

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “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.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

1 John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Have you ever had your friends or your family see a movie or beautiful place, but you didn't? When they get back, and they are raving about how wonderful it was, you find yourself listening, and evaluating. It's not that you don't believe your friends and family. But you don't have your own experience to compare with theirs. You're trying to sort out what's real and what's hype, what is meaningful only to your friend and what would be meaningful to you. For you to really talk about it, you need to have your own experience.

That's how I hear Thomas talking in our Gospel reading this morning. On one level, of course he knows that he ought to believe his friends. He knows that he ought to believe that this amazing thing is true, that God has raised Jesus from the dead. On another level, a more gut level, he's trying to figure out, is this real, or this hype.

When people meet Jesus, they need to have their own genuine experience with him. Nathaniel asks, way back in John 1, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" All Phillip can say is, "Come and see." Nathaniel will have to encounter Jesus and draw his own conclusions. Within three verses, Nathaniel is saying, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"<sup>1</sup>

The Samaritan woman at the well talks with Jesus and says to her neighbors, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" John says that many of them believed in Jesus based on what she said, and others because they heard Jesus themselves. The story ends with some of the woman's neighbors saying to her, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:46-51.

<sup>2</sup> John 4:1-42

On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene tells the disciples, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Peter and the other disciple do not sit there and argue with Mary. They do not tell her that it couldn’t be. They run to the tomb to see for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Mary herself does not believe, until she has not only seen the risen Christ, but he calls her by name. Before that, she assumes that this strange man must be the gardener. She has to have that personal experience of seeing Jesus, hearing his voice.

That first Easter Sunday evening, all the other disciples get the experience of seeing Jesus. He shows them the holes in his hands and his feet, demonstrating once and for all that he is the same Jesus who was crucified.

Where’s Thomas? We don’t know, which means it doesn’t really matter. The ones who were there are ecstatic. They tell Thomas the same thing that Mary had previously told them, “We have seen the Lord.”

Thomas refuses to be shamed into believing something he has not seen. He refuses to give in to peer pressure. He says to his friends that he wants to have the same personal experience with the risen Christ that they have had. Scripture records no objection, no one telling him that what he wants is unreasonable.

A week later, so, today in the liturgical calendar, one week after Easter, Thomas is with the other disciples. Jesus comes in, greets everyone, and then goes straight to Thomas. He knows what Thomas wants, and he gives it to him. He gives Thomas the personal experience of seeing for himself that it really is Jesus, and that he is risen from the dead.

Thomas’ response is simple, “My Lord and my God!”

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<sup>3</sup> John 20:1-18.

I'll come back to Thomas, but first we have to fix a mistranslation, I'm afraid. John 20:23 is usually translated, "If you forgive the sins of any [people], they are forgiven them. If you retain [the sins] of any, they are retained." Almost all the translations I can find say that, or words to that effect, going back to and including the Latin Vulgate in the fourth century A.D.<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther is an exception – he went back the original Greek. Fortunately, that's not what it really says in the original Greek in which John wrote the Gospel.

It is a very convenient translation for the Church, you must admit, as it would seem to indicate that the Church has the power to decide not to forgive certain sins, and that is that. God does not forgive those sins. That person becomes an exception to the rule that confession and repentance and absolution are absolute. At least until the Church changes its mind.

This individual person cannot have a clean slate, no matter how repentant they are or, I suppose, even what Jesus wants. For the people who run the Church or speak for it, this is a lot of power. This is eternal power. And this piece of Scripture has been interpreted this way many times over the centuries. But that is not what it says.

Thank God, the Church does not have this kind of power. Last time I checked, the Church consisted of the same kind of flawed human beings you find out there, on both sides of the communion table.

My wonderful wife Lisa has cautioned me not make this too technical, for which you should thank her, but what this verse actually says is more like, "If you forgive the sins of any

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<sup>4</sup> The 1545 *Luther Bibel* is more literal: "*Welchen ihr die Sünden erlasset, denen sind sie erlassen; und welchen ihr sie behaltet, denen sind sie behalten*". Or, "Whose sins are forgiven, they are forgiven them; and those you keep them, they are kept." Likewise, Young's Literal Translation in English keeps the ambiguity, but without addressing the grammar.

[people], they, the sins, are forgiven them. If you hold on to any [people], they, the people, are held.” It’s not the sins that are being retained here; it’s the people.<sup>5</sup>

What we have with Thomas is a wonderful example of this. “If you hold on to someone, they are held.” Jesus appears to Thomas, holding on to him through doubt to faith.

Just like Jesus holds on to Nathanael, whose first reaction to Jesus was to deny categorically that anything good could even come from Nazareth. The application of that story to our own regional and ethnic biases I leave to you.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus holds on to him anyway and shows him that he is the Christ. Nathanael follows Christ the rest of his life, from that day on. He goes on to help found the Church in Armenia, in what is now Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus holds on to the Samaritan woman at the well. This woman was a heretic and a hereditary enemy of God’s people the Jews. On top of that, she seemed to live a cursed life: she had had five husbands. Even if that was through no fault of her own, surely, she was doing something wrong. But Jesus talks with her. Jesus sees everything that there is to know about her, and holds on to her anyway. Jesus makes this woman, whose name we don’t even know, the first missionary to non-Jews in the whole New Testament.

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<sup>5</sup> The word for sins is feminine; what is being retained is masculine. “The people” is the clearest available antecedent for the pronoun. The mistranslation could conceivably have originally been accidental, but it is not a triviality. See Sandra Schneiders, “The Lamb of God and Forgiveness of Sin(s) in the Fourth Gospel,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011):27 and Mary Hinkle Shore, “Commentary on John 20:19-31,” <http://workingpreacher.org>.

<sup>6</sup> I’ll never forget a sermon by the now-Reverend Keith Leach, who read that question, and, then in a drawl as thick as he could make it, asked, “Can anything good come out’a South Alabama?”

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bartholomew\\_the\\_Apostle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bartholomew_the_Apostle). Yes, I am gliding right over the Nathanael-Bartholomew identification issue. That is not important to this story.

Jesus holds on to Mary Magdalene. He sees this woman whose life is a wreck. He brings seven demons out of her, and he still sees value in her. He holds on to her, even when others do not. Even when they call her names and try to discredit her, Jesus holds on to her, and she holds on to him. She is the first to see him risen, and she is the Apostle to the Apostles, the messenger to the messengers.

Jesus holds on to the disciples who are hiding behind locked doors on Easter evening. They are huddling behind closed doors, hiding from the religious and state authority figures, and afraid that they will be the next to die. Jesus could have written them all off as cowards, useless to him in his mission of changing the world. Instead he goes to them, comforts them, and tells them that the Holy Spirit will come to them, empowering them to do what He called on them to do.

Jesus holds on to Thomas. He comes to him. He gives him what he needs. Jesus walks with Thomas as he goes on to carry the word of God all the way to India, founding the Church known today as the “Saint Thomas Christians.”<sup>8</sup>

So, what does this story mean for us, in Columbus, Ohio, in the twenty-first century?

First, it means that everyone needs to have their own experience with Jesus. God has no grandchildren.<sup>9</sup> Being born into a Christian family and raised in a Christian home don’t make you a Christian. We might wish that we could give other people the benefit of our own experience here, but there is no substitute for personal experience.

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<sup>8</sup> *The apocryphal Acts of Thomas* (c. 180-230); Eusebius of Caesarea (4<sup>th</sup> century) quotes a lost work by Origen (3<sup>rd</sup> century).

<sup>9</sup> This quote has been thrown around so much, I have no idea where it originated. The lack of a citation is because I do not know the origin. That does not affect the fact that it is Truth.

What we can do is to say, like Phillip to his friend Nathaniel, “Come and see.” Let them, like Thomas, see and believe for themselves.

Second, it means that God will hold on to those whom he loves. And we know that God so loved the whole cosmos, that God sent Jesus to save us.<sup>10</sup> God will hold on to all of God’s children, refusing to give up on them.

And so must we.

AMEN.

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<sup>10</sup> John 3:16-17.