

“Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you’.”

That’s incredible.

What I mean is, that moment is both spectacularly magnificent and stunningly inconceivable. For some, the Gospel story is sufficient; they trust what they hear and carry on. For others, the phenomenon is literally not credible, not believable.

But regardless of how they are received, John’s Gospel and the peace that it conveys are given for everyone. Last Easter Sunday, we heard God’s angel announce that Christ has risen. That’s all some folks need to hear. But if you still have questions or uncertainties or reservations about the Christ event, well, then *this* Sunday is for you. John’s Gospel was written so that *all* may trust in God and continue to have life in God.

There is an echo in this passage; a reverberation of the prologue: “What has come into being in Jesus Christ, the Word, was life, and the life was the light of all people.” From the beginning, God planted the one Word in all hearts and minds. Now, John’s Gospel comes full circle with three very different encounters of the Risen Christ.

First, Jesus appears to a tearful Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. She doesn’t recognize him until he speaks her name. And then, in an intimate, personal encounter, Jesus tells Mary not to cling to him, claims her as his sister and sends her to the disciples, whom Jesus also claims as brothers and sisters. She says to them, “I have seen the Master.”

That very evening, Jesus comes to a group of frightened disciples hiding in a locked upper room. He bids them peace. Then he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them as he did from the cross upon the women and the beloved disciple. Then he sends them into the world. When the disciples see Thomas again, they say, “We have seen the Master.”

Now this is the same Thomas the Twin who was ready to die with Jesus on the way to see Lazarus; Thomas who insisted that Jesus clarify where he was going. He is not tearful, he is not frightened, he is not faithless. Instead, a

pragmatic Thomas insists that he must encounter and perceive the Risen Christ himself before he can trust.

A week later, Jesus appears again to the disciples locked away once more in the upper room. This time, Jesus bids peace to all present and then initiates a personal conversation with Thomas in the context of a gathered group. Jesus offers a Thomas an opening, a sensual encounter, that allows Thomas to perceive what can only be seen with the eyes of the spirit.

Jesus' invitation includes a phrase often translated as "Do not doubt." But John's Greek is more accurately rendered as "do not refuse to believe"; something more like, "Be not untrusting, but trust."

Recognizing the truth standing before him, Thomas responds with the first human exclamation of the full mystery of the Risen Christ: "My Master and my God."

Over and over, John's Gospel puts individuals and groups into the abiding presence of the unique incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Gospel braids a two-strand theme from beginning to end. One strand presents evidence that the Word of God comes into relationship with specific and distinct people. And because God offers relationship to every unique individual, the other strand shows God's intimate and infinite awareness of the entire spectrum of human perspectives.

The story of Thomas is a delightfully ambiguous recognition of the particularity of every person's encounter with the Risen Christ. Did Thomas touch the Risen Christ or not? Did Thomas expect to feel a resuscitated corpse or was he asking to *enter the wounds* in a more poetic sense? Was he still seeking a physical contact or has Thomas opened himself to communion with the Divine Presence in a new and mystical interaction?

Just imagine what you would need to fully perceive that presence and give yourself permission to trust that God is inviting you into exactly what you need. What would cause you to spontaneously declare: "My Master and my God."

Whatever Thomas' perspective, God worked with it. Now fully trusting the Risen Christ, Thomas names Jesus as human master and rabbi. The Jesus that Thomas has always known. But with the same breath, Thomas also

names the Risen One as the Divine Word and God. The God that has always known Thomas.

Let me tell you a story: In a 2005 PBS documentary titled *Crusade: The Life of Billy Graham*, Billy and a former colleague, Charles Templeton, talk about the issue that divided what had begun as a very close friendship. The two evangelists met in 1945 and began touring the revival circuit, filling stadiums with huge crowds.

Billy had studied at Christian fundamentalist schools where he chose to accept the King James Bible as the literal and flawless word of God. Those who heard both men preach expected Charles to become the next great evangelical preacher, but even before started at Princeton Theological Seminary, Charles began questioning his faith.

The year he was to start seminary, Charles told Billy that he could no longer believe the biblical account of creation. “The world,” he said, “was not created over a period of days a few thousand years ago; it has evolved over millions of years. It’s not a matter of speculation; it’s a demonstrable fact.”

But Billy could not accept that. “I’ve discovered something in my ministry,” Billy told Charles. “When I take the Bible literally, when I proclaim it as the word of God, my preaching has power...I don’t have the time or the intellect to examine all sides of the theological dispute,” Billy went on, “so I’ve decided once for all to stop questioning and accept the Bible as God’s word.”

Charles challenged Billy, “You don’t dare stop thinking about the most important question in life. Do it and you begin to die. It’s intellectual suicide.” Billy decided that very day that he would never again in his life allow himself to doubt. Some years later, Charles rejected his Christian faith but continued to explore the mystery. The two remained mutually respectful, but drifted apart.

Some of Templeton’s detractors insist that, at some point, we have to stop questioning and just decide to believe the Bible with invincible innocence. And yet, *literal* infallibility of the Bible is a 19th century American Protestant innovation, not part of our ancient tradition nor, for that matter, is it a point in the Episcopal catechism.

Some of Graham’s critics say that he preached unsupportable, immature superstition and insist that we never surrender reason as an essential element

of faith. And yet, Billy Graham touched the lives and hearts of hundreds of thousands of people with a conviction that even Templeton admired.

Ironically, one of the most compelling resources that makes room for both of their perspectives and many others is this story in John's Gospel about Thomas the Twin.

John's Greek reads: "You believe because you can see me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." There is no question mark.

And if Jesus is making a statement and not asking a question, we can propose the possibility that he is saying that Thomas' approach is just one way to embrace the Risen Christ. Jesus may simply be acknowledging one of multiple authentic ways to embrace one's faith.

John provides other possibilities in the encounters of Mary Magdalene and the eleven disciples with the Risen Christ. One kind of encounter does not negate or disqualify another kind of encounter. Among the multitude of fruitful ways to embrace faith, some depend on unwavering trust, some rely on shared experiences, and some insights come only to the eye of spirit.

So perhaps the most important words are those that Jesus spoke when he stood among the disciples and said, "Peace be with you." The Risen Christ freely gives this peace all of them; Mary Magdalene, the disciples and Thomas the Twin. Christ freely gives that same peace to Billy Graham, to Charles Templeton, and to all their detractors and all their supporters. Christ freely gives that peace to you and me, and to all creation with all our differences and all our similarities.

The peace that Christ gives does not separate, but unites. The peace that Christ gives unites people not in uncompromising *uniformity*, but in loving *solidarity* across all our human separations: political, economic, race, gender, orientation, even religion.

The Risen One who stands glorified among us extends to us the same invitation offered to Thomas; to see and hear and touch God in new ways – to encounter the Real Presence of the Word: at this table, in our lives and in creation.

"Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'."

That really is *truly* incredible, is it not?

Works consulted:

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