

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, Second Sunday of Easter, John 20:19-31
23 April 2017
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

Today's Gospel reading from John picks up immediately where Easter Sunday's lesson ended. As we learned at Easter, if the disciples were unprepared for Jesus' crucifixion, they were even more unprepared for his resurrection. At this point in today's lesson, a few of them have seen the risen Lord and have reported back to the others, but some remain skeptical. And who could blame them? No one, perhaps even Jesus himself, expected a resurrection of only one person and no one could quite understand what this resurrected Jesus was—he was both like and unlike the Jesus they knew. He kind of looked like Jesus, even to the point of having his scars, and he would eat and drink with them, but when they saw him they sometimes weren't initially sure it was really him. And just when they thought they were getting sure it was indeed their friend and Lord, he would suddenly disappear in strange and unpredictable ways. In today's reading, we see Jesus doing two things in his resurrected state: first, he is commissioning his disciples for the next part of their work in bringing the kingdom of God to realization on earth and, second, he is dealing with the disciples' doubts and fears. I will begin with the second part of the reading, the story of Thomas, and come back to the commissioning.

The story of Thomas proclaiming his doubts is always used on this Second Sunday of Easter, but when we look at it in the wider context John's Gospel as a whole, it takes on new significance. Originally, this was probably the last chapter in John—verses 30 and 31, at the end of our reading, suggest this very strongly. And what is the point that John wants us to get from his Gospel as a whole?

“...these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you might have life in his name.” Messiah and Son of God...for months now, we’ve been exploring how Jews believed the Messiah would be the son of God, but that they did not believe this title implied the Messiah was divine; rather, it indicated he would be a king like David, enjoying special favor with God. However, by the end of the first century, only about 70 years after the crucifixion, and when John’s Gospel was written, Jewish Christians were already coming to believe that Jesus was not only the Messiah but also God’s *divine* Son. That change is remarkable in itself, but perhaps even more remarkable is that these early Christians saw no problem believing in this *and* in continuing to believe in their traditional Jewish monotheism, that God is One. We’ll explore this more in weeks to come, but for now I want us to try to wrap our minds around what a significant development this was in the early Christian understanding of Jesus. And again, as I said at Easter, the resurrection is not *proof* of Jesus’ divine status, but it obviously led early Christians—early *Jewish* Christians, no less—in this direction.

The other important point about this story of Thomas is how it serves, along with the Prologue in the first chapter of John, to frame the entire Gospel. John’s Prologue—“In the beginning was the Word [the Logos]...”—is a clear reference to the first creation in Genesis and John’s point in the Prologue is that the coming of Jesus, as the Word or Logos of creation—marks out the beginning of a *new* creation. As in the first creation humans are created on the sixth day, Friday, as the culmination of God’s work, so it is on the sixth day of the week that Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowds and says, “Behold the man!” Jesus is understood to be the new Adam. Likewise, on the seventh day of creation, the

Sabbath, God rested, and on the seventh day Jesus rested in the tomb. The resurrection of Jesus occurs, then, on the first day of the new creation or the “eighth day” of the original. I quote here: “The Word [or Logos of the first creation], who was always the point at which the creator and creation came together as one, is now, in the resurrection, the point at which the creator and *new creation* are likewise one” (NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 667, emphasis in original). Bottom line, Easter has cosmic significance, and at this part in the story the disciples are only beginning to glimpse this significance for themselves and for the world. By the way, listen for this same point in our Eucharistic Prayer this morning—it’s all there in wonderful and succinct prose. Jesus “...gave himself up to death; and rising from the grave, destroyed death, and made the whole creation new.”

One last point about Thomas, one that most of you have heard before. For all his doubts about the risen Jesus, he is not condemned for them. Indeed, when he finally meets the risen Lord, and is invited to touch and see for himself, he refuses. Instead, he falls to his knees and makes the most astounding confession of faith in the entire Gospel. Thomas’ doubts and his strong confession of faith serve as the climax for the Gospel, and I hope John’s point is obvious—without the exploration of doubt, we never come to a mature faith.

Now, before I end this morning, I want to return to the first part of our reading and pick up the story where Jesus commissioned his disciples by giving them the Holy Spirit. As I said at Easter, Christians have long believed that the point of the resurrection was to confirm that we, too, will have a place with Jesus in heaven after die—and I’m not saying this is untrue—but I am saying that it

seems the very earliest stories about the resurrection were not about this, but about—in the words of our post-communion prayer—“sending us to do the work [God has] given us to do.” And I don’t want to take that back, but I also want to remind us that, after the resurrection, the disciples took some time to regroup in order to figure out what all this might mean for them and those, like you and me, who would come after them. In other versions of the story, they were told to wait, wait before beginning their Easter work until after Pentecost.

I emphasize this because, as your Interim Priest and pastor, I’m getting worried that we as a congregation may be trying to do too much during this interim period. Most of you have heard by now that our Senior Warden, Virginia Walker, resigned this past week and that Stu Case has graciously agreed to step into this role. Virginia has given us all the wonderful gift of her time and talents, and we will try to find a time soon to thank her formally for her service to the people of Saint Barnabas. But, with her permission, I also call our attention to her situation as one that should give us all pause to reflect on the limits of our time and energy.

There are certain core functions of this and every church that need to go on—worship, fellowship, outreach, and education—but I now want to invite the Vestry, and each of you as individual parishioners, to discern what *programmatically* can be postponed, or done less frequently or less elaborately, or even put on hold until a new Rector is in place and has a chance to get oriented. I’ve told some of you the story of my first rector’s position as a young priest. I was called to a small, but very active parish, and I took that position over another I had been offered because the parish seemed ready to do some very interesting things. But after I arrived, it soon became clear that the parish had

exhausted itself in the interim and just didn't have the energy to do what they had called me to do. It was a disappointment for all of us, and it was a lesson I never forgot.

So, again, while we are called to do the work of the kingdom of God—the work we were given to do as a commission from Jesus himself—perhaps we don't need to do all today, or tomorrow, or even next week. Let's pause, take a breath, and while trying to keep the big picture in mind at this point in our history—that is, the calling of new Rector—let us discern together what the Spirit would have us do, and perhaps not do, in the meantime. Amen.