

John 20:24-31

Another short text for us to deal with this week! (Which means our study will probably go longer than usual... fine by me!) Last week, Jesus came to his disciples and gave them the Greater Commission: to forgive sins. In order to lead them in this mission, Jesus gave them the promised Holy Spirit. (We didn't get into how it could be that the Holy Spirit is given both in John 20 and again in Acts 2, but we can go off on that tangent if you'd like... speak up now.) This week, we will see what happens with the last of the 12, Thomas, who was not in the room when Jesus first appeared to the disciples. Let's get to it!

20:24

We have run into Thomas before. He has made two prior appearances in the Gospel of John. One time back in chapter 11, where Jesus has been alerted to the sickness and then death of Lazarus. Jesus has decided to go to be with Lazarus, even though the Jews from Jerusalem were seeking to stone him. In reply to Jesus' insistence that he go be with Lazarus, Thomas says the ambiguous: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (Does Thomas mean die like he believes Jesus will at the hands of the Jews, or does he mean die like Lazarus has died?) The next time we come across Thomas is in chapter 14. Jesus has just said that the disciples know the way to the place where he is going. Thomas says: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" This question is a lead in to Jesus' memorable statement that: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." So far, Thomas. We know that he is a twin. We know that he is one of the twelve. Other than that, there's not a whole lot of proof-positive statements that can be made about Thomas from his previous appearances.

To cut to the chase, it is very possible that Thomas represents us. And just as Matthew invited you to see yourself as the 12th disciple on the mountain with Jesus when he gave his disciples the Great Commission, John invites you to see yourself in Thomas's shoes. Like Thomas, you were not with Jesus when he breathed on his disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit and the "Greater Commission." What about us? Jesus came to the Twelve, but not to us (at least not in the same way). Have we received the "Greater Commission"? Are we second-class disciples? How Jesus treats Thomas says a lot about how he treats us...

20:25

A lot is made of Thomas's response to the message of the disciples who saw Jesus after his resurrection, but not a lot of attention is paid to what the disciples actually said. Looking at their words, you will see that they say exactly the same thing that Mary Magdalene had said to them after she saw the risen Christ: "I/We have seen the Lord." Several comments about this "Proto-Evangelism":

- It is not argumentative.

- It is not debatable.
- It has as its focus the risen Christ.
- It is positive.
- It is personal.

Now, about Thomas' reply. He says he will not believe ("We have seen the Lord") unless he is both able to SEE and TOUCH the risen Christ. These are two things that you and I are not able to do. If Thomas' criteria for coming to faith is legitimate, then you and I will never be able to believe in him. With this in mind, the story now becomes very personal. IS IT POSSIBLE FOR SOMEONE WHO HAS NOT TOUCHED OR SEEN THE LORD TO BELIEVE IN HIM?

20:26

And so it's another Sunday. Same setting as the last. Only now Thomas is with the others. Once again, the doors are locked. Once again Jesus CAME to his disciples. Once again, he says "Peace to you." Everything is going eerily like it was the previous week. Nothing new is going on.

And now for some tangential thoughts. If the pattern of Christian worship had already been established by the time this gospel is written, it makes sense for the Sunday appearances of Jesus to be mentioned. It's also worth noting that, if everything is the same as it was the previous week, then the same reason(s) for the door being locked would also be in place. Even after seeing the risen Christ the disciples were still afraid of the Jews? Possibly. It's not until Pentecost, and the conversion of 3,000 men and their families that the disciples realize that they are on the winning team.

20:27

And now the story begins to look a little different from the last one. Instead of giving a Greater Commission to Thomas, Jesus addresses him to give him faith. He gives Thomas the opportunity to do what Thomas said he would need to do in order to overcome his unbelief.

Jesus then commands Thomas to stop unbelieving and start believing. And so then the question becomes (following Thomas' confession of Christ in the following passage): was it because he was able to touch and see Jesus that he came to faith, or was it because Jesus commanded him to believe that caused him to come to faith?

20:28

And... Thomas believes.

Notice how there is no record of him ever touching Jesus. Jesus gives him permission, but then commands faith... which is immediately produced. And so, from the text, it is the word of Christ that produces faith in Thomas, not his being able touch Jesus.

So what?

Faith is not something we can set parameters for, or construct tests for. Rather, faith is something given by Christ at his command and pleasure. We do not come to Jesus; he comes to us. We do not negotiate the terms of our faith; Christ compels us to believe.

Lastly, notice the substance of Thomas' confession of faith in Christ. This is the best confession of faith in Christ in the gospel of John. This is what a faith that is created by Christ confesses.

20:29

Getting back to the question raised by 20:25 (is it possible for someone who has not seen the risen Christ to believe in him). Jesus asks Thomas if he believes because he sees. Yes, he does. (He also believes because Jesus commands him to believe.) But is it possible for someone (you) to believe even though you have not seen the risen Christ face-to-face?

Not only is it possible, but those who do believe without seeing are blessed! It sounds like a strange thing to say that those who have never seen Jesus might be more blessed in their faith in him than those who have seen him. Yet this is what it looks like Jesus is saying. The question then is: how are they blessed more than (or in a different way than) those who have seen the risen Christ? It might sound strange, but we are blessed (in some way or ways) more than the apostles themselves! But how?

When it comes to the "main body" of the Gospel of John, this is the end. What follows is the purpose statement of the gospel followed by the epilogue. The main body of the gospel ends with you being told that YOU are blessed!

20:30

We have been limited to 7 signs plus the death and resurrection of Jesus for proof that he is who he says he is. But the author wants us to know that there is more to the story than just these events. We've talked in the past about what knowledge the author assumes his reader has. One question that the texts from the previous couple of lessons have raised is: does the author assume the reader has access to one or more of the synoptic gospels? Maybe he does and maybe he doesn't. But one thing is for certain: the author admits that he has omitted material from his gospel that is of the same significance as the material he included ("signs").

20:31

And here is the purpose statement of the gospel: that we would believe that Jesus is the Christ, that is, the Son of God. The author wants us to believe this because then we will "have life in his name." Life and faith go hand in hand; as do death and unbelief. Why do you think these comparisons are made? (Faith-life... and the opposite: death-unbelief.)

Notice the faith that is stated here is not in what Jesus DID, but who Jesus IS!