

A Skeptical Disciple, A Certain Word

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John 20:19–31

Today's Gospel for this second Sunday of Easter is about a certain Word and skeptical disciple. The certain Word, of course, comes from Jesus, the Word incarnate, newly risen from the dead. The skeptical disciple is Thomas. And the certain Word of Jesus turns a skeptic into a believer.

Thomas was called Didymus, “the Twin,” presumably because he had a twin brother. He is listed in the second tier of the Twelve, usually between Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot. Tradition says that he went on to bring the Gospel to India, where one of the oldest churches in Christianity still exists today.

Thomas was the skeptical, sometimes even cynical disciple. When Jesus announced that they were going to Bethany to help Jesus' friend Lazarus who had just died, it was Thomas who said, “Let's go too so we may die with him.” When Jesus said that He was going to prepare a place for them in His Father's house, it was Thomas who asked, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” And when the disciples came to Thomas with the news that they had seen Jesus risen from the dead, it was Thomas who said, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” And he said this even though he had heard Jesus say at least three times that He would die on a cross and on the third day rise again.

The scene is Easter evening. The first day of the week. Sunday, we call it. It's the first day of the new creation. Jesus had risen. The women had seen him. The word was circulating. And the disciples were holed up behind locked doors. They were afraid. The word was out. There would be investigations and interrogations. The same people who crucified Jesus would surely come after them. You can understand their fears. We live behind locked doors for a lot less.

Jesus appears among them. He doesn't climb through the window or knock at the door. Who would answer anyway? He simply appears. He's the Lord. He can do that. And He can do that and be fully human at the same time. I say that because of those who say that you can't just

appear out of nowhere and be fully human because that's not being human. But then, when God and Man are united in one Person, and He no longer has His divine hand tied behind His back, all bets are officially off. Jesus can do with His humanity whatever He pleases. And what pleases Him is to appear to His band of fearful disciples.

"Peace be with you." The first words out of His mouth are words of peace. And unlike our words, His words carry divine weight. They do what they say, just as they did in the beginning of Genesis where God spoke and it was so. "Let there be light," and Light there is. Peace be with you, and peace there is. This is the peace the world cannot give, the peace Jesus promised to His disciples before His death, the peace that comes because of His death. This is no idle wish. He shows them His hands and His side. This is the source of His peace – His wounds, the marks of His death. By His death He conquered Sin and Death. By His death He reconciled the world to His Father. By His death comes a peace that surpasses our understanding.

They were glad. Who wouldn't be? It was the Lord. You couldn't mistake Him. He's the one with the wounds. He died and rose, just as He said He would. He has the wounds to prove it. Whatever sorrow and fear they had melted away instantly. His words and wounds bring peace and joy.

"Peace be with you." He says it again. Didn't the first time work? Of course it did! But now something more. He sends them. "As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you." Jesus is the Apostle of the Father, and now He sends His disciples as His apostles. Sent ones sent with His authority.

And then He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." A little preview of Pentecost. At Pentecost, the Spirit came on the whole church. Here, the apostles. This is their ordination. With His words and His breath, Jesus ordains them to be His authorized representatives, to speak in His stead and by His command. What He speaks and what He wants heard is the reason He died – forgiveness. The justification of the sinner. He wants forgiveness to be spoken. "If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." Their forgiveness is Jesus' forgiveness.

"Do you believe the forgiveness I speak to you is God's forgiveness?" That's a key sentence in the liturgy of private confession. You occasionally also hear it in the corporate confession, as you did if you were here on Ash Wednesday or Holy Thursday. It's a question of office and

authority. Do you believe that the absolution you hear is from God Himself? Well, you should. It is authorized by the Lord Himself. His office, His words, His breath, His Spirit.

That's what the office of the holy ministry is all about, and it's all that it's good for. Forgiveness. Or, if you will not be forgiven, then withholding forgiveness. Sins forgiven and retained. We call it the "office of the keys," the keys that lock and unlock heaven itself by applying the forgiveness that Jesus won for you with His words.

It's all about the words and the authority they carry. When the words come from the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, that pack divine authority. They are the same words that absolved the paralytic and raised him up from his mat walking that "you may know that God has given authority on earth to forgive sin."

The words "I forgive you all of your sins" spoken in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ are the surest words there are on earth. They come by way of the cross and the tomb. They come with Jesus' breath in view of His wounds. They justify the sinner. They are Spirit and they are life, the words of eternal life. Learn to cherish them, believe them, cling to them. If you have nothing else but those words, you have all that Jesus died to win for you.

Thomas wasn't there that Sunday. See what happens when you miss church? You miss Jesus' words, wounds, breath and Spirit. The other disciples told him what happened, but Thomas refuses to believe. In fact, he even says, "Unless I touch his hands and side, there's no way I'll ever believe it." Even though Jesus had said it, and Thomas had heard it. That's not doubt. That's simply unbelief.

Fortunately for Thomas, he was there the next Sunday. And again Jesus pops in without so much as a knock on the door. "Peace be with you." And again He shows them those wounds – the nail marks, the spear mark. And then He turns to Thomas. "Go ahead, Thomas. Put your finger here, see my hands. Stick your hand in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe." And Thomas believes and confess what he believes: "My Lord and my God." Notice that Thomas never got around to touching the wounds as he said he wanted to do. Notice also that Jesus knew exactly what Thomas had said, and He granted him his wish.

But faith doesn't come by touch. Or by sight. Faith comes by hearing. In Thomas' case, the words of Jesus, "No longer be unbelieving but believe." We don't cause our faith; Jesus does with His words. "Believe." And Thomas the unbelieving skeptic becomes Thomas the believer, disciple and apostle.

“Have you believed because you have seen me?” Jesus asks. The answer is no. Seeing does not make for believing. If Jesus appeared right here in our midst in the same way, but didn’t say anything, it wouldn’t help your faith a bit. In fact, it might cause you to doubt. Was that real? Were you losing your mind? Was it a hallucination? The Word of Jesus is what makes faith happen. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Blessed are those who put their eyes into their ears and look by listening. Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and cling to it.

Blessed are you, here this morning. You have the words of Jesus. And you have His wounds – His Body and His Blood. And from His wounds, you have His peace, just as I declare it to you in the real presence of His Body and Blood. Listen for it. “The peace of the Lord be with you always.”

There is a Thomas in all of us, I’m afraid. The skeptic, the cynic. Demanding proof, not taking God at His Word. It’s the old Adam who will not believe, who will not trust, who demands that God prove Himself to be true before we will trust Him. Perhaps you have said it yourself. “Unless I see the nail marks, and touch that spear mark, I won’t believe it.” Maybe you are like those other disciples. Their sin wasn’t skepticism but fear. They were hiding for fear of men even having heard that Death had been swallowed up by Life.

None of Jesus’ disciples believed, or they wouldn’t have been locked up in some room, and Thomas wouldn’t have demanded proofs. They didn’t believe what Jesus had told them. They knew rationally and reasonably that dead men don’t rise from the dead.

They didn’t need convincing. “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him.” They really didn’t need to see Jesus. They needed to see Him to be eyewitnesses of His resurrection, but they didn’t need to see Him to believe. In fact, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Blessed are those who hear. They needed to hear those words. “Peace be with you.” “Receive the Holy Spirit.” “Believe.” “Your sins are forgiven you.”

That’s what you and I need more than anything. That’s why we gather together here. There isn’t much to see. But there is much to hear. What you hear is what they heard, with all the authority of Jesus’ wounds and breath behind those words. These are the words of Him who died for you:

Peace be with you.

I forgive you all of your sins.

Don't be unbelieving but believe.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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