

## John 20: 19-31

## The Blessings for the Rest of Us

The rushing water of our beloved Jemez River tells us the season is moving on. The abundance and the speed of the gushing river also reminds us of the hard winter we've had, with so much snow that lingered much longer in the mountains. But the season is moving on. Now the sun is getting higher and stronger, and the days longer. We cannot help but feel in our bodies this shift in the way we go about our day. We are in the season of change.

So also, the events of Easter created a havoc and a great shift in the lives of those who had followed Jesus, thrusting them into a brand-new season of faith, a brand-new way of believing in Jesus. And it is in this new season of faith and new way of believing you and I find ourselves, on this side of the resurrection.

And the transition from one season, when they had Jesus walking alongside them and teaching them, to the new season of coming to believe in their risen Lord was not easy. To begin with, that Easter morning, the first day of the week, didn't dawn with joyful shouts of Halleluiah for them. We heard last Sunday, on Easter, how the day began for Mary Magdalene; it began like a nightmare had come true.

For her, the empty tomb with the stone rolled back could only mean that someone had taken her Lord away, and she started weeping. Even after the two angels sitting in the tomb where Jesus's body had been asked her why she was weeping, it didn't occur to Mary that she might be mistaken, and she kept weeping.

And even when she saw Jesus standing in front of her, she didn't, or couldn't see that it was her beloved teacher; perhaps she could not see anything at this point for the tears had filled her eyes from weeping. Was Jesus offended or frustrated or disappointed? No. He didn't go "Come on, Mary, don't you see it's me?"

No, he simply did what he knew would stop her weeping; he called her name, "Mary." His voice calling her name pierced through her grief-stricken heart and she stopped weeping for once as she turned and saw, finally, without tears clouding her vision, it was her teacher. Jesus then **sent** Mary to the other disciples tell them that he was returning to his God and their God. So, Mary went to the disciples and announced to them "I have seen the Lord!"

This is where today's Gospel reading begins. It's still the same day, the first day of the week. Now it's in the evening and the disciples are still huddled up in a house behind locked

doors, where their hearts, too, were locked; locked with fear that the Jewish leaders might now be after them. Earlier that day, Mary had come and announced to them “I have seen the Lord” and told them that Jesus had **sent** her to tell them so they can hear her testimony and believe. But that didn’t remove the disciples’ fear; they did not believe that Jesus had been raised and was going back to his God and their God.

Then, into the house behind the locked doors Jesus comes and stands among them, bringing peace to the disciples’ fear-locked hearts. And, even before the disciples had a chance to think or react or say anything, without being asked, Jesus goes ahead and shows them his pierced hands and his side; he knew exactly what was needed to unlock the disciples’ fearful hearts so they could believe it was him.

Then Jesus tells them just as God **sent** Jesus to show and be the love of God in the fearful and nonbelieving world, and just as Jesus just **sent** Mary to them as a witness, now Jesus is **sending them** to the world, to be the witness that God of Life has overturned death; Love is stronger than death. And to empower them to do that, he breathed on them the breadth of God, the Holy Spirit.

We forget or don’t even notice that Jesus did this by his own initiative, to unlock the disciples’ fearful, nonbelieving hearts, because this has become part of the story known as “Doubting Thomas,” as if Thomas were the only one who needed a proof.

Thomas wasn’t there when Jesus came. So, when Thomas arrived, just as Mary Magdalene had told them “I have seen the Lord,” the disciples now told Thomas “We have seen the Lord.”

And just as the disciples did not believe Mary’s witness, Thomas refuses to believe the witness of the disciples - - - unless, he says, he, too, can see and also touch Jesus’s wounded hands and side.

A week later, the disciples are still in the house with the doors shut. This time Thomas is there, too, and Jesus comes again and offers Thomas exactly what he had demanded, even before Thomas had a chance to ask him. Again, Jesus takes the initiative. This time Jesus doesn’t just show his hands and his side, as he had done for other disciples, but Jesus invites Thomas to put his finger and see his hands, and to put his hand in his side, because that’s what Thomas needed. And Jesus’s reaching out to him in this way is enough for Thomas to respond, “my Lord and my God.”

First with Mary, then with the disciples in the house, and finally with Thomas, Jesus knew exactly what each of them needed in order to be able to believe and provided it to them even before they asked. Jesus did not demand from them what's beyond their ability to believe. Jesus took the initiative and empowered them so they could believe. In that moment of coming to believe in Jesus as their risen Lord, something shifted in their faith.

Then the story moves through the chain and reaches us, you and me. Thomas made his confession "my Lord and my God," and, through this text, testified to us. Now what will we do?

"But they all had a chance to see the risen Christ," we might say. What about all those generations after them, the rest of us, for whom believing must be without seeing, for whom "Seeing is Believing" isn't an option. We are blessed, Jesus says. He blesses those who come to believe without having seen.

Without the privilege of "seeing" Jesus, our faith hangs on the hearing of the testimony of the others, in the Scriptures and in the lives of those who embody the love of God, whose very lives testify to the power of the living God. And just as Jesus provided his disciples, Mary and Thomas and all the others, what they needed to be able to come to believe, so also Jesus provides the rest of us what we need, so we may hear and see their testimony and come to believe, that God's Love that **sent** Christ to this world was stronger than death, and we are loved by this life-giving God, who raised Jesus from death.

When we come to think of it, Jesus was always stretching himself out and bending backwards, so to speak, to reach out to us and enable us to believe in God's love from which nothing can separate us, and so we, too, can be sent to share that good news..

Knowing he would be leaving the disciples soon, and perhaps thinking of the rest of us who would come into the world long afterwards, on the night before his arrest, Jesus took the bread and gave it to the disciples, saying take, eat, this is my body broken for you; do this and remember me. And then he took the cup saying this is the cup of the new covenant, sealed with my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins, do this in remembrance of me. Whenever we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we, too, proclaim the saving death of the risen Christ. In this, we, the rest of us, participate in this story of witness.

And now that he no longer has his earthly human body to share, the resurrected Jesus gives his breath, the breath of God, the breath of life, the Holy Spirit. Remember what John the

Baptist said in the beginning of this Gospel. Jesus is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. With this blessing, we, too are sent.

Gift of the Holy Spirit is what empowers the community, our community, to continue Jesus' work. God breathed God's breath of life into the first human in Gen 2:7, in the story of creation: Jesus' breathing the Holy Spirit on the community of believers, we are made a new creation.

So, blessed now with the breath of life. What words do we find on our lips; what message do our lives spread, is it the good news? Are they the message of life, of forgiveness, of reconciliation and peace that Jesus would have us speak?

Our words and life, the words of the church and the life of the church, are meant to be the witness to this living God, whose love conquered death.

Before Mary uttered the first words witness, "I have seen the Lord!" There was this disciple who is described only as the disciple whom Jesus loved. He was the one who ran to the tomb with Peter, when Mary told them the tomb was empty. He got there first and saw the grave cloths lying in the tomb, and he believed. And this story, in the Gospel of John, is his testimony to us today.

In this season of Eastertime, may God bring a shift in our hearts and remove all that gets in our way of our claiming this story as our own, so our lives too, can proclaim Jesus is our risen Lord. Amen.