

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 on 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. Maybe focus on Jesus.

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, whose primary function is to do that.

When it comes to that, some of the Lutherans like to pit the pastor against the people, the Shepherd against the sheep in an adversarial manner. The model is not like that, and that 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 in fact 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, absolving sins.

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 so they 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 always 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 out, or not.

Textual Notes

19. This incident takes place “ὥσπερ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ τῇ μιᾷ σαββάτων – in the evening, the first day of the week. It was after dark, before bedtime, after the evening meal, the time when people would normally 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 and history.

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 about it.

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 the 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.”

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 current location, state of being, and the meaning of it all. Maybe they were entertaining thoughts of going up to Galilee, like He had talked to them about. Eventually, we know, they did make it up to there. He initially headed that way, by way of Emmaus.

Probably they talked about some of the things that had happened that morning. Peruse the parallel Gospel accounts of Easter Sunday morning, and note the multiple people who made their way to the tomb and found it empty. In addition to that, there were several verbal exchanges between people, including Jesus. There was certainly no shortage of notes to be exchanged, as well as opinions.

Last week, we talked about the conversation Jesus had with Mary near the tomb. Some time after that, Luke places Jesus on the road to Galilee, where He was supposed to reconnoiter with the Apostles. He has that fun conversation with Clopas and The Other Guy, stops off at Emmaus, they recognize Him in the “breaking of bread,” and now John places Him in the Locked Room.

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 right in the middle of the room.

The first thing Jesus says to them is the Hebrew word that assures the hearer that all is right with the world, God is still in control of His creation. It’s the last word people hear from up front before they leave the sanctuary to head back into the World. Given all that’s going on in the World these days, we should probably make an extra effort to assure our respective flocks of that ongoing truth.

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.” The response of the disciples is to what they now see, the resurrected Jesus. The word appears seventy-four times in the NT, and the dictionary definition of the verb “χαίρω” is “I rejoice, am glad; also a salutation: Hail.”

The word has several NT cognates, many of which appear often in the NT, and here, and if you can imagine that a dead colleague, brother, or Lord had been dead, then you get reports that the tomb is empty, but what exactly does that mean, and it’s one thing to see and say that the tomb is empty. But the plaintive cry of Mary from earlier had until this moment gone unanswered and unaddressed.

21. Once again, Jesus says “Εἰρήνη ὑμῖν – peace to you,” and then He adds, “καθὼς ἀπέσταλκέν με ὁ Πατήρ, καὶ γὰρ 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, each in his own turn is 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, and into our time. 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.

The Greek word “Πνεῦμα” can mean spirit, breath, or wind, all of which are necessary for life. To have Jesus with “breath” is to have a living Jesus, who now vivifies them by passing on to them the thing that gives life to the Church, the Holy Spirit, which always works through Word and Sacrament. Talk of the coming of the Holy Spirit ought therefore to be about this, not Pentecost.

Which is not to say that Pentecost is about nothing. The next time we see the Apostles, they are up

in Galilee fishing for fish, not for men. We have no reason to think that they were doing any Word and Sacrament ministry. At Pentecost, they were “filled with the Holy Spirit,” and began to preach the Word, and when converts came, they began to administer the Sacrament (Acts 2:44).

23. Along with, and connected to the receiving of the Holy Spirit, “ἄν τινων ἀφῆτε τὰς ἁμαρτίας, ἀφεόνται 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 the Christ, and with the Christ forgiveness of sins.

24. You can, and I do, make the case here that Thomas is more courageous than the rest; while they cower behind the locked openings, Thomas was out and about. Before this time, 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 is your feast day?

25. A week later, presumably Thomas has returned, and the people who had been there to see Jesus proclaim to him, “Ἐωράκαμεν 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.

A week later, they’re 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. It is not until after they saw Him ascend and went into Jerusalem that they became changed men.

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 they had.

These days, we hear the voice of Jesus in the Word and we see Him with our eyes in the Sacrament. What about all those Christians who make the same demand Thomas makes, but who never see Him in the Sacrament – for that matter don’t hear His voice from the pulpit. Is it any wonder that poorly shepherded sheep eventually grow weary of seeking Jesus, but they don’t find Him at church?

Where else can a Christian expect to find Jesus? If not in church, then where?

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, and He shows him.

27. Though Thomas had spoken in hyperbole, Jesus invites him to do exactly what he 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, “Ὁ 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, then 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 that 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 very big deal.

29. Can “belief” be a double entendre, as in believing that Jesus is alive and believing in Jesus as God? John does like double entendre. Jesus says to Thomas, in the hearing of 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 in this time and place.

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, like He said.

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. All are

edited. 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 this says he “γράφεται ἵνα πιστεύητε – wrote in order that you should believe,” that Jesus is the Christ, and believing that, “ζωὴν 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 therefore 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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Hymns

Easter 2A - John 20:19-31

Analytical Thomas

I'm a theologian. My wife is a scientist and works with other scientists. Scientists are logical, analytical thinkers. Thomas is like the scientist. Thomas is analytical. He wants to see things with his own eyes, not rely on what other people tell him *they* saw, especially when what they're telling him does not seem logical. Jesus was dead. How could he now be alive? We call him *A*doubting Thomas, a moniker that has made into the lexicon of idioms.

Thomas doubts the word of the witnesses, and who wouldn't? But when he sees what he sees with his own eyes, and when his finding is confirmed with another sense (touch), then he is very quick to believe, confessing Jesus to be *A*my Lord and my God. That's a pretty firm confession of faith only a little over a week after the Resurrection!

Does that mean that Thomas is to be commended? Not necessarily. Jesus calls those *A*blessed who have *not* seen and yet believed, a description that included nobody in the room at that time, but that does include every Christian today. It's easy to preach a piling-on-Thomas sermon, one that will likely allow people to go home with a warm feeling because at least they're not as bad as *A*Doubting Thomas. Pastors who preach sermons like that ought not to be surprised to find that they are tending to a flock of Pharisees.

The typical sermon on this text will spend a lot of time talking about the sin of Thomas, who is not even in the building. If the application is made to the sinners who are in the building, it's usually something like *A*we, like Thomas, often doubt... I would suggest that we don't spend a whole lot

of time talking about the guy who is not in the building, and more time talking to the people who are in the building. And we all know about Thomas anyway.

As always, it's a good idea to review the chronology here and set the scene.

The Apostles come off here as a bunch of sniveling cowards, continuing the posture that they took on Good Friday. They have seen (from afar) what happened to Jesus, their leader, they had not acted nobly, and they were afraid that the same thing was going to happen to them. This has historically often been the case for Christians. The profound thing about Pentecost is that God sent the Holy Spirit onto these same men, and these same cowardly men became bold confessors and proclaimers of the resurrected Christ.

Law/Gospel

Unbelief/Belief - I am school of thought that believes that when it comes to talking about faith, you can and should talk about faith, but not too much, and when you do talk about it you should make it clear that faith is given to the person by God, not because of self. (See Ephesians 2:8 again.) The Gospel is that God, working through Word and Sacrament in the Church, has given and sustains faith. If, as Luther said, faith is the only good work, it needs to be understood that we can't do that good work on our own.

Unforgiven/Forgiven - All people have sinned and are therefore unfit to stand before a Holy God. When sins are forgiven, then we are perfectly fit to stand before the Holy God as holy people (saints.) Go ahead and use the simile of a bank forgiving a loan, an unlikely and unusual thing. (By Aunlikely and unusual@ I mean it never happens.)

Locked/Unlocked - The door to the Kingdom of heaven is locked because of sin. It gets unlocked when sin is forgiven. You can talk about the Office of the Keys and Confession. You can use a door and window simile. You can talk about excommunication and reinstatement. People like to understand what that's all about, and many of them don't.

Confession/Absolution - It ought to be the easiest thing in the world for Christians to confess their sins before God and each other. Easy because they know that end, that absolution will follow the confession. The Lutherans believe that the fundamental work of the pastor is to absolve sins. They also believe that absolution is not limited to pastors. Go ahead and absolve one another! Work in private confession any time you get the chance.

Turmoil/Peace - What turmoil the disciples must have been in, given the recent events. The word

APeace@ assures them that God is in control of His World. Christians often feel like the world in which we dwell is in turmoil, because it is, and need to be assured that God is in control of this life and especially of the next.

Textual Notes

John is very adamant about the fact that the doors and windows were closed and locked. (The word seems to mean both.) He gives the very believable reason; the disciples were scared of their fellow Jews, who had just seen to Jesus= execution. They were tied in to Jesus, so they believed that they were in danger of the same. The word translated Ashut@ is in the perfect tense. Some translation say Ashut and locked,@ which is more emphatic.

A life-long member of the LCMS, my first inclination to think that Lutheranism may actually be biblical occurred freshman year at CURF (now CUC). I was reading the Book of Concord, the Bible, and a lot of other things (including the occasional text book). One day, for reasons not remembered, I looked at John Calvin=s commentary on this text. Calvin has Jesus entering the room by climbing in the window. The picture of Jesus as cat burglar did not square with the Jesus that I knew, and I looked further. The thing is, John Calvin=s Jesus cannot just walk through the wall, like the Jesus in the Bible just walks through the wall.

Luther=s Jesus, the Jesus of the Bible, has no problem walking through this wall, or slipping through the hometown crowd that wants to throw Him off a cliff, or sitting at the right hand of God but still being Areally present@ in church all over the world in the Sacrament of the Altar. Luther=s Great Confession (1529) is some of his best stuff, as he himself acknowledged. This section offers a great opportunity to talk about the person of Jesus and *why* the Church has always regarded this as an important doctrine. Only a divine/human Jesus could save mankind.

The Baby Boomers especially have to be told why these teachings are important.

AShalom@ Not Awhat were you thinking@ or Awhere were you?@ or Ayou=re all going to hell - extra crispy!@ Shalom. Peace. It=s the opposite of turmoil or chaos, which is what the world looked like

to them right about now. The word that assures the believer that, in spite of what it looks like to you, everything is right and God is still in control. It's the word that the OT priest proclaimed to the OT worshiper. It's the last word in the ear of the parishioner hears he leaves the sanctuary of Word and Sacrament and enters once more into a world that seems to be going increasingly crazy.

Note here, in a continuation of my earlier Thomas rant, that the disciples saw Jesus, who proclaimed words of Gospel, who then showed them his hands and his side, and then they were happy to see Him. They would appear not to have been any more believing than Thomas until they saw the hands and side. There's plenty of blame to go around...

Again, Jesus repeats *Ashalom*,⁶ and then talks about sending. The line of authority goes from the Father to the Son, who is in forty short days going to depart the scene, to the disciples. Who will speak for God when the Son is gone? The Church. We have talked before about how this comes off in the context of America. What? Do you Lutheran pastors think you speak for God? And this from the parishioners! We respond in the affirmative. To do otherwise is to admit that we are only speaking opinions, ours or somebody else's.

Jesus then elaborates on exactly what kind of authority He's giving them and how they are supposed to use it. He *Abreathes*⁷ on them and they receive the life-giving Holy Spirit. This verse teaches Holy Absolution, which the Confessions sometime refer to as a third sacrament.

Unfortunately for him, Thomas had run down to the mini-mart to pick up a pack of smokes and missed all the excitement. In what I think will be the final installment of my Thomas rant, one could make the case that Thomas is the only one who was able to screw up enough courage to leave the room. Maybe we could start calling him *ACourageous Thomas*.⁸ When the others told him what they had seen and what he had missed, he didn't believe them. Note here that throughout this pericope the word for *Aseeing*⁹ is the Greek word used to indicate the act of physically seeing, perceiving with the eyes.

Not to worry. Jesus comes back and reenacts the scene for him, walking through the walls, proclaiming *APeace*,¹⁰ invites Thomas to touch as well as see, and encourages him to cease his unbelief and start believing. Note that *Abelief*¹¹ and *Aunbelief*¹² are the same root except that *Aunbelief*¹² has the negator. Note also the emphatic, not the typical *Abut*.¹³ These things serve to emphasize the stark contrast between these two opposites. As Luther noted, the only sin is unbelief and the only good work is faith. (It might be a good idea to explain to your people that faith, belief, and trust are all the same word, especially if you're using them interchangeably, like I have been.)

Thomas The Confessor makes his confession of faith.

Jesus calls them *Ablessed*¹⁴ who believe without seeing Him with their eyes. The reference is at least to the children and possibly to the adults. I say *Apossibly*¹⁵ because we see Jesus in the host and cup, but that's different from Jesus being in the room and talking to us. In *Nunc Dimitis*, strategically placed after the Sacrament, we say with Simeon that we have seen Jesus.

The last two verses of this and the last verse of the next chapter give us a peek into the mind of John

as he writes. We note that we don't know all that Jesus did or said, and that all the books in the world could not hold that information. We also know that the purpose of his writing is so that people know who Jesus is and what He has done, and knowing those things they will come to believe in Him and be saved. Most people think that the contents of the Bible is mostly stuff telling them what to do and not to do. Americans don't like to be told what to do, so they avoid the book. There are the ten commandments and the like, but the message of the book is Gospel, and there's a lot of Gospel in it. The Law convicts, and the Gospel saves.

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