

We tend to assume that the disciples were eager to see Jesus again, but maybe not. Most of them probably felt ashamed at how they had denied or abandoned him. There's a fine sermon or two out there about how the disciples might have told themselves they had barred the doors out of fear of the local authorities, but they must also have been afraid of the disciples who stayed faithful, like the women who stayed with Jesus on the cross and at the tomb, women who might have held them accountable for their own choices. But I want to focus on how those terrible feelings of shame and fear were immediately replaced with overwhelming joy when Jesus arrived. The disciples were much harder on themselves than Jesus ever would have been, as is always the case, and so his presence cast out their lingering despair, doubt, fear, and guilt as swiftly as light casts out darkness. There's no substitute for an encounter with the risen Jesus.

It's tempting to skip ahead to Thomas, but I want to talk for a minute about that part where Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." It's tempting to skip past this part because what Jesus means is far from clear. One perfectly valid interpretation is that by saying this, Jesus is giving his apostles the authority to forgive sins, like when clergy give absolution in corporate and private confession. But meaning of the Greek is not obvious, and in any case, there are other scriptural bases for the clergy to declare forgiveness. Another way of interpreting the Greek is that Jesus is talking about putting away brokenness and restoring wholeness, in terms of cause and effect, rather than a specific ministerial or sacramental function. In other words, Jesus could have meant, now that you are my apostles, your decisions about whether to let things go will be effective on the community. And that brings us right to Thomas and the first test of this principle.

Many people hearing this story assume that Thomas just happened to be out of the room momentarily, maybe running an errand. But the Greek phrasing suggests that the rest of the disciples might have assumed Thomas wasn't coming back, and I think the story makes more sense if that is the case. Not only because of the connection John is making between the risen Christ, apostolic ministry, and the unity of the Church, but also because from the very beginning, the Church has needed a way to deal with the reality that not everyone stays faithful all the time. People sometimes stray away or storm off, sometimes for very understandable reasons, but for Christians, every loss is a crisis for the community.

Everything else we know about Thomas indicates that he was brave and bold, so the other disciples might have assumed he had already found another religious leader to follow. There were many messianic movements in their place and time, and all the others came and went without making much of a difference. In every other instance, when the leaders of those movements stopped leading them personally, none of the followers would even try to keep the movement going. They would not claim their

leaders had risen from the dead, and they certainly would not give up literally everything in order to proclaim their messages to the ends of the Earth. Something very different happened to Jesus's followers, and I can think of nothing besides the Resurrection that would explain why they became apostles proclaiming the same amazing message, especially considering what the choice cost them.

But anyway, these saints would tell you themselves that they were far from perfect; Christians have always had to grapple with the consequences of human imperfection. In some places and times, excommunication, shunning, or dramatic public acts of penitence have been local communities' response. And sometimes reunion and reconciliation prove impossible even when communities take a more gracious approach. But that is not the story that John handed down to us. Jesus himself reconnected Thomas to the body of the church by offering his own body. But Jesus did *not* force the others to accept Thomas as a member of the community. I suppose they could have pretended like nothing happened. Or they could have relegated Thomas to a lower status and held his past against him, as hypocritical as that would have been. Instead, they forgave him and welcomed him back, and the next time John mentions Thomas, he is listed as second only to Peter.

The obvious lesson is that the body heals the body, that is, unity *with* Jesus unifies the community *of* Jesus, and that is valuable to remember. The first Christians certainly didn't always get along, but they still loved and took care of each other. They stayed united to Jesus, and that enabled them to love each other the way Jesus loved all of them. So yes, we should always approach conflict in the church with the grace of Jesus on all sides, but I think there is another lesson we can glean here.

When we hear, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," we tend to assume that we are the blessed ones, because we are not eyewitnesses to the physical resurrected body of Jesus like the people in this story were. But when we assume we're the blessed ones, we should always want to double-check that. And indeed, our experience as Christians and our connection to Jesus are also strong. Frankly, we have a better understanding of Jesus than the disciples did, with the benefit of 2,000 years of scholarship and reflection. We have been retained as "very members incorporate in the mystical body" of Jesus, and that might be better than merely laying eyes on him. Not only do we know enough about Jesus to perceive him in ourselves and others, we literally see him when his body and blood are present in the Eucharist. And this is true no matter how faithful we have been.

Therefore, rather than seeing ourselves as hapless doubting Thomases, waiting to be acted upon, or acting like the disciples, who were paralyzed by fear before they received the Holy Spirit, I would hope that God would give us the faith to follow the example of the disciples after they received the Spirit and earned the title of apostles, ones who are sent. The Spirit gave them confidence, focus, perseverance, and the grace to seek and grant forgiveness, and the Spirit offers the same to us. These gifts

are not to make us feel better, but to strengthen us to embrace our identity as Christians and go on to proclaim to those who truly have not seen Jesus that “We have seen the Lord.”

Sharing our experiences with Jesus is an act of love, for when we share Jesus with those who have not seen, we bless them. People are hungry for good news, and they need to know that Jesus has shown us a better way to live than the one we had known, one where the highest law is love and our proud first duty is compassion. When we go out into the world again, I pray that we will take up the challenge to “show forth in [our] lives what [we] profess by [our] faith,” so that both we and the world will be blessed indeed.