



EASTER 1

THE NEW SHOFAR

The Risen Christ is alive and at work in our world

John 20:19-31 - Doubting Thomas

They were hiding because they were afraid

John's accounts of the resurrection and the appearances are presented as a kind of challenge to our faith. For him the details are important only inasmuch as they strengthen our faith living. What we read today is of the disciples locked away in some room in Jerusalem. They are locked up tightly because they are *in fear of the Jews*. Here we have the first of our human realities. When there is a perceived absence of Christ in the daily lives of believers, it is so easy to become overwhelmed by what is happening in us or around us. We lose sight of greater realities. These disciples had allowed present circumstances to strangle the experiences they had of Jesus and to threaten the intimacy of their relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship built up over years.

Jesus today is the Jesus sent by the Father and Raised from the grave

To their surprise, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst. What John leaves unanswered is "how did Jesus get into the room?" However, what he does is reveal that this Jesus in front of them is the same Jesus with whom they had wandered around Jerusalem and Galilee. He was the same – but different. However, John does not try to spell out the differences in any detail. What he does is show them the wounds of his crucifixion and suddenly something is changed in them. He is Risen and that is the only reality they need to accept. It is the gift that transforms everything in their lives, the one reality that forms the foundation for the rest of their lives, their ministries and their missions in the world. Importantly for John's narrative, this Risen Jesus does not end the persecution by the Jews and assure them that there will only be good times ahead for them. What the appearance does guarantee is how their experiences here in this room is a promise of what is to come in the years ahead. The Risen Christ is always with them, and especially present in the midst of darkness and fear. What they find in that room is *joy* and *peace*. The threats are not going to go away. They will still need to cope with those harsh and threatening realities but they will now do so with a new inner power – peace. Christ's Peace. A Peace God alone can give.

The world for disciples is now defined by the Risen Christ

John is also reminding the disciples how their lives are not defined in terms of those who persecute them, who want to put them to death. He understands how easy it is to allow the negative, the painful, the frightening and the immediately threatening to define who we are and to control all we try to do. But for the evangelist, our human existence is now defined by this Risen Jesus who stands in front of them. With them. We are a people of the Resurrection. We are a people with purpose to their lives, a purpose that has its origins in heaven, at God's right hand.

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Either Easter leads us into the world or we misunderstand its meaning

The disciples have received from Jesus the responsibility of bringing to the world the Good News of the forgiveness of sins: anyone coming to faith in Christ as the Redeeming Son of God, has their sins forgiven and are filled with the grace of a whole new life, a transformed way of being fully human. While it is God alone who can forgive sins, the role of the Church, of believing communities and individual believers, is to mediate, to make alive this reality. In giving witness to the joy of our own lives as a *people forgiven*, we are to bring hope to others. This “bringing to the world the Good News” is done by our way of living, speaking and acting. It is not all about preaching on street corners or heading off overseas to take the Gospel to pagan nations. The Easter challenge is to ourselves become the Good News to others, a living presentation of the Living Christ at work wherever human beings gather.

Why do you think John included the story of Doubting Thomas in his Gospel?

This appearance of Jesus to Thomas is found only in John’s Gospel and the language of the narrative makes it clear how it is very much a part of John’s ongoing theological message. If it is only in John’s Gospel, here is a question we should be asking: “why did John include this story”? For the great St John Chrysostom (349-407) it is about revealing to believers the great mercy of God that is on display in the actions of his Son. He notes how Jesus did not need to return to the room and speak to Thomas; nor was Jesus in any way compelled to meet the demands of Thomas. So then, why did he return? For Chrysostom, John is telling this story in order to illuminate the compassion of the Good Shepherd who does not want to lose even a single sheep from his flock. He was not prepared to abandon Thomas to his ignorance and sinful stubbornness. As it was with Thomas, says St John in his commentary on the Gospel, so it is with all believers. Jesus pursues us when we begin to weaken and tire of our commitment to discipleship and will not allow us to wander away from the light. Jesus wants us as a part of his divine saving plan for the world.

Matthew Henry on Thomas: Another great Christian preacher – Matthew Henry (1162-1714) - found encouragement in the way Jesus made his appearances within the setting of the faith community of disciples. It was while Thomas was away going about his own business that Jesus appeared to the others. Then, when in his mercy he decided to reveal himself to Thomas, that appearance too took place within the community of faith. Matthew Henry sees in this a reminder of an earlier promise of Jesus that *wherever two or three gather together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*. It is an encouragement to the local community of the Church. The more they come together as Christians, the more they come into contact with the Living and Risen Christ in their midst. This is not just pointing to liturgical gatherings, or the forming of groups for times of worship. Christ is present in and through every gathering of believers.

Somewhere along the line we need to ask: what is Easter to me?

The danger of Easter is how it can exist in our lives as a re-enactment of a significant event that took place a long time ago, something we celebrate solemnly and joyfully in our churches. What John is doing is offering his Easter narratives that we may understand and act upon the graces that have been released for us in order that we may be empowered for a transformation of our lives.

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