

John 20: 19-31 Thomas

Is there anyone here whose favourite Gospel is John? They say it's the most beloved of the Gospels – maybe you've heard me say that it's the one I have the most trouble with. Isn't that interesting? When the Bible Society publishes single gospels for distribution – it's the gospel of John they hand out. That would be a good topic for a discussion sometime.

I read a book lately, that gave me a kind of different perspective. It's called Listening for the Heartbeat of God, - a study in some of the leading historical figures in the tradition of Celtic spirituality. Basically it says that the Gospel of John represents a more intimate experience with Christ than do the other 3. By tradition, it was John the "beloved disciple" who, at the last supper, leaned his head against the breast of Jesus, listening for his heartbeat. (and you know of course that from the beginning, there have been different understandings about who that beloved disciple was....only mentioned in John and never named.)

The book says that John's gospel portrays a different way of being religious; a amore intuitive way, led by the heart, intimate, and guided more my feelings than by logic.

It certainly gave me a different look at this gospel, and I wonder what your own reaction to that is?

I can see that, in some ways, here in our reading for today. First of all, when it comes to physical contact with the body of the Risen Jesus, ....while there are quite a few stories about people SEEING him, and even some that have him saying "don't touch me" – here, in this reading, well...how much more intimate can you get? (read it again)

And then again, think about the stories of Pentecost. The way Luke tells it in Acts is this: (read Acts 2, first few verses) Now compare to today's reading....(read it again) It's a different feel, isn't it? Feeling his breath on them, through them....I can see what the authors of that book meant. Let's talk about that again sometime.

For now though, I want to focus on Thomas.

Try to picture how this must have been: This is the evening of Easter day. They're all in one place..they must have been exhausted. When do you think was the last time they slept? Thursday had been their last meal together, then that scene in the garden, the kangaroo court trial during the night, then the next day, the crucifixion....What was it like for them? Scripture doesn't say where they went, what they did during that time....they fled, it says. Where? Close enough to be watching from a distance? Were some of them together, did they just go off by themselves, and how did they find out what had happened? There is nothing to tell us. All we know is that John at least says that by Easter evening they had all gone to one place, hiding behind locked doors. All except Thomas. And Judas of course.

|Thomas wasn't there.

You know what I think? I think that among them there was a lot of blaming, suspicion, fear....I can't see them all in that room as one big happy family, can you? They were all together, to be sure...but I bet there were lots of sideways glances. Judas had turned Jesus in....they didn't know who else had turned, or might do, ...was Thomas going to come next, leading a band of soldiers as Judas had? They just didn't know. Where was Thomas? And of course they would look at each other, wondering....are YOU a traitor? Are YOU? And thinking too, ashamed, of how they themselves had run when he needed them...

And into that room of guilt and fear and suspicion.....

Appears the Risen Christ. And his first words are....PEACE BE WITH YOU.

I've just been to an event where among other things we talked about the people who once came to church and no longer do so. Who are we to them? What is our role and how can we as a church reach out to them? If we DO reach out to them, for what purpose, and what would our message be?

We would go a long way before we would find a better message than the one Jesus had for them that day. Peace be with you. Two things about this reading from John today helped me think about what we're doing.

The first is this: Thomas reminds me a bit of ....well...of ME. I'll tell you something about myself. When I'm upset, or stressed, grieving, or just plain having a hard time, what I do is..isolate myself. I back off. Keep to myself, either physically or emotionally. And I wallow. It spirals down; for example if I had a hard time at church, then I'd stay away, then because people would want to give me space and not be intrusive, they'd let me do that but I'd say "huh! They don't even care, not one person asked...." and it would just get worse and worse. Do you know what I mean? I wallow. Feel sorry for myself. All by myself. Now: sometimes, it's good to be alone for a while, healthy and important to work it out inside yourself. I understand that. BUT sometimes, it goes too far, it becomes unhealthy, and it's hard to hope, and it's hard to believe. Anything. I think Thomas did that. This was a horrible time for them, and he reacted by backing away. He wasn't there with them that night. He isolated himself. And he wasn't prepared to believe. Maybe he needed to do that, I don't know. But what I do know is that he missed Jesus. And the next time, Thomas WAS with them, and when Jesus appeared, he was there. There's something deep in there. A message for me. Something very deep.

It seems to be a human tendency to, when under stress, to remove ourselves from the very places we need to be. The places of truth and hope – the places we can see and experience the Risen Christ.

Do you do that? I have to keep learning it. Over and over and over. When I'm hurt, when a relationship is strained or broken, ....I need to put myself in the places where I'm most likely to encounter hope. I need to learn not to sulk, not to wallow (I'm a big wallower), not to withdraw. Now...another word for that is cocooning. And as I said, I recognize that's necessary sometimes; to go inside, regroup, gather strength alone.....and of course we all know what happens with cocoons...

But where is the line when you cross over from that into habits of the heart that lead you to despair rather than to hope? I've crossed that line more than once....where is that line?

So what does that have to do with people who used to come to church and now don't?

There are LOTS of people associated with our church who don't come to worship with us any longer. NOW PLEASE BE CLEAR ABOUT THIS. HERE'S WHAT I AM NOT SAYING. I am NOT saying that people can only find life and hope and the Risen Christ here in the church. That's not true...Christ is there in the world, in the places people live and work and we have no monopoly on truth or life. AND YET....we are his Body. This is the place where we tell his story regularly, it is here that we gather with other seekers, other followers, to read and tell and sing his story, to pray and to deliberately open ourselves to the Spirit of the resurrected one. It's here that we gather; that we open ourselves to the energy that only happens when people are together. That gathered energy, that circle energy and power happens when people gather. That's what worship is for. Not to replace individual experience of the holy, not as something better, but to supplement, to encourage, to discipline and inform that experience. Corporate worship is VERY important. It provides a vital part of a healthy spiritual life. The Risen Christ meets us here when we gather. This isn't game playing – this isn't some scheme to fill in time on Sunday mornings....it's world shaking, life-transforming business we're about. Sunday morning worship changes lives – it changes the world. It just does.

And when folks choose not to attend – IS IT POSSIBLE....is it possible that what has happened is like what happened to Thomas? Stuff is going on in their lives (and people as you know, have huge stress in their lives: financial, family, health, all kinds of really hard things to face) and like Thomas, they have withdrawn. Is it because they're scared? Or guilty, or bitter, or hopeless? If so, they need more than anything to hear words of peace. Peace be with you.

Maybe they're just really busy, and this feels like one more thing they have to do. And if that's been their experience of church – something they do out of duty or pressure, or obligation, then no wonder they don't come. And that's something we have to deal with.

It's up to us. Truly it is. In the power of our risen Lord, to go to people and speak a word of peace. And to make this a place of peace – where, when they come, they will hear the words of hope and of peace that can transform them and lift them up and give them courage to face whatever it is they have to face.

That's what we're trying to do

And that's who we're trying to be

To be people who live and speak peace we have to put ourselves in the place to receive it. It's important to find out for yourself where those places are.

Where is it that you enter the presence of resurrection power, and a peace that passes understanding? Find out. Find out for yourself, find where you get peace. Then go there.

In your searching, I will strongly suggest to you what I believe you already know; that among those places is the gathered body of believers and seekers. If you've been away, come home. It's here that we read and sing and seek God's blessing

It's here that we hear the story and encounter the scriptures.

We are the stewards of the mysteries of God

We have a pearl of great price

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The gospel is a gospel of peace. Please, this week – speak words of peace to the people you encounter.  
Go yourself to the places you know bring you that peace

If you have been in a place of loneliness, isolation, pain,

Know that the Risen one breaks through our walls, bidden or unbidden

To speak the words our souls long to hear

There are many many who long to hear it yet. Who will speak peace to them? Will it be you? Let it be so  
– amen.,