

## GOING BACK FOR THOMAS

Acts 2. 14a, 22-32

1 Peter 1. 3-9

John 20. 19-31

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

After having celebrated Easter last Sunday, we begin this Sunday to hear about the appearances of our resurrected Lord to the apostles: initially appearing to only a few people, and then apparently to many hundreds more.

In the gospel of St John, Jesus appears to people in this order: firstly, to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning; then later that day, to a group of disciples in a locked room; then a week later, to disciples again in the same place; and finally, to seven disciples<sup>1</sup> at some unspecified later point. Having heard about Mary Magdalene last week, today we hear about the second and third of these appearances of Christ, both to disciples in a locked room.

Either of these appearances would have been shocking, I suppose, but particularly the first one. Imagine the disciples, all huddled together on Easter night. Having seen what they had seen on Good Friday, and in spite of having heard the rumours of that morning's events, surely they were agitated and frightened of becoming victims of the persecution that had already claimed the life of their Lord. The doors were locked, John tells us; the disciples were in hiding, hoping that the Jews would not find them. With no doors open, and presumably no windows either, it must have been hot and stuffy in there: a closed-up room with stale air and the smell of crowded bodies. No doubt the disciples were trying to stay quiet, but when they

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jn 21. 1-19.

spoke, it was in urgent whispers. Yes, we can imagine the scene: a bunch of agitated people in close quarters, confused and frightened.

Then suddenly in this crowded, stuffy room *another person* is there with them. It is Jesus, their friend whom they knew had been crucified. ‘Peace be with you’, he says; and they probably needed a lot of peace right then. In our minds, we can picture the frenetic room becoming completely still as every face turns toward him. Every face that Christ has seen before and loved before; every face in that room revealing the contents of every heart. And perhaps from the looks on those faces, our Lord discerned some doubt. So he showed them his hands and his side; and then they knew that it was Jesus, and they were glad. Christ then breathes on them, giving them the Holy Spirit, as he had promised he would. From that moment, one imagines the disciples with the Easter cry ever on their lips: ‘Alleluia! The Lord is risen!’

And so with this dramatic scene having been accomplished, and the disciples having been given their commission, it would seem that the next appearance that Jesus makes in that room a week later is unnecessary. At first glance, it might even seem gratuitous, redundant and kind of anti-climactic. As I mentioned earlier, there are four resurrection appearances in John’s gospel, and in three of them Christ does something really interesting, or gives instructions that aren’t given elsewhere; and they all occur in different places. Mary Magdalene was told to go tell the disciples about our Lord while in the garden; the disciples were told to go be apostles when they were in the locked room; and Peter was told to ‘feed my sheep’ there on the beach. But nothing much different happens in this third resurrection appearance. It almost seems to have been ‘tacked on’.

What’s more, between the accounts of the Jesus’s two appearances in today’s gospel, there is no narrative transition or explanation of what has happened in the one week

that separates them. I would have thought that the events of that week would have been momentous and worth recording! But no description is given of what Christ or the disciples have been up to; no description is provided of what the effects of the sending of the Spirit have been for the last few days. Instead, immediately we hear how our Lord appears in the locked room again, before the disciples, saying ‘peace be with you’ once more.

The only difference in the context of this third resurrection appearance is the presence of Thomas. ‘Doubting Thomas’. It makes me wonder if this repeated scene, presented in this redundant and otherwise unnecessary way, is John suggesting that the main reason that Jesus appears in the locked room a second time is *because Thomas is there*.

All of Christ’s work had already been done, including the incredibly important sending of the Spirit. The point to the disciples had been made already. But Thomas—absent from the earlier scene, gone off somewhere else like a sheep who had wandered off into the woods—Thomas wasn’t on board yet. So our Lord, like the good shepherd who will never give up on even the errant sheep, goes back to that stuffy room for him, and perhaps just for him. Jesus won’t let Thomas be left behind.

If that’s the case, then perhaps Thomas’s subsequent declaration of faith (‘my Lord and my God’) may not just be a reaction to seeing Jesus’s wounds. It may also be the result of Thomas seeing Christ, after his resurrection, acting out *for Thomas* the kind of saving love that our Lord had talked about during his life. Because Jesus went back for Thomas. Yes, it is true that Thomas had wandered off; it is true that he wouldn’t believe the other disciples. Thomas asked for proof. But Christ would not give up on him.

Perhaps it is because Thomas is the errant sheep, the one whom the good shepherd goes to get, maybe that is why Thomas is the one (and the first one in that gospel) who realises who Jesus really is: 'My Lord and my God.' This is a new way of talking about Jesus of Nazareth, and it is Thomas—of all people!—who comes up with it. There is something about that saving relationship itself, and not just the presence of the wounds of the resurrected Christ that Thomas had previously been looking for, that makes him believe that our Lord is the very revelation of God, that Jesus is God incarnate. Because he came back for him.

Perhaps Thomas saw that his relationship with Christ was, on a smaller scale, reflective of the overarching story of salvation. That story in which God chose Israel from among all nations, and then went to get her back even after she turned away from him. That story in which God established creation, and then, after creation's free will introduced sin into the world, became incarnate, as created, in order to reconcile creation to the Creator. That story of becoming incarnate, and not letting the world's rejection be the final word, but bringing eternal life out of death. Going back. This recurring theme, which had been happening on a world-historical scale, is telescoped down to become personal and intimate between Thomas and Jesus.

By setting up the story this way, it's as if John wants us to know that Christ doesn't want a relationship with 'people' abstractly considered. He wants a relationship with you and with me, and he doesn't give up. If it takes going back to the same place and repeating himself, that's what he'll do. If at first he doesn't succeed, he'll try, try again. And he'll do it for everyone, including the dubious and the sceptical and the faithless. In fact, he may do it especially for them; and especially for *us*.

On Easter Day we celebrated the saving power of the resurrection of our Lord for the whole world. Here on the second Sunday of Easter, we celebrate that the risen Jesus makes that saving power *personal*, for you and for me.

Amen.