

Reflection John 20:19-31

Where are you abiding these days? I know, I know. In our homes. But really, where are you abiding? In my sweat pants. In my kitchen for three flaming meals a day and don't get used to it. In the Zoom screens and if I need to take one more meeting there, Things are Going to be Said. Where are you abiding? In a vague no man's land between back then when so many things were normal I didn't call them "normal," I just called them "life" and some hazy future that I can't imagine at the moment. I'm abiding in a hand cracking fog of cleaning, cleaning, cleaning. I'm abiding in a sea of worry for my neighbors, for the folks in the nursing home, for my job and financial prospects. I'm abiding in a half-remembered tour of isosceles triangles as I help my kid keep up with her school work. I'm abiding in an unending series of walks with the dog, our time at home being merely an extended pause between tours of the neighborhood and beyond.

For the Gospel of John, where today's reading comes from, believing in Jesus wasn't about agreeing to a list of ideas. Believing in Jesus means you are abiding in Jesus.¹ Believing in Jesus means you are living inside the relationship you have with Jesus. Believing in Jesus means your whole life, three meals a day, Zoom meetings, walks with the dog, cleaning, worrying, all of those activities are anchored in your relationship with Jesus.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus goes to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and almost immediately we hear of the Last Supper and his trial and crucifixion. In the Gospel of John, he goes to Jerusalem and then there are chapters and chapters of his teaching before we hear the stories of Jesus' last week. So it's easy to forget that after Jesus announced he would go to Jerusalem, Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16).

Like the others who had given up their normal lives to follow Jesus, Thomas had a deep relationship with Jesus. Thomas had left behind so much in order to abide with Jesus. In becoming a disciple of Jesus, by building his whole life around that relationship, Thomas has experienced what it means to live with the reality that the reign of God is at hand, that that reality must shape the teaching, healing, and confrontations for justice that flow from it.² Thomas isn't surprised by the Cross.³ There is no way you can abide in the reign of God being at hand

¹ Karoline Lewis, "Commentary on the Gospel: John 20:19-31", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for May 1, 2011, Second Sunday of Easter", https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=198&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 13 April 2020)

²D. Cameron Murchison, "Second Sunday of Easter, Theological Perspective, John 20:19-31" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 398.

³William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 275.



and not expect the Cross. You're just too dangerous for the powers and principalities of this world. Thomas' relationship with Jesus has him not only expecting the Cross, but embracing it as a reality that will end his own life. That's where Thomas is abiding.

When Thomas hears about Jesus standing among the other disciples behind the locked door (John 20:19), I don't think he's asking for anything special, or anything more special than what they experienced. I mean, the Cross he expected. But when the dead won't even stay dead, what can you count on in this world?⁴ So, sure, the appearance of Jesus takes a little processing. But way more importantly, Thomas had a relationship with Jesus, who lived his life proclaiming that the reign of God was at hand and we needed to start living that way. We needed to start acting like we loved God and we loved our neighbors. We needed to act in ways that the political and religious authorities were definitely not going to be happy with.

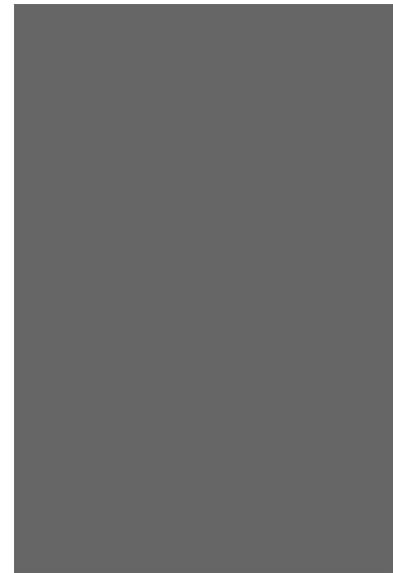
Thomas needs to know that the man who appeared in their midst on that Easter Sunday was really, truly the man they had followed to Jerusalem. Because the power of the Resurrection comes from the reality that the actions you took in life because of your relationship with Jesus continue on to the other side of death. Thomas has to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt that abiding in Jesus in life creates the reality that he will abide in Jesus after death. That nothing, not even death itself, can sever that relationship.

That matters to me too. I know we have 2,000 years between Thomas and us. But if the same guy who was only too human, who wept and ate with outsiders and who made sure there was plenty of wine at a wedding isn't the same guy who offers peace on Easter evening (John 20:19), then I doubt I abide in my relationship with Jesus as deeply.

I know enough about cars not to be bamboozled at the dealership when my car is being serviced. I also know enough about cars to ask someone who's a real expert. I don't need to know why they answer my question the way they do, because I know they have dug in far more deeply than I ever will and that is good enough. So when Thomas says, 1) "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." (John 20:25) and 2) "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28), I'm grateful. Thomas is worried about what I'm worried about: does my relationship with Jesus survive death? And he gets his answer. I don't need to know if he actually saw and touched. He got his answer. And I can rely on his answer for mine.⁵

⁴ Anna Carter Florence, "Second Sunday of Advent," in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 58.

⁵ Murchison, 398.



When Thomas says, "My Lord and my God!", he's claiming, reclaiming, returning to the relationship he has with Jesus. In the Gospel of John, sin is failing to have a relationship with God through Jesus.⁶ In the Gospel of John, being a witness doesn't mean knowing something, it means living your life so others get drawn into relationship with God through your actions.⁷ So when Jesus assures the disciples that if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain

the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:23), he's basically saying, as witnesses, they need to forgive others. And they need to live their lives so that others are brought into relationship with God.

Where are you abiding? Are you forgiving others? Are you living so that others come into relationship with God? [Pause]. I can get so caught up in tending to relationships with others that I neglect to tend my relationship with God. And once that begins to languish, there's no amount of living I can do that can help others come into relationship with God. So wherever you're abiding these days, take some time to figure out how you can say, "My Lord and my God!", how you can emphasize your relationship with the reign of God in this world. Because that is beyond doubt part of living into the reality of the Resurrection.