

“Life in His Name”

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I asked to read the scripture today to share some context before it is proclaimed. This was my plan even before yesterday’s synagogue attack.

The Gospel of John from which this morning’s reading comes was composed later than the synoptic Gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, and while John contains some beautiful stories not found in the other records the loss of which would be grievous for the church, it also is the Gospel most easily warped for the purposes of anti-Semitism. I want us to understand why.

The Johannine community lived at a time when there was increasing tension between Jewish followers of Jesus and others in the Jewish communities in Jerusalem. Healthy debate between schools of Jewish thought had existed before, and would be the basis of the beauty of Talmudic discourse. But at the time of John’s writing, the Jews who followed Jesus had begun to be identified as something new, not just followers of a charismatic Rabbi and Healer named Jesus, but believers in what quite reasonably was considered a first-commandment-breaking heresy: that this Jesus was himself the Son of God, or as Christian creeds hundreds of years later would put it, “very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

In our text today we will hear what is likely the original ending of John’s Gospel in which the apostle Thomas articulates exactly that central belief of Christian Faith, naming the Risen Christ “*my Lord and my God.*” It is the culmination of John’s biography: the Word from Chapter 1 who was in the World unrecognized, has been disclosed through a series of “signs” and is revealed at last.

The author John’s frustration and anger on behalf of his community at being excluded and kept from preaching their new religion in the synagogues is reflected in language scattered through John’s Gospel. For comparison’s sake, the lumping term “the Jews” as opposed to “the Pharisees” or the “Sadducees,” sects of contemporary Judaism, or the “scribes” or “Sanhedrin,” referencing roles within the community, is used 71 times in John’s Gospel, versus 16 in the Synoptics.

It’s potent stuff, especially in John’s Passion narrative- which is one reason I rotate with the lectionary through the other three Gospels, but not the John readings of the story, for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. Not to put too fine a point in it, there are passages in John, and Matthew also, that were used by my European Christian ancestors to justify pogroms, anti-Semitic attacks on the Chosen People culminating most horrifically in the Shoah, the Holocaust.

It might have seemed to some of us that such things were past, but we have been reminded that anti-Semitism is alive and well, a sickness of hatred looking for opportunity. It is my intent in ministry not to feed the fever of that kind of intolerance: we know better- and as people of faith say “never again.”

In their effort to protect against anti-Semitic readings of the New Testament where background isn't provided or available, some translators have rendered the Greek word "Jews" that appears in our reading as "Judeans." The NRSV from which we read uses the literal translation, and rather than changing it I would ask that each of us change, that we hear the phrase "for fear of the Jews" within its late first century context. It means "for fear of being martyred as Jesus had been by the Romans," "for fear of conflict and opposition," "for fear of the division of families and nation over religion."

It's not the theme of my sermon, and it serves John's narrative to emphasize the miraculous nature of Jesus' appearances to the disciples, but it's worth noting that the disciples' locking their doors out of fear placed a barrier, a literal one, between themselves and the world they were called to serve, and even between themselves and Christ. In his Spirit, we are called to break through.

Given where we find ourselves today, I specifically would challenge each of us to find one way this week to do more than we usually would to understand, support, ally with, or advocate on behalf of religious minorities. This might be something as simple as learning more about food traditions from a book in the library, or it might be making the first step in a more complicated effort to ensure religious parity in school holidays or at your place of employment. Just as 99 years ago, it was men who had the power to vote to allow women access to the polls, many changes we all likely would acknowledge are fair only happen if those not directly affected do some of the work.

And now, with ears to hear, let us listen for the Good News, as proclaimed by St. John:

"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.

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."

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

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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

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."

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.”

Particularly with my lengthy introduction to this text, this is a passage on which we could spend a lot of time.

There is an almost-unique appearance of Easter Joy in verse 20. We associate Joy with Easter, but more often than not the Gospels describe fear and amazement in those who witnessed the resurrection.

There’s John’s account of Jesus blessing and sending out his disciples, and his gift to them of the breath of the Holy Spirit. In the John tradition, this rather than Luke-Acts’ Pentecost story marks the birth of the Church.

There’s that perplexing statement about the power to forgive or retain sins. One commentator observed it’s like interviewing at a company and being offered the job of your would-be boss instead. It’s flattering, but surely Jesus above all should understand the disciples’ limitations?

And then there’s the wonderful final story about plain-speaking Thomas. People call him “doubting” Thomas, but the guy really was just salt of the earth. And without John’s Gospel we wouldn’t know much about him.

In John 11, it’s Thomas who when he hears Jesus is going back near Jerusalem says *“to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”*” I think someone once compared Thomas to Euyore..

In John 14, it’s Thomas who responds when Jesus says in reference to his departure, *“And you know the way to the place where I am going,” “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”*

And here in John 20 when Thomas isn’t present the first time Jesus appears, he says what any normal person unaccustomed to resurrection, or someone from Missouri, would say, *“You’ve gotta show me.”* It’s really a bit unfair that “Doubting Thomas” becomes his nickname when presumably all the other disciples who were there for Jesus’ first visit _also_ had the chance to examine his wounds.

But “Doubting Thomas” is what we call him. And that unshakable nickname in tension with the fact that Thomas is the first one in John’s Gospel, as NT Wright puts it, “to look at Jesus of Nazareth and address the word “God” directly to him,” gives context to what Jesus says next... what Jesus says to us: *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

The Gospels and Paul’s writings suggest a little more than 500 first-century human beings had an encounter with the Resurrected Lord, out of a world population then of perhaps 300 million. Social scientists estimate about 108 billion Homo sapiens have ever been born. The odds for any

given person to have had the chance to see the post-crucifixion Jesus with their own eyes, to touch his wounds are tiny.

The rest of us have two things, and with them and in them the promise of a blessing.

- We have the witness of those who experienced something that sent them from hiding in a locked room to proclaiming their Good News “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the” far ends of the Roman world they knew, the story of which is recorded in the New Testament.
- And we have the experience of our own hearts.

Friends, it was the breath of Jesus upon the first witnesses and the same Holy Spirit in us that makes our faith possible- and blessed.

The Easter Joy we feel, that sense of hope in possibility, that surge of daring to believe God’s Love has overcome Death, that is a gift of God’s Holy Spirit.

May we breathe it in, or to switch metaphors, fan it to strength like one who kindles a new flame in a dark Easter dawn, and be sent forth to live in Jesus’ name.

We have not seen, and yet we perceive. We have not touched, yet we have been changed.

We join with generations to offer our Alleluias and claim Christ as Messiah, our Lord and our God. And we are blessed. Alleluia and Amen.