

This text is exclusive to John. It is appointed to be read on the First Sunday after Easter in the TLH one-year lectionary. In LW and LSB, it is appointed to be read on the Second Sunday of Easter every year. The focus in preaching tends to be upon Thomas, stuck with the moniker “doubting,” and we maybe need to get away from that parenthetical footnote a little bit.

The Lutherans tend to cite this pericope as their best proof text for Holy Absolution. In that tendency, they are correct. Jesus is here speaking to the Twelve – eleven – and He gives them both power and responsibility to forgive sins, or not. That has been passed down through the years and now lies in the hands of those who fill the Apostolic Office.

Some of the Lutherans like to theologically pit the pastor against the people, the Shepherd against the sheep in an adversarial manner. The model is not like that, and it doesn’t work. Such thinking presents itself in several ways, including the question of who can and cannot forgive sins. I have heard the question framed in terms of who has the keys on his belt (in his pocket).

Forgiving sins is not an either/or, nor is it a competition. All Christians can and should forgive sins, like Luther and Jesus say, and I encourage all people to do that. But they don’t have to. Pastors, on the other hand, must. It’s my job to forgive the sins of individual penitents, and it’s my job to stand up there on Sunday morning and absolve the sins of the group, and we do, reliably.

I can work on my car or my mower, or not, but when I take it to the mechanic, he must because it’s his job. Same thing for Absolution, and I know a lot of pastors are criticizing me as we speak for using the word “job” to refer to my job. It’s a Divine Call and the like, but it’s also a job, and people understand the concept of an employee – I am that as well – just doing his job.

So, when a few people want to use the sub-par songbook allowed by somebody twenty years ago, I tell them that my job is to pick the best hymns for Sunday morning, and the best hymns are often found in the Lutheran Service Book, not in the sub-par book. When I admonish or exercise church discipline, nothing person, I’m just doing my job, and who can criticize a guy for doing that.

A lot of Americans are messed up when it comes to the Holy Spirit, and our people hang with those people and may be in need of some education about the work of the Holy Spirit. Americans are very independent and individualistic, and when it comes to their religion, they like to make the choices and they like to be in control and the Holy Spirit may even speak directly to him.

In the NT, the Holy Spirit is always connected to the Church, which is where the Word and Sacraments are located, which is the means by which the Holy Spirit operates. The Holy Spirit never

operates outside of the Church, where the Word and Sacraments are located, and where you find the Church, you find Christians. No Church, no Word, No Sacraments, no Christians.

This, then, is more properly the beginning of the Christian Church than Pentecost, and if you look at the Book of Acts, you will see that when “Holy Spirit” is spoken of, it’s talking about the Church. When the “Holy Spirit” sends this person here, and forbids him go there, it’s not a voice in his head, but the Christian Church doing what the Christian Church does today; sending, or not.

Textual Notes

19. This incident takes place “ὥσπας τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ τῇ μιᾷ σαββάτων – evening, the first day of the week. It was after dark, before bedtime, after the evening meal, the time when people engage in conversation. The word “Sabbath” as it is used here means “week,” as in “the first day of” it. Can you imagine what the after-dinner conversation must have been like.

The hatches were battened down; “καὶ τῶν θυρῶν κεκλεισμένων ὅπου ἦσαν οἱ μαθηταὶ - and the openings were closed and locked where the disciples were.” I’ve been talking about the Historical – Grammatical Method of exegesis lately, the preferred way to study the Bible. To engage in Historical – Grammatical study, you have to know the grammar of the language.

The first book we read for Summer Greek with Dr. Voelz was the *Plain English Handbook*. At the time, I knew that a noun was a person, place, or thing, and that a verb was an “action word,” whatever that meant. I think the idea was that, if you’re going to learn a new language, you need to know about grammar if you’re going to understand what the teacher is saying.

Historical means that you need to know the history of the period you are reading. The NT Bible scholar ought to know a lot about things in the first century, when the NT took place and was written down. Included in that knowledge ought to be things like politics, particularly Roman and Jewish, religion, particularly Jewish and others, social customs, and doors and locks of the day.

Most of the translations correctly have the doors “locked.” The word “θυρῶν” means “opening,” which would include any windows. In those days, after dark you closed all the doors and windows and locked them to keep out intruders. The verb is in the perfect tense, and the openings probably were locked up during the day also “διὰ τὸν φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων – because of the fear of the Jews.”

I found myself talking a lot on Good Friday about how the Jewish religious leaders were responsible for the death of Jesus, and that’s how it had to be; the priests offering up the sacrifice to be killed by Pontius Pilate. Besides that, the movement to make the Romans – who cared not a lick about the religious affairs of the Jews – the movers behind His crucifixion.

Pilate was the reluctant executioner, and Stephen tells his fellow Jews that they were responsible for the crucifixion, and the Jewish man John pulls no punches here; the reason why they were locked down is because they had seen what had happened to Jesus, and they didn’t want the same thing to

happen to them. As events unfold – Epistle – we see that those fears were well-founded.

So we have fearful men engaging in – wouldn't you have liked to have been a fly on the wall – conversation that likely centered on Jesus; His location, His state of being, and probably they talked about some of the things He had said to them. Maybe they were entertaining thoughts of going up to Galilee, like they talked about. Eventually, we know, they did make it up to there.

While they were doing whatever it was they were doing, “ἦλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἔστη εἰς τὸ μέσον, καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς Εἰρήνη ὑμῖν – Jesus came and stood in the middle, and He said to them, ‘Peace to you.’” He comes to them through the walls, and He does not start at the inside wall and walk over to them. Instead, He's not there, and then He's standing there in the middle of the room.

20. He said that, then He showed them His hands – both of them – and His side, and “ἐχάρησαν οὖν οἱ μαθηταὶ ἰδόντες τὸν Κύριον – the disciples rejoiced, seeing the Lord.” That verb “χαίρω” has several cognates, many of which appear often in the NT, and here – when some people come into the room, it's a bad thing. When Jesus comes into the room, it's a very good thing that you're here.

21. Once again, Jesus says “Εἰρήνη ὑμῖν – peace to you,” and then He adds, “καθὼς ἀπέσταλκέν με ὁ Πατήρ, κἀγὼ πέμπω ὑμᾶς – as My Father has sent me, I also send you.” The order of sending; the Father sends the Son, and then the Son sends the Apostles; the Twelve, the Seventy, those who have since then stood in the Apostolic Office, sent to proclaim the Gospel.

The Father's sending of the Son is in the perfect tense; He is sent to say and to do certain things, He has done and said things in the past, and the results of His doing and saying continue into the present and beyond, into the future. The Son's sending of the Apostles is in the present tense; He is currently sending them, and He continues to send them by means of Ordination.

22. After He said that, “ἐνεφύσησεν καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς Λάβετε Πνεῦμα Ἅγιον – He breathed on them and said, ‘receive the Holy Spirit.’” God breathing into Adam the breath of life comes to mind, as does Ezekiel (37:9) calling on breath to come and breathe life into the dry bones. This breathing can also be seen as a precursor to Pentecost, when these same men will be “filled” with the Holy Spirit.

Given that “Πνεῦμα” can mean spirit, breath, or wind, it may be that rather than breathing on them, Jesus breathed into them. What would that look like? It would not look like Jesus doing CPR on each of them. It would look like John using the metaphor of breathing as he tells us that Jesus verbally told them to receive the Holy Spirit.

23. Along with, and connected to the receiving of the Holy Spirit, “ἄν τινων ἀφῆτε τὰς ἁμαρτίας, ἀφένται αὐτοῖς· ἄν τινων κρατῆτε, κεκράτηνται – if any of you should forgive the sins, they are forgiven them. If any of you should retain, they are retained.” Many of the translations connect “τινων – any” to the person sinning, emasculating ordination. The older translations have it right.

There is a lot of conditional language here, but it's really pretty simple; forgiveness of sins comes through the Church, and if not through the Church, then from nowhere. Pastors routinely pronounce the Absolution, most every Sunday, and a lot of them preach the Gospel as well, an exclusively

Christian thing because only the Church has Christ.

24. You can make the case here that Thomas is more courageous than the rest; while they cower behind the locked openings, Thomas was out and about. He was hand-picked by Jesus to be one of the Primary Apostles, he was faithful unto death (martyred in India), he will soon make a fine confession of faith, and his feast day is December 21. What's your feast day?

25. Presumably, Thomas has returned, and the people who had been there to see Jesus proclaim to him, “Εωράκαμεν τὸν Κύριον – we have seen the Lord,” which sounds like a fairly nice confession of faith, including a verb in the Perfect Tense. This particular verb for “to see” indicates the perception of sight; they have seen Jesus with their eyes, and that's where they leave it.

Yet a week later, as we will see, they are still in that same room with the hatches battened down. After that, they will go up to Galilee – I think to return to their previous pre-called-by-Jesus lives. To see Jesus is one thing, and no great shakes; Paul tells us that upwards of five hundred people saw Him post-Resurrection. To fully comprehend the meaning of that will come later, at Pentecost.

As for Thomas, he demands evidence; he wants to see what they had seen while he was not there, and he declares that in the absence of that evidence “οὐ μὴ πιστεύσω – I never believe.” When he says that, he's only asking to see what they had seen, and he's not saying that he isn't a Christian. He's just saying that he won't believe that Jesus is alive until he sees a living Jesus, like them.

26. Jesus comes a second time, and the words “καὶ Θωμᾶς μετ' αὐτῶν – and Thomas with them” indicate that it was for the benefit of Thomas that Jesus makes this second trip into the same place and says the same words. I take this to mean that Jesus agrees with me; the request of Thomas to see what they see is reasonable, and He wants Thomas to see what they saw.

27. Jesus invites Thomas to do exactly what Thomas said he would have to do in order for him to believe that Jesus is alive, “Θωμᾶ Φέρε τὸν δάκτυλόν σου ὧδε καὶ ἴδε τὰς χεῖράς μου – bring your finger here, and see my hands,” which is an interesting combination of mixed perceptions. He then invites him to bring his hand and put his hand into His side.

Having thusly invited Thomas, Jesus invites or commands him to “μὴ γίνου ἄπιστος ἀλλὰ πιστός – not be unbelieving, but believing,” regarding His being alive. The verb is the Present Imperative of “to be” and the words for believing – or not – are adjectives separated by the emphatic “but.” He is to go from a state of not believing to a state of believing, and what can Thomas say to that?

28. The visual evidence he has requested had been produced, and he says to Jesus, “Ο Κύριός μου καὶ ὁ Θεός μου – my Lord and my God,” a proper confession of faith, much stronger than the one made by the eleven in his absence. When they saw what they saw, they proclaimed that they had seen the Lord – which they had – but they attach no theological import or meaning to it.

When Thomas later saw the same thing they saw, he understood that if Jesus was standing before him alive, then every other thing He had ever said about Himself is true. Whereas their statement was an articulation of their perception of sight, his is an articulation of what he believes about Jesus;

that Jesus is “Lord” and that He is “God,” and those two things are a big deal.

29. Can “belief” be a double entendre, as in believing that Jesus is alive and believing in Jesus as God? Jesus says to Thomas, in the hearing of them all, “Ὅτι ἑώρακάς με, πεπίστευκας – because you have seen, you have believed.” Both verbs are in the Perfect Tense, and the clear meaning is that Thomas has seen with his eyes and so he now believes that Jesus is alive.

Just as clearly, when Thomas was in that room, before he had seen Jesus, he already had what we would call “saving faith,” as per his confession of faith. Most clearly, the appearing of Jesus to Thomas had been an affirmation of his Christian faith, much like the miracles were, and much as the Sacraments – seen with our eyes – are affirmations of what we already believe.

He then concludes by talking about everybody other than the five hundred plus who bore witness to the Resurrection, “μακάριοι οἱ μὴ ἰδόντες καὶ πιστεύσαντες – blessed the not having seen but having believed.” Indeed, most of those who have believed in Jesus over the years have not actually seen Him in the flesh, and yet, through Word and Sacrament we have faith, and we believe.

We believe in the miracles, not having seen them, because we have been given faith, and because they have been written down for our benefit. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead for the same reason, and for that same reason we believe that God uses Word and Sacrament to create and maintain faith in all Christians, and in knowing all those things, we are truly blessed.

30. Almost as an afterthought – thought nothing in the Bible is an afterthought – John adds that Jesus did many other “σημεῖα – miracles” and He did them “ἐνώπιον τῶν μαθητῶν – in the sight of the disciples.” The adverb means “in the eye,” the strongest of several words translated “see” for the perception of sight; we might say that they saw these things “with their own eyes.”

The idea that John’s Gospel is not comprehensive should not surprise us. No biography is. From the child’s story of Abe Lincoln to Sandburg’s larger work to the volumes of documents housed at the Lincoln Museum in Springfield – you may recall that I talked to Mary Todd Lincoln down there. She talked like her husband was a Christian, and a fairly devout one at that.

31. The person who wrote what he wrote “γέγραπται ἵνα πιστεύητε – wrote in order that you should believe,” that Jesus is the Christ, and believing that, “ζῶν ἔχητε ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ - you should have life in His name.” The purpose of John’s Gospel is thus stated, and the verbs in the subjunctive mode indicate that not everybody will believe, and not everybody will have eternal life.

It’s an important point because if you ask the guy on the street what’s in the Bible, he will probably tell you that the Bible tells us what to do and not to do. I think it’s one of the reasons why people avoid that book like the plague. To be sure, the Bible tells us what to do and not to do, including what you need to do to be saved, and what you have to do is neither hard nor complicated.

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