

The Story Goes Ever On

John 20:19-31

Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church

27 April 2025

The Rev. W. Mark Koenig

Our Gospel lesson this morning is John, chapter 20, verses 19 through 31.

A word before I read the passage.

The Gospel of John regularly refers to those responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus as “the Jews.” That happens in our passage and about seventy places total in the Gospel. Unlike the other Gospels, John makes no attempt to identify those opposing Jesus as particular people or groups. John’s language groups all the Jewish people of the time together as enemies of Jesus. Which they were not.

Jesus was a Jew as were his followers. Joseph of Arimathea who buried Jesus was a Jew. John’s broad-brush stroke is wrong. It also overlooks the reality that crucifixion was a Roman penalty, carried out by the occupying Roman forces.

Such wording, such language has been used through the centuries and to the present time to foster and justify anti-Semitism – discrimination and persecution against Jewish people.

Every time one group of people “other” or demonize or dehumanize another group of people as a whole, bad consequences almost always follow. It happened during the pandemic when some people referred to COVID-19 in ways that contributed to a rise in attacks against Asian Americans. It happens today as some people speak of all our immigrant neighbors and siblings.

Words matter. Words have consequences.

Because they do, I will change the language of verse 19 as I read today’s lesson.

Listen for God’s word to you this day.

¹⁹When 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, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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.”

²⁶A 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.” ²⁷Then 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.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

The details vary. And they too matter. Each variation points to another dimension of the mystery of the Resurrection. But all four Gospels contain common elements as they tell what happened on the third day after the death of Jesus.

Each Gospel recounts that the women who followed Jesus went to his tomb. The women who watched as Roman crucifixion crushed his breath from him. The women who saw his broken body laid to rest. The women went to his tomb to perform a final act of caring for his body.

Each Gospel recounts the women found the tomb empty. The women were the first to witness resurrection even if they did not fully understand.

From there, the accounts diverge even further. In John's Gospel, which concerns us today, Mary Magdalene tells the other followers that the stone has been rolled from the tomb. Simon Peter and the disciple Jesus loved race to see. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene in the garden.

After they leave the tomb and the garden, the scene shifts to a room. There the followers of Jesus gather. They securely lock the doors.

They were afraid, the Gospel tells us. Afraid without Jesus. Afraid of arrest by the Roman authorities. Afraid of death. Maybe even afraid of life: afraid of what Jesus might ask of them if Jesus really were resurrected.

Behind the locked doors and beyond the fear, the Risen Jesus appears to them. He gives them his peace. He breathes the Holy Spirit on them. It's like group CPR. The Jesus imparts his Holy Spirit to his people and grants new life to his followers. He sends them into the world with work to do.

"Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus says, and the stage is set . . . they are ready to go into the world to witness to Jesus . . . except . . . someone is missing. Thomas is not there. Jesus must come back and pick him up. No one can be forgotten. No one can be alone. New life in Jesus is for all.

Thomas comes back. The other followers engage in evangelism. They share the great, good news. "We have seen the Lord."

And Thomas replies, "Yeah. Right." "Unless I see for myself, I won't believe." Say this for Thomas ... when it would have been easy for him to agree and go along and believe because of what the others, he would not pretend. Faith had to be real to him.

Jesus returns when Thomas is present, displays his wounds. And Thomas believes. "My Lord and my God!" His words serve as the basis for every formal affirmation of faith in Jesus.

In this moment of recognizing Jesus, everything changes for Thomas and for all the followers of Jesus. It can be hard to recognize others. John's Gospel does not say how the others knew Jesus. For Thomas, the scars in the hands and feet led to the recognition that this was Jesus who had been crucified and resurrected.

My friend, Nibs Stroup observes that when we recognize Jesus, “we come to see life, to see ourselves, and to see the world in a whole new way.”ⁱ

Recognizing the risen Jesus transformed his earliest followers. It invited them to consider a new vision for life.

In the Resurrection, God took victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair. God vindicated the life and ministry of Jesus. God affirmed that Jesus showed the way to live. Behind a closed door, the Resurrected Jesus gave his followers the Holy Spirit and resurrected them. They were freed to live in new ways.

The book of Acts and the letters of the Christian Scriptures tell the story of this new living. The Jesus people – the followers of the way – preached and taught and welcomed and shared and cared and loved in his name. Their living – their loving – after the style of Jesus – is how the world knew they followed him.

You see, the resurrection is for the purpose of re-creation after death, and re-creation before death. The resurrection is about the life to come. It is about this life. The resurrection of Jesus leads to the resurrection of his followers. It frees the people of Jesus from fear to continue his ministry by loving kindness, doing justice, and walking humbly with God.

It did so for his first followers. It has done so for those who have followed Jesus through the ages. It can do so for us.

When we look around today, we see a world, a nation, a community, maybe even a church filled with fear and in need of resurrection.

We each bear our own burdens, confront our own concerns, face our own challenges, carry our own traumas. We have fears known only to ourselves. And we have shared fears.

We may fear the changes brought by aging or illness.

We may fear the loss of beloved family members or friends.

We may fear for people around the world who know conflict, exploitation, and oppression.

We may fear for the economy and how that will impact us.

We may fear for our immigrant siblings who might be at risk of arrest and deportation.

We may fear what might happen as we continue to abuse and misuse God’s good earth.

Like those who gathered around the cross, like the women at the tomb, and like the disciples in the locked room, sometimes we tremble, tremble, tremble.ⁱⁱ

We know that the world is a broken and fearful place.

And we know more.

Thanks be to God we also know resurrection.

In the resurrection ... in the power of the Holy Spirit ... we receive hope in the power and love and grace of God. We are freed from fear ... freed to live in new ways as the people of Jesus.

Jesus sought to bring healing and wholeness, justice and love to the world. That was his work ... his ministry. Jesus calls his people to join in that ministry.

As Dr. Raj Nadella says, through his offer to Thomas to touch his wounds, Jesus extends an invitation ... to stand in solidarity with each other ... and to join Jesus in ministry to the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus invited and freed his followers through the ages to join in this work and ministry.

Jesus invites and frees us to do the same ... to join Jesus in ministry and

... welcome all people ... show compassion ...
... offer forgiveness ... serve our communities ...
... feed the hungry ... nurture relationships ...
... pursue a more just society and care for all God's beloved children and creation.

Will we do so perfectly? Of course not. But every time we fail, every time we stumble, God will provide the Holy Spirit to revive our souls again.^{iv} And the story will continue.

"Easter is about how God's story isn't finished yet." So the Rev. Katie Mulligan summarized her Easter sermon one year.^v

The Romans thought the Jesus story had ended. I often have this vision of Roman officials and soldiers standing around in togas and gold armor and red capes ... that's what they wore in all the movies, right. It must be correct.

The Romans stand there.

Jesus has been crucified. Taken from the cross. A stone sealed the tomb. Guards placed outside the stone.

The Romans stand there and congratulate themselves.

"Our work is finished ... this Jesus story is done."

And so it seemed.

Until

an empty tomb

and a locked room

and other encounters

led to a recognition of Jesus

and a dawning awareness of

Resurrection

that affirmed Jesus' life and ministry and message

and freed his followers to live in new ways.

And through the first followers of Jesus, God's story goes ever on.

Through followers of Jesus whose names we know and through followers of Jesus whose names we have never heard but who lived as Jesus' people and have their names written in the Book of Life, God's story goes ever on.^{vi}

Through the people who loved us and told us of Jesus, God's story goes ever on.

In us and through us, God's story goes on.

Christ is alive.

We are his people.

Freed to live in hope, love one another, and pursue justice in the name of Jesus.

And God's story ... Jesus' story ... in which by God's grace we have a part to play ... the story will go ever on.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ <https://nibsnotes.blogspot.com/2021/04/the-stuff-of-recognition.html>.

ⁱⁱ *Were You There?*.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://churchanew.org/blog/posts/raj-nadella-preaching-thomas-and-embodied-solidarity>.

^{iv} *There Is a Balm in Gilead*.

^v Posted on her Facebook page.

^{vi} Thanks to the Rev. Dr. Otis Turner for this image.