

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, April 23, 2017 // Easter 2, Year A

The Gospel: John 20:19-31

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.

Background and general observations

Easter is not one day but a season that is fifty days long. The Easter season culminates on the Day of Pentecost (Pente = 50), when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. Many regard Christmas Day, Easter Day, and the Day of Pentecost as the three greatest feasts of the church year.

Interestingly, the Second Sunday of Easter is often called "Low Sunday," because the attendance in church on this day is often so much lower than the attendance on Easter Day. That's understandable, but it's also unfortunate, since this is the day on which we traditionally read the account of "Doubting Thomas." Many people think that it's unfair to label Thomas as "doubting." After all, he not only ended up believing, he ended up believing profoundly — "My Lord and my God!" That is a response that is very different from, "Well, it is you, Jesus."

Some like to point out, as well, that Thomas in fact confesses his belief without having to test the evidence, as Jesus invites him to do ("Put your finger here..."). We might also wonder if the other disciples would have needed some sort of visual or even tactile confirmation of Jesus' presence after his death, if they (like Thomas) had not been present when Jesus appeared to the others in that locked room a week earlier.

This passage contains the second and third appearances of the risen Jesus. The first appearance, of course, was to Mary Magdalene in the garden. The fourth appearance occurs in the next chapter of this Gospel, when Jesus appears to the disciples on the beach, directs them in their fishing, and then has breakfast with them.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Jesus enters a locked room where his disciples are gathered in fear. These disciples are the people who had the benefit of Jesus' companionship, of hearing Jesus' teachings, and of witnessing Jesus' miracles. Yet, they are also the people who scattered and ran away in Jesus' hour of greatest need.

We might expect Jesus to give the disciples a hard time, "What happened to you guys?! Where were you?!" Instead, he simply says, "Peace be with you."

If this is the way Jesus treats these disciples who failed and who abandoned him in his misery, even though they had been privileged to be with him intimately, why do you suppose many believe that God is inclined to punish us so severely when we fail? What can we learn about God from this passage and the ways God responds to our shortcomings? And what can we learn about ourselves and the way we treat others when they, too, have failed?

2. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." This is a powerful statement. We are to be like Christ to one another, sent by God to each other.

Who or what in your life has been a "God-send"?

In what ways might you be a "God-send" to someone else?

3. The common phrase "you have to see to believe" feels particularly relevant as Thomas says he needs tangible evidence of Jesus' wounds in order to believe that Jesus has indeed been resurrected. In many ways, Thomas' doubt is a very human reminder of our own skepticism concerning matters of the Divine, of mystery, and of that which exceeds our rational understanding.

In what ways do you—or don't you—identify with Thomas? What do you make of the relationship between his doubt and his profound faithfulness?

What kind of experience must *you* have, in order to believe that Jesus has truly risen from the dead? What kind of experience must any of us have, if we are going to believe that God is a real, living and active presence in our lives?

Anne Lamott writes, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty." Do you agree with her?

4. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

This is another powerful statement. It seems that Jesus is saying we have not only an enormous power over one another but an incredible responsibility *to* one another.

Do you feel you have sins that are being retained by people? What kind of damage does this do? And what sins of others are you retaining? At what cost to yourself?

5. The late Episcopal priest and New Testament scholar, Robert Capon, said the following about the primary calling of the church and of Christians:

The church is not in the morals business. The world is in the morals business, quite rightfully; and it has done a fine job of it, all things considered. The history of the world's moral codes is a monument to the labors of many philosophers, and it is a monument of striking unity and beauty. As C.S. Lewis said, anyone who thinks the moral codes of mankind are all different should be locked up in a library and be made to read three days' worth of them. He would be bored silly by the sheer sameness.

What the world cannot get right, however, is the forgiveness business — and that, of course, is the church's real job. She is in the world to deal with the Sin which the world can't turn off or escape from. She is not in the business of telling the world what's right and wrong so that it can do good and avoid evil. She is in the business of offering, to a world which knows all about that tiresome subject, forgiveness for its chronic unwillingness to take its own advice. But the minute she even hints that morals, and not forgiveness, is the name of her game, she instantly corrupts the Gospel and runs headlong into blatant nonsense.

*The church becomes, not Ms. Forgiven Sinner, but Ms. Right. Christianity becomes the good guys in here versus the bad guys out there. Which, of course, is pure tripe. The church is nothing but the world under the sign of baptism. ... (Robert Farrar Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox: An Introduction to the Language of Theology*)*

How do you respond to this idea that we are, first and foremost, people who have been sent to forgive sins?

How are you doing in that vocation? What do you need in order to do your job better, to forgive more easily?