

1 Sermon, May 6, 2012

Texts: John 20:19-29

Title: "Easter Renewal: Thomas"

1. We normally look at the encounter between Thomas and Jesus
2. What is hidden is what happened in that week between
3. What held them together? What holds us together?
4. Community transforms by asking questions -- together
5. Community transforms through love
6. Community transforms through common work
7. Community transforms through ritual

1. We normally look at the encounter between Thomas and Jesus

Today's Gospel reading is about Jesus appearing to the Disciples, breathing on them so they will receive the Holy Spirit, and then coming back again and appearing to Thomas, seemingly just for Thomas' benefit.

The usual sermon on this section of the gospel would talk about the relationship between Jesus and Thomas in that encounter.

2. What is hidden is what happened in that week between

Today, instead, I'd like us to think about what happened in that week in between the two appearances. -- Because something remarkable happened.

Given the traumatic, puzzling and genuinely bizarre things that had happened to them, it would have been natural for those twelve disciples to disperse. Many of them were native to Galilee, and it would have been natural for them to go home to familiar places and sort it all out.

There had been disagreements among them, tensions among them, so without the physical presence of Jesus, you'd think the group would fall apart.

But it didn't. They stuck by each other. They had become true community for each other. They didn't run back to their extended families, because they had come to have a bond stronger than family.

That's the unspoken miracle after the resurrection: the survival of (and maybe even renewal of) community. Somehow they understood that they ought to stay together; they understood that Jesus would want it that way; they understood that the Holy Spirit was a gift to them as a community -- the Spirit would not work if they were separated.

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3. Transformation

The disciples were transformed by the resurrection of Jesus, but part of that transformation was because they stuck together. The transformation would not have happened if they were alone.

4. Community transforms by asking questions – together

I think of Thomas, absent for the first appearance of Jesus, asking question after question about what had happened. I imagine Thomas with a healthy skepticism that helped the others to describe and explain what had happened so that it became clearer in their minds. Thomas might have asked:

What happened when Jesus breathed on you?

How do you know for sure?

Show me, because I'm not sure I'm ready to believe it.

Where exactly were you when this happened? Were you doing anything special?

Does this have anything to do with the parable Jesus told us about the kingdom of God being like a mustard seed? Is this experience making us stronger?

Did Jesus say anything about what we should do?

You can imagine Thomas asking questions that clarified and reinforced their sense of belonging, their desire to make sense of things.

It probably got irritating. It probably gave them practice with forgiveness.

I think that Christian community still transforms us through questions.

How do we follow Jesus together?

How do we know about heaven?

Is it more important to feed the hungry or to pray?

How does intercessory prayer work?

Max Lucado wrote:

Questions can make hermits out of us, driving us into hiding. Yet the cave has no answers. Christ distributes courage through community; he dissipates doubts through fellowship. He never deposits all knowledge in one person but distributes pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to many. When you interlock your understanding with mine, and we share our discoveries, when we mix, mingle, confess and pray, Christ speaks.

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Max Lucado, *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear* (Thomas Nelson, 2009), p. 144; submitted by Bill White, Paramount, California

5. Community transforms through love

Questions do have transforming power, and I'm sure that many questions worked on the community of the disciples in between those two appearances of Jesus.

But questions certainly weren't enough. They had to be held together by some kind of glue, or else the friction would push them away from each other.

That glue, I believe, is what we commonly call love.

Tertullian wrote around AD 198 that the Christians were known for love:

"Look", they say, "how they love each other"... "See, how ready they are to die for one another" ...
Tertullian, *Apology* 39, 40, AD 198

The love of those early Christians was far from perfect, but as Michael Green wrote, it was

. . . nevertheless sufficiently different and impressive to attract notice, to invite curiosity, and to inspire discipleship in an age that was as pleasure-conscious, as materialistic and as devoid of serious purpose as our own.

Paganism saw in Early Christianity a quality of living, and supremely of dying, which could not be found elsewhere."
Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, 1991) p. 275

6. Community transforms through common work

Christian Community is transforming: through questions, and through love, but also through common work. In today's Gospel reading, their common work was figuring out what they should do. But later, their work would set the world on fire.

I think that our Free Community meal has been transforming. Even though we had few people attending beyond our congregation for the first seven months, there was always a sense of higher purpose to it.

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There was a sense of working together to offer a free gift to the community, It was not to benefit us, but to benefit anyone who had a need.

A week and a half ago, the meal bore fruit in a new way, when we had a lot more people not from our church attending. But all along there was a sense of joy about it, a sense of being part of something greater than ourselves.

7. Community transforms through ritual

Community is transforming.

We celebrate that today through Holy Communion.

In Holy Communion, we remember that Christ is in us, that we are his body. We are much more together than we could ever be apart. In fact, we're a new creation together.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer."

The words "communion" and "community" have a common root. That root is togetherness.

In the simple act of eating a little bread and drinking a little juice, we remember that we are connected together by a bond of love greater than we can express.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

19 The disciples were afraid of the Jewish leaders, and on the evening of that same Sunday they locked themselves in a room. Suddenly, Jesus appeared in the middle of the group. He greeted them **20** and showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they became very happy.

21 After Jesus had greeted them again, he said, "I am sending you, just as the Father has sent me." **22** Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive anyone's sins, they will be forgiven. But if you don't forgive their sins, they will not be forgiven."

24 Although Thomas the Twin was one of the twelve disciples, he wasn't with the others when Jesus appeared to them. **25** So they told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

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But Thomas said, "First, I must see the nail scars in his hands and touch them with my finger. I must put my hand where the spear went into his side. I won't believe unless I do this!"

26 A week later the disciples were together again. This time, Thomas was with them. Jesus came in while the doors were still locked and stood in the middle of the group. He greeted his disciples **27** and said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and look at my hands! Put your hand into my side. Stop doubting and have faith!"

28 Thomas replied, "You are my Lord and my God!"

29 Jesus said, "Thomas, do you have faith because you have seen me? The people who have faith in me without seeing me are the ones who are really blessed!" (John 20:19-29, CEV)

19-20 Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he showed them his hands and side.

20-21 The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were exuberant. Jesus repeated his greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you."

22-23 Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

24-25 But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master."

But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

26 Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."

27 Then he focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe."

28 Thomas said, "My Master! My God!"

29 Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing." (John 20:19-29, Message)

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". . . the Lord does not look so much at the magnitude of anything we do as at the love with which we do it. If we accomplish what we can [now], His Majesty will see to it that we become able to do more each day."

Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle