

John 20:19-31 “Concerning Fellowship”

This is the story of “Doubting Thomas.” First of all, I don’t like that nickname. None of the gospel writers gave him that name. In fact, the words, “Doubting” and “Thomas” never appear one after another in the Bible. Period! It’s the *church* that gave the poor guy this awful nickname. You never hear anyone refer to Peter as “Denying Peter.” Or “Petty James” or “Narcissistic John.” But Thomas? He gets a label that, I’m sorry, he *does not* deserve. When we refer to him as “Doubting Thomas,” it makes it look like there’s no room for doubt if you want to be “in” with God! And yet there is an abundance of people in the Bible who were “doubters.” And this nickname we’ve given Thomas makes it sound as if doubting is the worst possible thing you could do as a Christian! “Oh, what an unfaithful, unbelieving, horrible person Thomas was for doubting the resurrected Christ!” Listen, he wasn’t doubting the resurrected Christ! He was doubting the other disciples! And if you want to talk about who is *not* doing what they’re supposed to be doing, I’m ready to point the finger at the disciples who saw Jesus!

First of all, they were locked inside a house because they “feared the Jews.” And I want to make this clear: they were not afraid of “Jews” in general. A lot of folks throughout history and even to this day take verses like this and use them to justify anti-Semitism. Christians in Germany who supported Hitler during his rise to power would often refer to the Jews in general as, “The Christ-killers.” Remember that the disciples were Jews. They were locked in the room because they feared the corrupt Jewish leaders who conspired with the Romans to kill Jesus. Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise. So then Jesus appeared to these disciples. And of course they were happy to see him. “Wow ... I guess Mary Magdalene wasn’t crazy after all! Jesus did come back!” That’s when Jesus gave them this commission – “As the father sent me, so I send you.” Then Jesus “breathed on them” and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” That makes sense. The other gospel writers mention the importance of the Holy Spirit too. This is John’s version of the great

commission. “I’m giving you my spirit and I’m sending you out.”
“Okay, Sending us out to do what?” “To forgive sins.”

“What? Who in the world has the power to forgive sins?” Good question. You don’t hear many sermons about this part of the “Doubting Thomas” story do you? We may touch on it a bit when we talk about the Lord’s prayer – at least when we choose to translate “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” as “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” We talk a lot about how Jesus forgives *our* sins. But we don’t say a whole lot about *our own power* to forgive sins. Maybe it’s because we aren’t always very good at it. We’re rarely even *willing* to forgive sins.

This is when Thomas comes into the picture. He missed out on all of this. He missed Jesus’ commission. He missed receiving Jesus’ Spirit. So when Thomas came back and the other disciples told him about all of this, he made it clear that he only believes what he sees. “Oh, there he goes again. Doubting Thomas!” Listen, Thomas never asked for anything more than what any of the other disciples or Mary Magdalene had already received. Mary didn’t go to the tomb because she thought Jesus had been raised. She went there to take care of his body. When she found the empty tomb, she didn’t say, “Oh, Jesus is gone, that must mean he’s been raised from the dead!” Even when Jesus spoke to her, she didn’t know it was him. She was asking, “Sir, if you’ve carried him away tell me where you’ve laid him.” But then it finally dawned on her that this was Jesus. She put it all together and *then* she believed.

Oh, but not Thomas! No, he doesn’t have an excuse. He’s “the doubter” after all. Again, Thomas *did not doubt Jesus!* He doubted the disciples! He didn’t buy this story that they encountered Jesus and that Jesus gave them his spirit and commissioned them to forgive sins because they’ve given Thomas no reason for him to believe they’d been transformed! And the best evidence that there’s been zero transformation on the disciples’ part? They were still hiding in that locked room a week later! Why are you guys back in the house? Jesus

sent you out! He gave you the Holy Spirit! What are you still doing in the house with the doors shut and locked!? Thomas must have been like, “Really? Jesus came back, huh? Doesn’t seem like you’re any different.” Eight days later it still didn’t seem like there was much evidence that they’d been transformed. It’s no wonder Thomas doubted.

Those other disciples had a whole week to get moving on the mission Jesus gave them. “As the Father sent me, so I send you?” Sure doesn’t look like it! Doesn’t look like they’re out forgiving any sins. So before you start giving Thomas unflattering nick-names, let’s not forget that we could call this whole crew a bunch of “Scardy-cats!” But then on that eighth day, Jesus had his famous encounter with Thomas where he showed him the wounds in his hands and side and Thomas finally believed. And then Jesus said, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” And anyone who’s been in the church for any length of time has probably heard dozens of sermons on this verse.

If you haven’t figured it out already, I’m tired of all the negative attention we direct towards poor Thomas and what a jerk he was because he wouldn’t believe what the other disciples said unless he saw for himself. Why don’t we give the guy credit for *staying* with the disciples in the first place? When the disciples told him about seeing Jesus he *could* have said, “You’re all full of beans.” He could have left and gone home. But he didn’t. “Being there is 90% of the struggle,” right? He was there. Let’s give the guy props for hanging in there with his friends in spite of his doubts. Let’s give him credit for hanging out with the disciples when clearly they were still too afraid to go outside the house even though Jesus told them to go out and forgive sins.

Here’s what I think is the bigger lesson in this story -- And it’s a tougher lesson to understand, because the easy thing to do is pick on Thomas and say that he lacked faith or commitment. I think this story has more to do with a core value of God’s Kingdom. It’s about Jesus preparing his followers to usher in the Kingdom of God. This was

Jesus' ministry and message – The Kingdom of God is at hand. Right here. Right in front of us. So close, but so far because you just can't get beyond seeing the world through the filters of earth's kingdoms. God's reign is different. The Kingdom of God isn't just for brave people. It's for folks who are scared. Scared, but *willing* to become brave by *hanging in there*. Even when we doubt. God's Kingdom isn't just for the "good people." God's Kingdom isn't just for those folks who are always paragons of faithfulness ... who "trust and obey 'cause there's no other way." It's for normal, flawed people like you and me. Like "Doubting Thomas." Or "Denying Peter." Or "Narcisitic John" or "Petty James." Or the guy who the gospel writers *did* assign a negative nickname – "Simon the Zealot." In our day and age we'd call him, "Simon the Crazy Redneck Survivalist Militia Guy." Either way, it doesn't matter. He has a place in God's kingdom too.

And I've got to say this because I only touched on this a little bit last week, but God's kingdom isn't just for men either. We sort of made a joke about how the church rewarded Mary Magdalene for being the first evangelist by making sure women kept silent in church for the next 2,000 years. Let's not forget that gender makes no difference either as far as who can live under the safety and protection of God's reign. You might think, "Come on Jesse, this is the 21st Century. That's a given." You'd be surprised.

There's a term for what happened on that day when Jesus appeared to Thomas and the other disciples. We call it "Fellowship." In the Bible that word is, "Koinonia." So now you know why we call the other end of our building "Koinonia Hall." It's a place where we gather for fellowship. Fellowship is all about belonging. And it's the kind of belonging that isn't based on status, achievement, behavior, gender, education, race, orientation, culture, fashion, generation, political affiliation or anything like that. Fellowship is based on a deep belief that *everyone matters*. Everyone is welcome. And everyone is loved. No conditions. No expectations. No exemptions. It's not the kind of belonging you find at the *top* of the ladder among those who *think*

they're the best. In fact, a lot of the time it's at the bottom among all the rest, with all the other failures and losers who have either climbed the ladder and fallen, or who never got up enough gumption to climb in the first place.

Whatever else this "Reign of God" will become, from that night on it was a "fellowship." It's a community where anyone who wants to be part of it will be welcome. Jesus showed his scars which means we don't have to hide ours. Fellowship is for scarred people *and* scared people. It's for people who *want* to believe but aren't sure *how* to believe. When we come together just as we are, we begin to rise again like Jesus ... like the Easter people we claim to be. We come together to believe again, to hope again, and to live again. Through fellowship, a little locked room becomes the biggest space in the world. In that space of fellowship, the Holy Spirit fills us like a deep breath of fresh air.