

John 20:19-31

20:19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

20:20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

20:21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

20:22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

20:23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

20:24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

20:25 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."

20:26 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."

20:27 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."

20:28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

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."

20:30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book.

20:31 But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Sermon: Seeing is Believing

Our text begins:

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 authorities...

That makes me wonder: what kind of space was this? I didn't live in first-century Palestine, so it's hard for me to say. Instead, I must allow my mind to wander, and the first thing I think of is the film *Twelve Angry Men*.

Twelve men sit in a sweltering hot jury room in New York City in the summer of 1957. They have been asked to render a verdict in a seemingly open-and-shut murder trial. Initially, the men think they'll only be confined to this room for a short while; one juror is even confident he'll be done in time to catch the Yankees game that evening. But another juror, played by Henry Fonda, is convinced the accused is innocent, and he will not make a hasty decision. The jury deliberates all throughout the evening.

As the deliberations drag on, we hear the constant humming of florescent light bulbs, and the slow tick-tick-ticking of the second hand on an industrial clock, and the buzzing of a small, circular office fan. With each passing hour, the men grow more impatient; more cramped. The air is thick and heavy; suit jackets have been shed; neckties loosened. Tempers flare. Nobody leaves until they've reached a consensus.

This is how I picture the disciples on the first Easter. Stuck in a small, hot, dark, unventilated room, waiting to come to a consensus about what has happened. Is their ministry over? Is their teacher dead? *Really?* And if so, what will they do with the rest of their lives, assuming they can escape Jerusalem without being arrested, or even murdered.

These young men are tired. And scared. And confused. And grieving. Not to mention, feeling ashamed, bewildered, and anxious.

The story continues:

*Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."
And after he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.
Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.*

What a well-timed entrance! In a place of heightened anxiety and discomfort, Jesus knows just what to say. "Peace, friends! Don't worry, it's me. I am here. Now. With you!"

Can you imagine the sense of relief? Can you imagine how this dark, dank room must have been instantly transformed into a place of light and life?

What happens next is even better. Jesus commissions the disciples with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says: "Again I say: Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And having said these words, he breathes on the disciples, and says 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."

Now I know what some of you are thinking, but might not want to voice aloud: So...Jesus gives the disciples the Holy Spirit by breathing three-day-old, dead-guy breath on them. Gross! Did he at least pop a tic-tac before he did it?!? Come on, dude!!!

If you aren't familiar with Genesis or John's prologue, you, too, might believe the only thing coming out of Jesus' mouth that day was dragon breath.

Pause. Reflect. Be more thoughtful. When God creates the world in Genesis, we're told that the "ruach" or the Spirit, or the Breath of God, sweeps across the waters, and creates order out of a formless void. In the garden story, we are reminded that God breathes, or "ruachs" life into the earth creature. In the Evangelist's prologue, we're told it's this Ruach or Spirit or Word that is made flesh – in other words, Jesus is the ruach or breath of God personified.

And here, in a dark, dank, lifeless room, Jesus breathes the Spirit of God onto the disciples. Chaos becomes calm. Life overcomes death. And the disciples are filled with the substance that equips them to be God's instruments in the world. And even better, the substance they are filled with is contagious and viral. That means the disciples have the power to fill others with the very same Spirit that fills them.

Friends, that's good news, anyway you frame it, even if it does smell like dragon breath!

Awesome. Our story, can end, right?

Not so fast.

It seems that one disciple is missing from our gathering. Thomas had been absent. Perhaps he had drawn the short straw, and been the one appointed to get food, or to gather intelligence in the street about where the authorities were lurking. Maybe Thomas was on-call for the weekend, the chaplain tasked to offer prayer and healing to a nearby neighbor in need. Whatever the reason, Thomas misses Jesus' appearance.

Upon returning, Thomas hears the story his friends recount, and declares, "I will not believe (you have seen the Lord) unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in that mark and in his side."

Like a skeptical juror, Thomas will not believe unless he sees and hears for himself.

Righteous Christians throughout the ages have dubbed him "Doubting Thomas," accusing Thomas of insincere faith. I don't believe this is a fair assessment.

Thomas follows the same pattern as his peers. On Easter Morning, Mary Magdalene does not instantly recognize Jesus. As a matter of fact, her first instinct is to assume this strange figure is the one who had robbed the body. Mary only recognizes Jesus when she hears Jesus call her by name. Likewise, Peter and the beloved disciple do not instantly recognize Jesus' presence either. Luke's gospel tells us that when Mary and the others share news of resurrection with the eleven, they all dismiss the news as an idle tale. And when Jesus appears to the other

disciples in the locked room, it's only after Jesus shows them his wounds that the disciples rejoice. None of the others believe without seeing. So why are none of the others labeled doubters?

There's something else. If Thomas left the security of the locked room, he most certainly opened himself up to the risk of being arrested. And what's his reward for duty? Thomas misses his commissioning, and is left to trust the words of his friends. It's very possible that what Thomas is experiencing is grief, not doubt. Thomas missed the big event. Perhaps he feels like an outsider, like a second-class disciple. Who wouldn't? Therefore, Thomas says, "I must see for myself to really believe."

A week later, Thomas gets his wish. Jesus reappears to the disciples in the same manner as before. And Jesus says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it by my side. Do not doubt, but believe."

Thomas responds with belief: "My Lord and My God!"

Thomas is the first of the disciples to proclaim Jesus' identity with conviction. Upon seeing Jesus, Thomas expresses his belief. The text tells us that Jesus invites Thomas to touch, but it doesn't say Thomas actually touches Jesus. We're left to interpret that sight alone is enough for Thomas to believe.

Jesus replies, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed, or how happy, are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Tradition teaches us to interpret Jesus' reply as a gentle rebuke to Thomas. A little anecdote to remind us to believe better than Thomas does.

I believe that's a poor way to interpret this line. I'd even go as far as to say that such an interpretation is both lazy and dangerous. The truth is that this gospel was written as much as 70 years after the death of Jesus. John writes to an audience who at best, would have had second-hand accounts of the life of Jesus. And an audience, who just like us, will never be able to see for ourselves the events of that room on the first Easter week.

Jesus' words not only bless Thomas, one who could see firsthand, but they also bless us, those who cannot see, and yet still believe.

The Evangelist concludes the story:

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.

Friends, the Ruach of God, that gentle breath that Jesus blew upon the disciples is still swirling around more 2,000 years later. We may never see the original room, but that doesn't mean we can't believe in the power of the breath that brought it life. This same breath stirs in you and me and everyone. This breath leaves our lips in prayers of petition, and busts through into dark places held captive to air made thick and lifeless with anxiety and fear. This same breath dances in drumbeats, piano notes, and praise choruses reminding one and all of their good gifts to be used for God's good purposes. And this ruach sweeps over a

Seeing is Believing
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table of bread and grapes inviting all to experience Christ's presence for themselves.

Friends, the earliest disciples had to see for themselves, before they could believe. But on that first Easter day, Christ shared with them a breath that gives us more than sight. Christ shared a breath that gives us life!

So close your eyes. And draw in the breath of life. For in this breath, Christ lives, and so do we!!!

Thanks be to God!!!