not limited to a particular physical or spatial location. He is not restricted by death or by material objects like walls and doors. He operates outside of ordinary three-dimensional space and time.

### 3. Jesus calls Thomas to believe (v. 27)

In scene three, Jesus confronts Thomas' lack of belief. Jesus extends his hands and invited him to touch him. Then Jesus says something that is partly a rebuke:

**Jn 20:27.** "Do not doubt but believe." (NRSV)

**Greek.** καὶ μὴ γίνου ἄπιστος ἀλλὰ πιστός.

**Literally.** "Stop being faithless, but [be] trusting or faithful!"

How did Thomas respond? Did Thomas touch Jesus? Notice that verse 29 only speaks of Thomas "seeing" the Lord. The impression is that Thomas was overwhelmed by the appearance of Jesus and there was no further need for confirmation.

### 4. Thomas' confession (v. 28)

#### a. "You are my Lord and my God!"

Thomas bursts out with a confession: "My Lord and my God!" (ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου). He is not simply praising God. He is addressing Jesus as Lord and God. And more than that, he is saying: "You are my Lord and my God!" This is the language of devotion and submission.

Thomas' confession is the *dénouement*, the final resolution of the main conflict in John's story of Jesus. Throughout John's Gospel, people have not understood who Jesus was, but now Thomas' confession leaves no doubt.

There is a theological and political aspect to Thomas' confession.

### **b. Theological: Christocentric monotheism**

Theologically, Thomas' confession raises an issue about monotheism. Thomas' confession indicates that we may address Jesus with the same language that Israel addressed Yahweh. Right here, in John 20:28, we see a Christian expansion of the Jewish concept of monotheism. Jesus shares the divine identity of One Yahweh.

### **c. Political: Allegiance to God alone**

Politically, Thomas' confession raises an issue about allegiance. In the last two decades of the first century, when John's Gospel was written, Emperor Domitian was addressed as "*Dominus et Deus noster*," which means "Our Lord and God."

In other words, the same claim being made about the emperor is made about Jesus. Don't think this is simply coincidence. John's Gospel was written in Asia Minor, which had many Roman cities such as Ephesus where Domitian was highly revered. Undoubtedly, John is presenting Thomas' confession as an alternative pledge of allegiance. Not Caesar, but Jesus is Lord.

## **5. Jesus' pronouncement (v. 29)**

The narrative concludes with a pronouncement by Jesus.

**NRSV John 20:29.** 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."

**NIV John 20:29.** Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The NRSV has a question, but the NIV a statement. Given Thomas' exuberant confession in v. 28, it seems more likely that Jesus is not asking questions about Thomas' faith (NRSV), but simply stated the facts (NIV).<sup>6</sup>

Thomas has seen and has believed. That's good as far as it goes. It is faith based on signs. Throughout John's Gospel, many people have believed in Jesus because they have seen signs—water to wine, various healings, mass feedings, and other empirical evidence—and now with the most important sign of all, the resurrection, Thomas has believed.

But now, Jesus says there is a type of faith even more blessed than sign-faith. It is faith not based on signs, but on something else. We have to look at verses 30-31 to see what it is.

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<sup>6</sup> Beasley-Murray, Barrett, and Schnackenburg agree.

**John 20:30-31.** <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> 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.(NRSV)

Sign-faith is okay, but faith based on written testimony, the written word, the Gospel, carries a greater blessing.

### **E. Summary**

1. Jesus' resurrection appearances meant that God has vindicated him.
2. Jesus' appearances were real, but baffling and beyond ordinary experience.
3. The Risen Christ is also the Crucified Jesus; suffering and death is not discarded, but taken up and transformed.
4. The Risen Christ empowers his disciples to continue his mission in the world.
5. The Risen Christ changes our understanding of God and calls us away from false political allegiances.