

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

---

Christ is risen. On the morning of the resurrection, Mary Magdalen is the first to see the Risen Christ. She goes to get Peter and the Beloved Disciple who see the empty tomb.

That evening, the Risen Christ appears to the disciples in the upper room where they had all locked themselves in. The folks who deserted Jesus, denied him and watched him die. All, that is, except Thomas who, for reasons unknown, is not there.

Eight days later, today, Thomas finally sees the Risen Christ. That moment is captured in Caravaggio's compelling 17<sup>th</sup> c. masterpiece, "The Incredulity of Thomas," and in Albrecht Dürer's 16<sup>th</sup> c. woodcut, "The Doubting Thomas."

Those images of St. Thomas putting his fingers in the wound in Christ's side were so phenomenally popular that they still influence our imagination and shape our sense of the meaning of this story.

As dramatic and moving as Caravaggio's painting and Dürer's woodcut are, they support a little mischief. We can easily become fascinated with the idea of "belief" as an intellectual exercise with right and wrong answers. The resurrection becomes a screening test. We can let ourselves assume that by agreeing with the assertion that Christ rose from the dead, we reserve a suite in God's heavenly hotel after we die.

To be fair, even the most talented artist couldn't reproduce the more astounding aspect of this story. Because, for John, the resurrection is an opening to abundant life with God in *this* life, as well as in whatever comes after this life. Salvation for John is centered on a *relationship* with the living Christ, with God our creator, with the indwelling breath of the Holy Spirit, right here and right now.

John gave us a well-developed character in Thomas that was intended to reassure and to inspire those of us who do not see or touch a physically tangible Jesus. We, like Thomas, have to rely on what we hear about the earthly Jesus and on what we experience of the Risen Christ.

Thomas, like us, did not hear directly what the other disciples heard. Jesus twice said, "Peace be with you"; a Hebrew blessing – shalom – a blessing of wholeness for body, mind and spirit, and a binding together for harmony and well-being for all.

And then Jesus said, "Receive a holy spirit," breathing upon them, and then "for those sins you let go, they are let go; those you hold fast, they have been held fast."

Jesus didn't leave us a checklist of concrete details that we must hold to be absolutely true, without question. We have to hear and trust that the Risen Christ is still saying: "You are in a relationship with the living God; a relationship that you can choose to nurture and develop."

Our collect for this Sunday begins with this sentence: “Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation...”

The covenant and the ritual of reconciliation rely on the dynamics of forgiveness. Now, the media these days are giving forgiveness some unusual attention, and some folks are confused about what forgiveness is and what it isn't.

Forgiveness is not condoning unkindness. Forgiveness is not excusing, ignoring or explaining away hateful or disrespectful behavior. Forgiveness is not just forgetting painful encounters. Forgiveness is not denying feelings. Those are forms of *cut-rate* forgiveness that may keep the peace, but only at the cost of our integrity and well-being.

That's not what Jesus meant when he said, “...for those sins you let go, they are let go.”

*Refusing* to forgive is always an option. Choosing refusal can make us feel powerful and in control. On rare occasions, it is the better option, though the path to wholeness is more difficult. More often, refusing to forgive isolates us from life, especially if we start stewing in our own anger or grief or pain.

A friend of mine who studies forgiveness says that the careful feeding and dedicated nurturing of grievances can keep a hurt alive forever. This is part of what Jesus meant when he said, “those [sins] you hold fast, they have been held fast.”

There is another way.

Keep in mind that, except for minor slights, only God can forgive unconditionally. For humans, all genuine forgiveness, even self-forgiveness, is a process. Reconciliation is always an option for God, but reconciling forgiveness may not be possible or even appropriate for all human interactions. Acceptance can be.

Forgiveness begins when we remember that we have been liberated by God's Holy Spirit and adopted as siblings of the Risen Christ. “Receive a holy spirit,” Jesus said. And with that spirit, we are liberated to choose how we want to respond to an offense. Now, that's

not license to just do whatever we want. Liberty is freedom with responsibility. We are not free to meet evil with evil.

We are free to decide not to forgive. Or we can unbind ourselves by choosing not to let another person or an event to be in charge of how we feel and act. That's acceptance.

Acceptance is not cut-rate forgiveness nor is it a refusal to forgive. Instead, with God's help, acceptance is a life-affirming way to release the power of other people's sins by taking charge of our pain, and finding our own meaning from it to create new or different relationships.

The gift of forgiveness, you see, is primarily for the one doing the forgiving, and only secondarily for the one in need of forgiveness.

If the person who harms us is unwilling or unavailable to repair the relationship, we can decide that they are not in charge of our emotions, forgive them – without excusing or condoning their behavior – and leave any future reconciliation in God's hands.

All genuine human forgiveness is conditional. Only if the person who harms us is willing and available to repair the relationship, can we forgive and begin the work of reconciliation.

At some point, you and I will hurt someone else. And by going through the human process of forgiveness from both sides, with God's help, we can learn how to loosen the cords of blunders that bind us and to release the strands we hold of other people's guilt.

Genuinely *reconciling* forgiveness requires an exchange between two unguarded hearts. If we are the one doing harm and want to earn the precious gift of forgiveness, we have to examine and change our behavior. Seeing pain that we have caused is not easy. Apologizing without defensiveness is still more difficult. And working to regain trust is perhaps hardest of all.

And if we are the one harmed, forgiveness will come only when we can relax the impulse for retribution and resentment.

But, if both are willing to work, together, with God's help, we can create openings for the peace, the shalom, that God offers all God's children – a renewed wholeness of body, mind and spirit, and a binding

together for harmony and well-being. We learn how to untangle the knots within ourselves and in our human relationships. And then we can mend our hearts' simple ties to each other and to God.

God's reconciling forgiveness brings peace into the present moment; it doesn't change the past. Like love, reconciling forgiveness can flourish only in the context of living, mutual relationships.

Belief in the resurrection is not a faith filter for the afterlife. Belief in the resurrection is trusting God to restore right relationship with us; a relationship that is so loving, so intimate, so universal that it is literally incredible – not credible – unbelievable on the face of it.

And yet...

And yet, even as we struggle to make rational sense of it, the crucified and Risen Christ is offering each of us the same incredible invitation offered to Thomas. The offer is now what it was then – a gesture of the genuine, reconciling and unconditional forgiveness that only God can give.

Thomas asked for an act of physical intimacy. What Jesus offers to Thomas and to us is an embrace beyond our comprehension. By inviting Thomas and you and I to touch the divine wounds, the Risen Christ offers us an eternal "touch" into the interior of the Divine, a unitive experience of the Spirit, the very breath of God breathing within us.

God's astonishing reconciling forgiveness is offered as a return to right relationship with God, who transcends and includes all space, all time, all creation: the Divine reconciliation of the Creator with the created.

How blissful are those for whom this contact is sufficient; for they shall be rich in the fullness of God's interior presence, and in the purity and strength of their faith.

---

Works cited or consulted:

Barnhart, OSBCam., Bruno. *The Good Wine: Reading John from the Center*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993.

Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.  
Douglas-Klotz, Neil, and Matthew Fox. *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.

Spring, Janis Abrahms and Michael Spring. *How Can I Forgive You?: The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not to*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006.

Personal conversations with Dr. Fred Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects and lecturer in Wellness at the Stanford University School of Medicine.