

One Week Later
John 20:19-31

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I'd only been on serving this church for a day or two when I discovered that a certain unnamed staff member enjoys intentionally calling other ministers by the wrong name. Even the first several days I'm in the office, one person after another is getting brought to the door: "Have you met Travis?"

This is all well and good, until it gets said enough to cause the wrong people confusion and next thing you know the pastor stands up on Wednesday night and invites "Travis" to come and preach. I should've just sat there to see if any Travis' wanted to give it a shot!

Nicknames can stick - even if they're the wrong name - which is unfortunate if decade after decade you've been called Doubting Thomas, or Thomas the Doubter. Did you know Doubting Thomas gets its own Wikipedia page? Even Judas gets to use his real name on Wikipedia.

Today's episode with Thomas comes one week after the Easter story. There aren't many stories quite like it in the gospels, where we get to observe the disciples after easter – one week later. Mark is moving so quickly that he wraps things up with the empty tomb. Matthew includes lines about Jesus appearing to the disciples in Galilee, and an important commission. Last week we heard Luke tell a great story about a stranger meeting up with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, but that happens on the same day the tomb is emptied, and then he's gone, carried up into heaven and out of their sight.

John is the only one who lingers around to give us a glimpse of what it's like to be a disciple **one week later**.

When we find them one week later, the disciples huddled again in the safety and security of the house. A week after Jesus' death and resurrection and not much has changed. They're all right where we found them the day news of the empty tomb first broke. Well, everyone except for Thomas. He was the missing disciple when this all starts. Maybe "Missing Thomas" would be a better nickname.

John 20:19

At the outset of our text, in John 20:19, the disciples were huddled together, just as they had been over the Sabbath. Somewhere in all the chaos, hope tried to work its way into their minds but most of the disciples were giving in to Fear. So, they do what we all do: close up the doors. Get within safe walls. They seek out protection, confinement, and insulation in these moments.

FEAR

Fear has a way of doing that, doesn't it? It sends us spiraling into self-preservation in search of security. Fear has a way of turning the focus inward. When we feel threatened or insecure, we start making sure the lines that separate us all are more and more clear.

It was fear of the Jewish leaders, we're told, that led them to safety of this space. If Jesus' body *was* gone, the high priest's henchmen would be on a search to find it. The first place they'd look would be here, right where Jesus' people had gathered. And if he had just caused enough of a stir to be put to death, and now he's missing, what are they going to want to do with us, they're thinking. Are we next?

Beyond the Jewish leaders they had plenty of other things to fear too. Everyone who knows them knows they left everything for this movement. They've given up so much, endured the scrutiny of those who didn't understand, to follow this teacher. Every deal they walked away from, every responsibility they shoved on somebody else, all of them know. So, it's likely that their fear of how others would perceive them made it all the more convenient to make sure the deadbolt was set.

Between the fear and uncertainty of how the outside world might react and the unsettling idea of who might be interested in coming in, the disciples sit huddled – behind locked doors. Suddenly, all the stirring slowed and the whispers trickled down quickly to silence. A familiar voice was coming from the center of the room.

JESUS SHOW UP

20:19b-23: You might assume that it would be nothing but relief when the text tells us Jesus is suddenly standing among them. But some of the fear might even be aimed at Jesus himself. After all, if he *was* alive, as those women kept insisting, he probably has a thing or two to say about the way they had all abandoned him. Guilt and shame at their failure might have given some of the disciples a reason to fear rebuke from the teacher they had promised to follow, *no matter what*.

But none of their mistakes or problems, none of their safe walls or locked doors, none of it is enough to keep Jesus from coming in. It's what he does. Jesus shows up in the places where we'd rather be left alone and refuses to let sin and death have the last word. Jesus shows up in every place we'd rather divide up the world, in every place where we quite like the walls we've made, in all the ways we're more comfortable with a segmented or polarized society and he offers a different word, a better way.

Twice he greets them with this pronouncement of peace, echoing his own words in John 14:27

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

20:21 - “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

And as he says this he breathes on them and invites them to receive the holy spirit.

TAKE A BREATH

In midst of all this, their fear turns to rejoicing. “Before they saw him, all they had been able to see was the end of them. That locked up house was the end of the line for them, the end of the vision they had walked away from all other visions of their lives to serve. They had the breath knocked out of them, the life. They could not remember how to breathe.”¹

You know what it’s like to struggle for breath? You’ve come from under the water and gasped for air or had the wind punched out of your stomach. Jesus knows that before they can hear or do anything else they need to breathe. The one who first created order out of chaos, now breathes peace into the chaos of their locked upper room, hope into their world of uncertainty. The words for ‘wind’, and ‘breath’, and ‘spirit’ in Scripture are the same (and that is true in both the Hebrew and the Greek).

The Scriptures teach us that God breathes over the waters and the universe takes form; God proclaims to a valley of bones through the prophet in Ezekiel 37:5:

“I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.”

the Psalmist proclaims, “Let everything that breathes praise God.” (Psalm 150:6)

Just as God breathed his breathe, the breathe of life, into the dust of the earth and humankind comes to life, Jesus breathes and new life fills the room.

John makes a point to remind us several times in chapter 20 that this is the first day of the week, the first day of something new. The resurrected Jesus is announcing to the world the beginning of a new creation, a new wind through which he intends to recreate the world.

And Thomas wasn’t there.

Maybe he was out comforting or helping others, or looking for supplies for the other disciples, or dealing with illness, or an emergency at home that demanded his attention. Some assume that he had lost faith entirely, but he’s back with them soon enough so that’s probably not the case. Wherever he is, he’s definitely in distress.

I like to picture the disciples arguing over who has go pick up the dinner for them all, and Thomas draws the short straw. Having said that, can we all agree that Thomas picked an unfortunate time to go out for pizza?

DOUBT?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Take A Breath,” Duke University Chapel (April 23, 2017)

And the disciples try to fill him in, but he isn't having it. The traditional reading of this text faults him for this, but is he really asking for anything more than what the other disciples have experienced? In the usual interpretation of the story, his problem was that he needed tangible proof that God had actually raised Jesus from the dead. He's seen as the holdout, the guy who wouldn't take anyone else's word for anything. He wanted the evidence for himself and without that, Thomas said, he would not believe.

Roy "Wrong Way" Riegel

On January 1, 1929, the Golden Bears faced the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, USA. Midway through the second quarter, Roy Riegels find himself the fumble of a lifetime. He scooped it up off the ground, just 30 yards away from the Yellow Jackets' end zone. But after bouncing off a few palyers and loosing his bearing, Riegels ended up running 69 yards in the wrong direction. In his own words:

I was running toward the sidelines when I picked up the ball," Riegels told The Associated Press. "I started to turn to my left toward Tech's goal. Somebody shoved me and I bounded right off into a tackler. In pivoting to get away from him, I completely lost my bearings."²

His quarterback, known for his speed, finally caught up with Riegels at California's 3-yard line and tried to turn him around, but he the pile of players behind them landed them tackled on the 1 yard line. The Bears would be forced to punt, Tech blocked the punt, and the result is a 2 point safety, the difference in this game between winning and losing.

His wrong-way run in the 1929 Rose Bowl is often cited as the worst blunder in the history of college football. According to one article, there were approximately 4,500 stories totaling an estimated 250,000 column inches written about Riegels' wrong way run in newspapers across the United States.³

The unfortunate thing is that Roy Riegels was the captain of that team and that season he was named an NCAA All American. Cal's coach Nibs Price gave credit to Riegels as the smartest player he ever coached. But one blunder, and he'll forever be known as Wrong Way Roy.

For centuries Thomas hasn't been able shake the nickname he gets for supposedly being a skeptic. He makes one demand, and his whole identity is marked with the word Doubter, as if that was such an uncommon thing. As if none of the other disciples had doubts? As if we haven't had our own questions?

But listen to what he says, what he wants: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands," Thomas says, "and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not

² Richard Goldstein, "Revisiting Wrong Way Riegels" (Dec. 25, 2003), *The New York Times*

³ Ron Fimrite, "Nowhere To Hide" (Oct. 15, 1990), sportsillustrated.com

believe.” It’s the wounds he wants to see, not just the face. He wants to touch the places where the Jesus he knew so well was hurt, where the spear went into his side even after he was dead. Is he having problems believing that Jesus is risen or is he wanting to know something else? He doesn’t argue with the disciples about whether or not they’ve seen him. He doesn’t directly dispute that he’s risen. What he wants to see are the wounds.

But he wasn’t there. He’ll have to sit in the middle of those questions for days, the longest days of his life. I bet the other disciples came and went, took care of a few family needs, daily tasks. Not Thomas – I bet he was glued to a chair in that upper room thinking “there’s no way I’m missing it if it happens again!”

ONE WEEK LATER

20:26 – One week later, and John sets the scene almost identically, except of course, that Thomas is with them. Thomas gets a tough reputation from this story, but the 10 disciples who have already seen and been sent by Jesus are right where he left them. Their safe walls are still there and the door is still locked. After all that commotion and rejoicing, it seems like a week later not much has changed. It’s a real temptation, isn’t it? We can pack the place out and rejoice about what God accomplished, but we all get uncomfortable when we have to face what that will require of us. You can still hear Jesus’ words lingering in the locked room: “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” “As the Father..” is easy to hear, but we struggle with the “so I send you” part.

“AS-SO” LIVING

Miroslav Volf says that “Christian practices have what we may call an as-so structure...: As God has received us in Christ, so we are to receive our fellow human beings [...] We must say: As Christ, so we.”⁴

If the world knew of Jesus’ sending only by what it looks like when we are sent by him, how would they understand Jesus? Would they see sent disciples who live out a full gospel?

As the father is compassionate, so you must be compassionate.

As you have been forgiven, so must you forgive. Paul joins in saying the same:

“As God has called each, so let each walk.” (1 Cor. 7:17)

“As Christ was raised from the dead, so we might also live anew.” (Roman 6:4)

“As Christ accepted us, so we should accept one another.” (Rom. 15:7)

“As you received Christ Jesus as Lord, so walk in him.” (Col. 2:6)

“As we have worn the likeness of the man made of dust, so we shall wear the likeness of the heavenly man.” (1 Cor. 15:49)⁵

“As the father has sent me, so I send you.”

One week later, and the as-so structure of imitating Jesus is already breaking down.

⁴ Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (2002), 250.

⁵ Compiled by David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship* (2006), 32.

But Jesus shows up again (the second Sunday night in a row). After greeting them, Jesus addresses Thomas and invites him to carry out the tests he had demanded, to put his finger in the nail prints and his hand in the side. “Do not be unbelieving,” he says, “but believing.” Many translations use the word “doubt” here, and Thomas gets that eternal nickname from it, but it’s literally the negation of faith. Doubt, in English, speaks of questions and uncertainty. Jesus isn’t upset about your questions or curiosity. What he addresses here is unbelief. With his invitation, Jesus shows Thomas not only are his doubts okay, but Jesus isn’t surprised by them. He knows every one of them before he shows up, and he can handle all of yours too.

Some think that Thomas actually touches and inspects Jesus. Since the 5th century, artists have depicted this scene. The most famous, painted by Carvaggio, is titled “The Incredulity of Thomas” and like many readers through the years he portrays the inquisitive Thomas with his finger deeply probing Jesus’ wounds. But John doesn’t say anything about this. In fact, Jesus notes that Thomas believes because he has seen – not because he has touched. He doesn’t even need to carry out the test. The sight of Jesus and his wounds seems to be enough.

So, was his doubt really all about seeing for himself? Or is he looking for something specific? Thomas didn’t just ask for proof that Jesus was alive. He wanted to see the wounds of the risen Jesus. Maybe he needs to see for himself that the risen one is the same one who died—who hasn’t come back all healed up and good as new but bares on his body a story that unmasks the powers of this world for what they are.

He sees the wounds and immediately believes because he’s struck by the reality that this isn’t a shiny new phantom or a fleeting ghost. As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, the one that “God has raised up is the same one who was damaged beyond all human repair. He is looking for evidence that this Messiah knows everything there is to know about the worst kind of breathlessness and will never overlook theirs.”⁶

If this isn’t the same Lord he saw marred beyond recognition, then what is Thomas supposed to believe? That Jesus’ new life in God has nothing to do with his old one? Are the troubles of this world just a passing illusion?

When he sees the marks on Jesus’ body, Thomas cannot help but believe that Jesus’ resurrected life means something for his life, and for every life. He can see that no matter how hurt or scarred we might be, Jesus has new life for that too. He has discovered for himself that there is no amount of sin Jesus cannot overcome and no amount of death that he cannot undo.

Easter isn’t over. God has brought new life into the world and he offers it now to you – and to anyone who would believe. And through you he intends to offer it to the world.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Take A Breath,” Duke University Chapel (April 23, 2017)

His body bares these marks as evidence that the brokenness and despair of you and me and all of creation is never more than the new life of Jesus can handle. Thomas sees and knows, if this Lord can bring life from there, then surely he is God.

20:28 – So Thomas gives us the most adequate confession in all of John's gospel: "My Lord and My God." Jesus receives many titles in the gospel. He's called Rabbi, Messiah, Prophet, King of Israel, Son of God. Mary and the disciples hail him as Lord when he appears after resurrection. But it's Thomas who makes it clear that he can be addressed with the same language that Israel used to address Yahweh. John begins his gospel proclaiming to the reader "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" and now the gospel comes to a close as the disciple rightly affirms: He is God.

Here we sit, one week later. One week after Easter. The candy is on clearance, the decorations can go back in the box. Pack it up and move on. And if things get tough, just retreat back to that useless place where life felt safer and the world was kept at arms reach.

Or, join Thomas today, and every day, in responding to Jesus with the confession he deserves: "My Lord and My God" and hear him responding back to you "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."