

Second Sunday of Eastertide

John 20:19-31; Psalm 133; Acts 4:32-35; I John 1:1-2:2

John 20:19-31 is the story of how Jesus' disciples embraced the reality of a risen Christ and the implications of that resurrection upon them and the future of the church. But that embrace did not begin so auspiciously.

The text begins, "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" (20:19a). The damning words, "the doors were locked for fear of the Jews", tell us that the disciples' fearful conduct indicates that they have not taken Mary's report of Jesus' resurrection (20:18) seriously. They didn't believe her! And because they didn't believe her, they still lived in "fear of the Judeans" (the Jewish political, economic and religious establishment that had seemingly eliminated Jesus).

But suddenly, Jesus appears in their midst. Unrestrained by death and by locked doors, the resurrected Jesus stands among them and says, "Peace be with you" (20:19b)! This, of course, is not simply a greeting. Jesus is blessing them with shalom – with God's intentions for all humanity, the intentions of vital relationship with God, political justice and equitable distribution of wealth. In his act of blessing his community with shalom, Jesus fulfills his promise to them that he will give them the gift of peace (see 14:27).

Of course, the disciples are stunned beyond belief! Jesus, knowing their incredulity and disbelief, shows them his hands and feet still bearing the scars of the nails, so that they would know that what they were viewing was the resurrected Christ, not a vision or a spirit (vs. 20).

But Jesus wastes no time in reflecting on his resurrection. Rather he moves immediately to make two demands of them. First, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you" (vs. 21). They are to go out into the world with the good news of Jesus' resurrection, for God has sent them.

Second, "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (vs. 23). This responsibility of the Christian community is to forgive each other. To forgive sins is the Spirit-empowered mission of the church. By assuming that responsibility, the Christian community continues Jesus' work of making God known in the world and thus bringing the world to decision and (if that decision is avoided or rejected) judgment (cf. 3:19-21; 15:22-24; 16:8-11).

In between these two commands, Jesus performs a most important act. "Jesus breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (20:23). Jesus provides his disciples with the power that they need in order to remain a community committed to him, and to fulfill the twin commissions of bringing Christ's new community to the world and forgiveness or retention of sins. He fills them with the Holy Spirit. In doing so, he fulfills his second promise to them – the promise of providing them a Paraclete or Spirit to take his place (cf. 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15).

The scene then shifts. One of the disciples, Thomas, was not present when the resurrected Jesus met with the disciples. They, of course, enthusiastically tell him of their experience with the

same identical words with which Mary told them (20:24; 20:18). “We have seen the Lord!” But like Mary, the disciples’ testimony is dismissed and rejected as well. Thomas is no different than they have been!

Thomas incredulously responds, “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” (vs. 25). But Jesus is going to take Thomas at his word!

The following Sabbath, Jesus appears to Thomas, who is now with the believing disciples (vs. 26). Confronting him directly, Jesus invites Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (vs. 27). Note what Jesus does here. He takes each of Thomas’ demands, and answers them one-by-one. He doesn’t depend upon his physical presence to convince Thomas, but instead lovingly confronts Thomas on each of his demands, answering them – and thus, both acknowledging and giving credibility to those demands.

Thus, Jesus faces Thomas’ doubts head-on, and provides the means for him to deal with them. It is upon such direct confrontation, forgiveness and call that the Christian community is built!

The church has labeled this story “Doubting Thomas”. That is a misnamed story. It is not so much about a doubting Thomas as it is about a graceful Jesus. Jesus’ love for Thomas is so great that he legitimizes what one should recognize are reasonable doubts (you or I would have likely said the same thing), and then graciously meets those demands point by point. This story is about the abundant grace of Jesus that desires nothing more than moving every person and all society toward faith!

And that is exactly the response Jesus receives. “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God’” (vs. 28)! In one magnificent moment, Thomas moves from doubt to what is the most powerful and theologically discerning confession in the Gospel. In this confession, the Gospel of John reaches its theological apex, as it boldly proclaims that Jesus is, indeed, Lord and God of the “cosmos”, the world, the political, economic and religious systems of the world, and of each individual – whether they acknowledge that lordship or not!

Once testimony has been given to the fact that Jesus is indeed “Lord and Christ”, this chapter (and perhaps the entire book¹) moves to its conclusion: There is much that Jesus did in his ministry, the text implies, that are not included in this book – not because they are not important stories, teachings and events, but because they do not serve the purpose of the book. This book’s purpose is very specific and clear, the author states. “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” (vs. 31)! That is the purpose of the book of John – to present us with a countercultural Christ, controlling the forces of nature and history, confronting the Jewish and Roman systems and calling them to accountability, building his community of faith that would

¹ A number of biblical scholars contend that the book of John originally ended at 20:31, and that the author (or another author) later appended two additional stories to make clear the mission of the beloved community and to resolve what happened to Peter. Other biblical scholars contend that chapter 21 was always part of the Johannine manuscript, and that the book was designed to be completed at 21:25.

pose a viable alternative to societies that had become possessed by greed, unilateral power and lust for control, even orchestrating his own death and then being raised from the dead to lead his covenant community into the world to transform it – a Jesus who was, indeed, “my Lord and my God”!

Psalm 133 and Psalm 134 are meant to be read together, because they belong together. Although they are clearly two distinct poems, they share a common understanding that life consists primarily of relationships.

Psalm 133 begins with well-known lines: “How very good it is when kindred live together in unity. It is like the precious oil on the head, running down the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore” (Psalm 133:1-3).

Psalm 134 is equally short, but places its emphasis on the worship of God. “Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord. May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion” (134:1-3).

The two psalms together magnificently present the relationality of God. Together, they stress that meaning, purpose and satisfaction in life is found in a concentration upon relationships. Psalm 133 stresses the Godliness of fostering our relationships with each other – of living in unity. Psalm 134 features the importance of deepening our relationship with God – in this psalm by praying to God in his Temple and blessing God. Both psalms are emphasizing the central element of human life. Augustine put it best when he wrote, “Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee” (*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, p. 1). In a profound sense, Psalm 133 also reminds us that “God has made us for each other, and our heart is restless, until it repose in each other”. It takes both love of God and love of people to truly live into shalom. Both statements are equally true and are, in fact, true to each other – two sides of the same coin. Life is about relationality – and little else matters than our relationship with God and each other!

In these two psalms, meant to be in juxtaposition with each other, is the foundation of the biblical concept of the shalom community. The shalom community is, in the final analysis, not an idea nor simply a political or economic practice (although it includes all three). It is a relationship – being at-one with God and with humanity, as we seek through such love to live out justice and equity in the world.

Acts 4:33-35 describes the earliest Christian community as one in which “those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (vs. 32). The author of the book of Acts, Luke, in this statement singles out the most unique characteristic of the beloved community of Christians – they shared their wealth!

The primary principle upon which ancient Israelite society was built was their firm belief that their God was a God of abundance. Whereas all other societies at the time operated out of a premise of scarcity (that is, that there was not enough to go around, so the powerful had to hoard a disproportionate portion in order to maintain their dominance), the ancient Israelites believed that their God was the creator “of the cattle on a thousand hills and every wild animal of the forest” (Psalm 50:10), the One who had given them the wealth of Egypt when they had triumphantly departed from slavery (Exod. 12:35), who had brought them into a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Jer. 11:5), and who had given them whole cities “that they did not build” (Deut. 6:10). Israel had at one time operated on the premise that there was more than enough abundance to be shared by all so there would be “no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4), as long as it was not hoarded by the powerful.

By the time of Jesus, however, that vision of economic life as God intended it to be lived had long faded from Israel. All four gospels attack the politically and religiously powerful of Israel as being overwhelmingly greedy and exploitive of the poor. Thus, in Jesus’ first century Israel, 98% of the population was made up of struggling farmers, artisans (carpenters, metal-workers, tanners, etc.) and the marginalized that annually survived on only about 15% of the income they generated. 85% of their earnings went into taxes that supported the wealthy 2% of the Jewish (Herodian nobility, the scribes and Pharisees, the Jerusalem Clergy Aristocracy, land-owners) and Roman society who ruled Israel.²

Jesus intended the Christian community to be something quite different, however. It is clear from all four gospels that Jesus intended the church to be a countercultural body that, by its very existence and its standards would be a constant irritant to the world’s systems – an example to them of a society as God intended it to be. The best example of that community was the earliest Christian church as described in Acts 4:32-35.

The primary vehicles Israel had developed to guarantee an equitable distribution of Israel’s wealth so that poverty would be eliminated were the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee. The Sabbatical Year, occurring every seven years, worked to rebalance Israelite society in three ways. First, the land was to lie fallow one year in seven, so that it might renew itself and not be over-farmed (Exod. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:11-12, 18-22). Second, all debts between Hebrews were to be cancelled (Deut. 15:1-11; Lev. 25:35-40). Third, all Hebrew slaves were to be set free and compensated for their slavery (Deut. 15:12-18; Lev. 25:39-55).

Jubilee was built upon the sabbatical year teaching of Deuteronomy 15 and Exodus 23. It occurred every seventh Sabbatical year, or every 49 years. Because it was a sabbatical year “writ large”, it contained the three stipulations of any sabbatical year – land lying fallow, debts forgiven, slaves set free. But the Jubilee had a fourth stipulation that struck much more surely at the building of capital in Israel. At every Jubilee, each Hebrew family was to regain possession of its ancestral land³ (Lev. 25:13-34). What this stipulation guaranteed, as long as it was obeyed,

² For a more comprehensive description of the Israelite economy at the time of Jesus, see my book, *Transforming Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 57-70. For a bibliography of research dealing with that economy, see pp. 199-200 of that book.

³ Through most of Israel’s history, the primary land that each extended family held was the land deeded to them when Israel conquered Palestine under Joshua and the land was divided between its tribes. That land was each

was a legislated reversal of fortune. That is, since wealth lay primarily in land and in little else, the economy would be rebalanced every fifty years. In this way, no family could buy up and then permanently hold an increasing amount of land. Jubilee, therefore, was created to guarantee that power could not accrue nor wealth accumulate in the hands of a self-selected few while the remainder of society sunk ever deeper into poverty.

By the time of Jesus, however, widespread poverty is exactly what happened. The Jubilee and Sabbatical Year had not been observed for close to 400 years (except for the stipulation of letting the land lie fallow, which hurt only the farmers who would be deprived of an income for one year). Jesus, of course, came proclaiming the reinstatement of the entire Jubilee (Luke 4:18-19).

What was so outstanding about the earliest Christian church was that they had decided to practice Jubilee and the Sabbatical year – not just once every 50 or 7 years, *but every day!* “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (vss. 34-35). *The church practiced Jubilee and the Sabbatical year every day*⁴ – and the result was a community that finally fulfilled the command of Deuteronomy 15:4, “There will be no poor among you”!

I John 1:1—2:2. “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it and declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us” (1:1-3). The idea of a person rising from the dead is preposterous – not just to modern ears, but to ancient humanity’s, as well. Yet the author of the first epistle of John declares, “We know what we’ve seen, what we’ve touched, what we’ve embraced. This was Jesus – alive again! And the only way that could happen was by an act of God! He is indeed Lord and God!”

Christianity is, in the final analysis, not a body of doctrine, not a 2,000-year-old institution, not even an ethical guideline for society. It is a personal encounter – an ongoing encounter – between the risen Christ and his people. “I know what I saw! And he who I saw, I know!” That is the essential gospel message. And it is given voice in this epistle lesson by an eyewitness to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

family’s “birthright”. If they got in debt or faced financial reversals, the family could sell that land. But, the one buying that land could hold and use it only until the next Jubilee, when it reverted back to the birthright holder. Thus, no land could be sold in perpetuity.

⁴ There are inevitably those Christians who are made uncomfortable with the early church’s embrace of the Jubilee and Sabbatical year standards and react against it. Their most popular arguments are that this was a form of communism (which is ludicrous, because communism didn’t exist as an economic theory until 1847 when *The Communist Manifesto* was published by Marx and Engels). Economically, it would be closer to calling the economic theory behind the early church as communitarianism, rather than communism. Second, others will argue that the arrangement presented in Acts 4:32-35 proved to be such a bad idea that it was soon abandoned. However, there is no evidence either from scripture or church history that such was the case. It was clearly adapted by Paul in his missionary outreach to Gentile lands (they would have known nothing of the Jubilee or Sabbatical year legislation), but there is no reference in any New Testament books to this economic commitment to one another being abandoned during the New Testament era.

We do not know who “John” was. He has sometimes been identified with “John the Apostle” or with “John the Elder” or with another “John”. But he was there! He looked. He heard. He spoke with a former dead man. He may have joined Thomas in putting his finger into the nail holes in Jesus’ hands and feet or thrust his hand into the gaping gash in Jesus’ side. He knelt before Jesus. He worshipped Jesus. And he embraced him as “Lord and God”. Therefore, when this man declares that Jesus has risen from the dead, he knows what he is talking about!

But the writer of this epistle is not simply concerned with arguing persuasively for the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. His main objective in writing this letter is to strengthen the Body of Christ – the church.

He contrasts the church with the society in which it lives but which it seeks to transform. Society that has not embraced the risen Jesus is a culture of “darkness” and “liars”, people who do not perceive that the way they choose to personally dominate and to build their political, economic and religious systems to control, exploit and oppress is sin. Conversely, because Christians have met the risen Christ and live in a loving relationship with him and each other, they are part of an alternative society of light and truth, people who are well aware of their capacity to dominate and therefore depend upon Jesus and each other to build a society of justice, equitable distribution of wealth, the elimination of poverty and a dynamic relationship with God through Christ both for each person and for all of that society.

However, the fact of the matter, the author muses, is that we as Christians may intend to shape both our alternative Christian society and to impact the world’s systems with kingdom principles. But the reality is that we are sinners too. Both personally and corporately, we can lust for power and act oppressively when we should be acting justly. We can slip into greedy behavior and thus exploit others. We can yearn for dynamic relationship with the One whom we “heard, saw, looked at, touched” – and yet use our ecclesiastical position to dominate and to control. We can meet the enemy, and discover that he is us!

“But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (2:2). The hope we have as those who belong to the Christian community is that when we sin, either as individuals or corporately, “we have an advocate with the Father”. Because of his atoning death and resurrection power, Jesus can intercede with God on our behalf (cf. John 14:26) and as our atoning sacrifice (cf. 4:10), we can be forgiven and thus continue the mission given to us as God’s people to work for the reformation of all of society into the alternative community God intends for us all.

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