

After Jesus was resurrected he didn't immediately ascend to heaven to be with God. He hung around for a while. On numerous occasions he appeared to his disciples and followers. In John's gospel there are three accounts of Jesus appearing to his followers. The first person he appeared to was Mary Magdalene. She was weeping outside the empty tomb because she thought the body of Jesus had been stolen. Then suddenly Jesus appeared beside her and asked, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Mary didn't recognize Jesus at first. In fact, she thought he was the gardener and replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said, "Mary!" She turned and said to him, "Teacher!" I can just imagine the look of shock and joy on Mary's face as she went from one moment thinking all hope was lost to seeing her friend and Savior face to face.

John told another story about when Jesus appeared to his followers. Some of Jesus' disciples were gathered at the Sea of Galilee when Peter said to the group, "I am going fishing." The rest of the group replied, "We will go with you." Now they were not going on a vacation or a weekend getaway. Remember that fishing was their trade and by Peter making the statement that he was going back to fishing he was essentially saying, "I'm going back to the work I was doing before I got mixed up with Jesus." Remember, the disciples had no idea what Jesus had in store for them in future so they thought the best thing for them to do at that moment was to go back to fishing.

Just after daybreak Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not recognize him from a distance. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." I love that part of the story. I can just see some of the disciples rolling their eyes in response to this strangers comment about their lack of luck in fishing that day. Jesus had to have a sense of humor. Of all the places and things to do when making a resurrection appearance, Jesus decided to stand on the side of the lake and say in effect, "Catch anything boys?" Their answer was priceless – "No." Jesus then decided to play like a fishing guide and told them to cast their nets to the right side of the boat. So they did as he said and caught so many fish that they were not able to haul it in because there were so many. One of the disciples then recognized Jesus and said, "It is the Lord!" Peter was so excited he jumped in the lake to get to Jesus as soon as possible.

When the disciples got to the shore they noticed a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you

have just caught.” So they brought him their fish – all 153 of them and they joined Jesus for breakfast on the shoreline. The story goes that Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. Sounds a little like communion doesn’t it? I suppose we could refer to this as the Last Breakfast.

John tells us that this was the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples. Before this appearance at the lake, we have our story for today’s sermon. The disciples were gathered together in a house and were huddled together behind locked doors. They were afraid and I can’t say that I blame them. If I had just witnessed what they did to Jesus I think I would be a little nervous as well if I was a follower. Despite the locked doors on the house, Jesus came and stood among the group. I think we can all take comfort in the fact that Jesus does not allow locked doors to get between us and him. Locked doors do not apply to Jesus, and neither do locked hearts or impossible situations. Jesus has this way of defying the odds and those who follow him, you and me included, need to understand that whether we have faith or not is sometimes not the point. The point is that we serve a living God who knows no boundaries. Jesus didn’t knock on the door or ask for permission to come in. He simply showed up and said to the group, “Peace be with you.” In other words, “Everything is okay.” After he spoke those words he showed them his hands and his side. Then he did something remarkable. He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you have forgiven the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Most people associate the book of Acts with the giving and receiving of the Holy Spirit, but right here in John Jesus himself breathed the Spirit into his disciples. I think it’s interesting that Jesus felt it necessary to say something about forgiveness when he talked to his disciples. I’ve never made a resurrection appearance myself so I am certainly not qualified to comment on what you should and shouldn’t say after being resurrected from the dead, but I would think you would be precise and efficient with your words. You would want to make every word count so the fact that Jesus talked about forgiveness is a clue that forgiveness is important to God and should be important to us.

I was talking with a Hospice nurse the other day at the nursing home and we were talking about all the families we come into contact with on a regular basis. She made the comment that she has had some “interesting” families to work with. I told her that I have dealt with some “interesting” people as well. Interesting, by the way, is a code word for difficult! We talked about how almost in every family there is at least one or two people

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who are to the point of not talking and estranged. It could be a brother/sister relationship, a cousin, a spouse, etc. Chances are there will be some serious relationship problem and when families are in crisis situations, such as dealing with the death of a loved one, emotions are intensified. The sad thing is that most of these situations can be resolved through forgiveness that is neither offered nor accepted. When I speak of forgiveness I speak of forgiveness not in the sense that bad, abusive behavior is tolerated and accepted, but forgiveness in the sense of loving one another despite the hurts and pains of the past.

Jesus knew that if the church was going to be the church there had to be forgiveness. I am certain that there were some hard feelings among the disciples, and that Jesus talked about forgiveness because that is what they needed to hear at the time. Remember, the disciples were not perfect people. They were ordinary people just like you and me with all sorts of problems and faults. There was one disciple, however, who was not among the group at the time. His name was Thomas.

We all know that Thomas was not with the group when Jesus made his appearance the first time, but what we do not know is where Thomas was when Jesus appeared. Did the disciples draw straws to see who would be the unlucky one who had to go out and pick up the fried chicken for supper? Was Thomas not there because he was picking up the family pack at Jim's Crispy Fried Chicken? Where was Thomas? Everyone else was hiding behind locked doors, but not Thomas. Was he going for a walk? Was he just getting a breath of fresh air? Maybe the house was a no smoking house and he was out back having a smoke. Who knows? All we know for sure is that he wasn't there when Jesus showed up.

When Thomas came back Jesus had already gone. Naturally, the other disciples shared the excited news that they had seen Jesus. Thomas, like any sensible person, replied, "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." Thomas has taken a lot of flack over the years. He even has an adjective attached to his name "Doubting" – Doubting Thomas. I don't know where we get the right to call him Doubting Thomas because I'm certain that if you and I were in the same spot we would have said much the same thing. Instead of Doubting Thomas, we should call him Honest Thomas or Realistic Thomas.

A week later the disciples and Thomas were all in the house together. Notice that Thomas is not missing this time. Perhaps he thought to himself,

“You know I don’t really believe it but just in case, I’m going to let someone else pick up the chicken this time.” Lucky for Thomas he was at the right place at the right time. They were behind shut doors again and again Jesus barged right in 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.” I love this part of the story because it says one thing loud and clear – Jesus was focused not on the other disciples but Thomas. His sole intention for showing up a second time was out of love for Thomas. It was not to say to Thomas, “I’ll show you.” It was to say, “You said this is what you need to believe so here I am to show you.” We are not sure if Thomas actually put his hands in Jesus’ wounds but we are told that Thomas responded, “My Lord and my God!” In other words, “I believe.”

We each come to faith in the risen Christ in different ways. Just as we all learn differently and have different personality traits, we all respond in different ways when it comes to faith. And Jesus knows that. Jesus knows what we need as a church and as individuals. Jesus is not hiding waiting for us to find him. On the contrary, Jesus is actively calling us into relationship and will do whatever it takes, including stretching out his wounded hands for us to see and touch. Keep in mind it was Jesus who decided to show up again just for Thomas’ sake. Jesus knows that we need all the reassurance we can get.

I was talking with someone the other day and we both made the comment that it sure would be easier to have faith if the world looked more redeemed. In other words, sometimes it’s hard to believe in a good God when all the evidence is to the contrary. I can even see where someone might say, “Why should I believe when the world looks like this?” Robert Fulghum wrote the book “All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten”. In one of his chapters he told the following story about a lawyer friend of his:

“He’s forty-seven and has a wife, four kids, house in Beverly Hills, job in the city with big firm...the whole catastrophe. I keep up with him because he’s always a little ahead of the times. He’s taken all the trips and done just about everything a person could want to do. This year he is into simple ignorance. ‘It’s all garbage,’ says he. ‘All lies. Your senses lie to you, the president lies to you, the more you search the less you find, the more you try, the worse it gets. Ignorance is bliss. Just Be, man. Don’t think or do – just Be. The world is coming to an end!’”

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“The day before he left to go home he jumped off a lakeside dock with his clothes on to help a kid who appeared to be in danger of drowning in the deep water. And he confessed to being in town for the National Lawyers Guild convention, since he’s a member of its social justice committee. ‘So if it’s all lies and garbage – and ignorance is the ultimate trip – then how come...?’ I say. ‘Well,’ says he, ‘I might be wrong.’”