

Scripture Comments

John 20.19-31

April 8, 2018

Fear Not

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We are looking at the second half of what most Biblical scholars believe was the original ending of John. These stories are not about the miracle of the resurrection, but rather invite us to reflect upon the community of believers. Jesus unexpectedly intrudes into the community. The only thing they have in common is their shared fear, which is no basis for a community. Jesus' intrusion reconstitutes the community. Three times he says, "Peace." The word is more than a simple greeting. It is an assurance and a summons to a new life of "belief," a life of faithful, obedient living.

The appearance of Jesus to the disciples gathered behind locked doors depicts the birth of the church. The responses to the risen Jesus are as varied as the people he encounters. The beloved disciple, Mary, the other disciples and now Thomas focus on the connection between seeing and believing. At the end of this story Jesus blesses the ones who have not seen and yet believe.

I frequently tell folks in Bible study that we do ourselves a disservice by the manner in which we read the Bible. We read it in little pieces. Therefore, we do not get the big picture and often we fail to see connections. This is one of those times when we benefit from at least reading the entire chapter (20) as one piece. Although the lectionary divides the chapter into Mary's story and the story of Thomas, they make more sense together.

As with last Sunday's story (April 1, 2018, Easter) this story centers on Jesus. He is eager to be known. He breaks through the astonishment and fear of each of the other characters. The narrator mentions three times the scars of Jesus. John wants his readers to know that the risen Jesus is the same as the one who was crucified. The mysterious event of the resurrection has not erased the marks of rejection and death, nor transformed Jesus into someone other than the one he has been throughout his ministry. The emphasis is on continuity.

Jesus is not passive. He brings peace to his frightened followers and charges them to bear that peace to others. The appearances of Jesus do more than testify to the resurrection, they evoke a transformation among the disciples. Something absolutely new and unheard of has happened. It is not only resurrection, it is also empowerment for the future.

The locked doors underscore the trauma and fear of the disciples. They have reason to think that they may be the next victims. After Jesus appears, speaks and displays his wounds, the disciples rejoice. The appearance of the risen Lord is transforming. The transformation has a purpose. Jesus deputizes the disciples to be his agents in declaring to the world the same peace he has given them. The commission to the disciples carries further authority. The disciples have the responsibility to declare or refuse to declare forgiveness of sins. It is through the disciples, the nucleus of the church, that the benefits of Christ are made available to the world.

Along with the commission comes the gift of the Holy Spirit. John does not wait for Pentecost. On the First Easter evening, the church receives the promised Paraclete (14.15-17, 25-26; 15.26; 16.7-11, 12-16). In the brief space of five verses (19-23) John describes the beginning of the church, authorized by the risen Jesus to declare the good news of peace and forgiveness, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 20 presents a set of vignettes on how faith emerges. The beloved disciple sees the empty tomb and believes. Peter sees the same thing and is skeptical. Mary sees the empty tomb and continues to grieve until Jesus calls her by name. The other disciples also must see in order to believe. Though Thomas is really no different from the other disciples, he has become the celebrated case of the one who remains unconvinced until he sees. In each case, faith comes from sight, though what is seen may vary from the discarded grave clothes to Jesus himself.

This lection addresses the possible feeling that the gap of years has made faith less valuable or more difficult. The nostalgic notion that says, "Oh, I wish that I could have been there," is answered by the special benediction of Jesus, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (29). It is faith born of the word, from the witness of those who did see and whose witness remains.

Throughout this gospel, John has shown that there is faith based on signs and there is faith that needs no signs; there is weak faith and strong faith; shallow faith and deep faith; growing faith and faltering faith. This is a story to assure readers that faith is no less a possibility for us than it was for the original disciples. In John's version of the story, faith is not a once-upon-a-time decision, but a decision that is made new in every situation. Please pay attention to the fact that the last "convert" in this story is Thomas. He is a disciple, one of the Twelve. Perhaps John tells this story for all of us who have felt guilty that our faith was not born full grown in one dramatic experience.

References:

Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*; 1993.
Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year B, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*; 1993.