

Easter 2, Year A
John 20:19-31
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In the Sherlock Holmes story *Silver Blaze* Holmes cracks the case by noting “the curious incident of the dog in the night.” Watson pointed out that the dog did nothing in the night, whereupon Holmes replied “That was the curious incident.” I have the same feeling about our story from John’s Gospel for today. There is something in this passage that didn’t happen that has always struck me as significant. I want to share it this morning not because I know it is right or because I am certain that John intended it, but because it speaks to the way life goes a certain amount of the time.

When Jesus meets the disciples the first time when Thomas is not there it is the evening of the day of the Resurrection, quite a different story, by the way than the other gospels tell. There he first satisfies them that he really is the one who was crucified, and then he commissions them by breathing on them and saying: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” A week later when he appeared to them again - Thomas among them this time - he assures Thomas that he truly is the crucified one in very much the same way he had convinced the other disciples a week before, but he does not specifically commission Thomas as he had the others. There is here no giving of the Holy Spirit

specifically to Thomas, even though Thomas is so moved by what he has witnessed that he confesses Jesus as “ My Lord and my God.”

That strikes me as curious. For the only explanation for this notable omission is either poor writing – and John was not a poor writer at all – or that Thomas did not get the Holy Spirit since he wasn’t in on the one chance he had for it, or that Jesus gave the Holy Spirit not just to a bunch of individuals, but to the entire community all at once, those present as well as those absent, women as well as men. Of those two reasonable and possible explanations only the second one makes any sense at all, and that is how the church has always interpreted the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is something given as gift to the entire church, and we receive that gift ourselves in Baptism when we become part of the church. So it is the church - the entire body - that has the gift of the Spirit, and not just some specific named individuals within it. That is true not just now, but then as well.

What this means is that the only difference between Thomas and the others is not that he doubted and they didn’t, since all required and were offered the same proofs of resurrection, or that they had the Spirit and he didn’t. The only difference between Thomas and the other disciples was that they knew they had the Spirit, they knew they were part of the life of the risen Christ, and he didn’t know it yet, for he had not come to an awareness of what he already possessed by virtue of his membership in the community.

What is remarkable about that is how common it is. Very often all of us live as though we were powerless, as though we did not have the gifts that being

part of the risen body of Christ gives us. Think for a moment about the very issue raised in the story itself, that of forgiveness. I have felt in myself, and certainly seen it in others that at times we can't forgive. It isn't that we won't forgive, or choose not to forgive, it is a feeling of powerlessness, of truly believing that we can't forgive unless the one who has done wrong acknowledges the sin and asks for forgiveness. As a result we who feel powerless in this way from time to time end up carrying around a load of bitterness and resentment the stems from hanging onto the damage that has been done because we don't believe we have a choice in the matter.

That happens because we don't realize that what we need is not something to added from the outside that will free us to forgive, but rather what we need is to realize that we already are free to forgive, that we have that power right now, and the only thing necessary is to realize it. For forgiveness does not mean that we must open ourselves to abuse again, nor does it mean that we arrange to pretend that nothing bad really happened. Indeed, forgiveness requires that we first understand fully the extent to which we have been hurt, and then decide to let it go so that we might be free from the results of what others have done. To be unable to forgive is to give those who have hurt us tremendous power to bind us in the hurts we have suffered, and we don't need to do that. We already have the power to free ourselves, we do not have to define ourselves by what has hurt us, but sometimes, like Thomas, we don't realize what we already have.

As a preacher I have long been really used to making public statements that didn't really make any difference to anyone. They might be well written, and well presented, and so forth, but in the end they don't change anything, or anything much. So it was quite amazing to me several years ago to discover that what I said did make a difference to at least a few people. The particular instance I am thinking of was of a negative sort, what I said felt hurtful, but nevertheless I found the whole thing very remarkable that because of my place in the Body of Christ, because of the gift given to me, I did have this capacity to make a difference for good as for ill. It wasn't that over time I developed this, it was that I had always had that ability, but it took a painful moment for me to wake up to it, to realize that this was the case with me, and therefore to begin to be much more careful, much more deliberate in the way I presented my public statements because I became more aware of this gift that was already mine. I still say things that people don't like, but I now do it with a greater sense of awareness of the position I have, and the consequent need to be careful with how I couch things, and the freedom I must give to people to understand life and God differently than I.

I suspect very strongly that each of us could look at our lives and discover many points where we have power and gifts that we just don't know we have, and so consequently underestimate ourselves in ways that really limit us. In this sense we are all like Thomas; we all live in some ways unaware of the gifts we have, and therefore unable to live as fully as we might. I believe it also true that

simply by virtue of our membership in Christ's body we have gifts as well that sometimes we are not aware of. Just as one brief example, as members of the church we know, at least in our heads, that we are defined by God, and God's love for us. There is no other indicator of our true and real value that in the end really matters. Yet, so often we live as though we either didn't believe that or didn't know it. We live as though we were defined by other people's attitudes towards us, or by our job or social status. These things matter, I am not saying they don't, though I am saying that probably they shouldn't. But try to imagine for just a moment what your life would be like if you really believed, and lived in the power of the belief that what makes you matter in this world is that you are loved and accepted by God, and because of that you deserve to be treated with the same dignity and respect as all other children of God, and moreover you need to treat yourself with the same dignity and respect as all other children of God. Think of the power implied in that, think of the difference that could make in your attitude towards yourself and all other people. Now realize that it is true, and the real issue is not what if that were the case, but can you wake up to the truth that it is the case. Everyone here already has that gift, the gift of being loved and accepted by God. You have that gift now, you are part of that life of God now. Do you know it? Do you live as though it were true? The example Thomas gives us is therefore both important and instructive. He reminds us of ourselves, at least some of the time, and therefore shows us what can happen in our own lives when we wake up to the life that is already ours.