

“So that You May Continue to Have Life”
(John 20:19-3)

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by
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Today’s sermon title is a translation of parts of John 20:31, from the gospel reading that you heard earlier. The author spelled out the purpose for this selection of Jesus’ significant and witnessed deeds, written down in the gospel according to John, that is, to generate belief or trust in Jesus’ name. The gospel of John addressed the community of its audience, specifically “you,” which scholars referred to as the Johannine community or John’s group, regarding trusting and having life in Jesus’ name. I have chosen the translation “so that you may continue to believe ... may continue to have life,” put forward by Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, professors of the New Testament and religious studies respectively, and social science commentators on the gospel according to John.

Malina and Rohrbaugh analyzed the language of the gospel, and suggested that it was used to express John’s group as a consciously alternative society to the two larger societies in which they were embedded. There were two terms in John that highlight how the author was speaking to their own in-group, John’s group, about the larger groups that they were in. Languages in John like “the Judeans (which were inaccurately translated as the Jews)” referred to the dominant Israelite society centered in Judea, to which John’s group stood in opposition and with which they lived in tension due to their belief of the risen Jesus. And then, both “the Judeans” and John’s group were subjected to the colonial rule and overarching social, political, economic and military system that was the Greco-Roman empire, which is “this world” in John.

So while the purpose of John was to generate belief, its author was aware of the boundaries between John’s group and these other larger groups, as well as Jesus’ concerns in the Gospel to preserve those given to him. Therefore, Malina and Rohrbaugh concluded that the single Greek verbs behind the translation here in 20:31 would be better read for their realized meaning: “so that you may continue to believe ... may continue to have life,” that is, among the pressures and tensions of living with the Judeans or the Roman authority. And so, I would like to apply this purpose of “continuing to have life” to today’s gospel passage, and to share three graces of a transforming life in the risen Jesus that we may glean from it.

Our gospel passage today begins at 20:19, which was noted as the evening of that day. Earlier “that day” in the early morning, the tomb of Jesus was found to be empty, and then Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene. So now in the evening, John’s audience were told that the disciples locked themselves up in a house in Jerusalem for the fear of the Judeans, and Jesus came through and appeared in bodily form among them.

There are two layers to the disciples’ fear that John’s audience would probably understand, but we might be unfamiliar with. One, there was a severe Roman ordinance against tampering with buried bodies that would result in capital punishment. The Judeans would attest that Jesus’ disciples were highly suspected for the empty tomb because of how Jesus had talked

about his resurrection. Two, the disappearance of the body, even that of an executed criminal in the eyes of Roman law, which Jesus was, would disrupt the Israelite burial customs that theologically stipulated the decomposition of the body was necessary for the dead person to atone their sins. And this was the exact tension between John's audience and the Judean society. In Malina and Rohrbaugh's words, "[f]or John, Jesus calamitously died due to the intransigence of the Judeans, but God rescued and vindicated him because Jesus was in fact the mediator of life itself." Furthermore, "[t]he other [gospel] tradition, that Jesus died deliberately because God wanted him dead for the benefit of others, is not in John." Since this is not a sermon on the meaning of Jesus' death but that of his resurrection, we would not dwell on that today.

And so, it was in the midst of the disciples' fear that Jesus was present among them in that locked house, showing them the bodily markers of his crucifixion, saying "Peace be with you." Peace. Not a peace without the facts of execution. Not a peace without a personal betrayal and a public humiliation. Not a peace without inflicted wounds of violence and shaming. The presence of the risen Jesus brought tremendous joy to this fearful group of disciples. I could only imagine the energy in that room where the disciples and Jesus reunited again after all that had transpired. And hear this retelling of Jesus' appearance to the fearful disciples, John's audience would also recalled, in the particular struggle of their own situation, the joy promised by the cosmic presence of the risen Jesus. I think this is one of the graces of a transforming life in the risen Jesus – that we too would be gifted the joy that is the presence of God in the midst of all our fears.

And then quickly in verse 21, as if there was no need for a moment to savor how the disciples were comforted by his resurrection, Jesus immediately gave them the charge to move forward with another blessing of peace. This charge forward was accompanied by a giving of the Holy Spirit in verse 22. Jesus breathed on the disciples as God had breathed on the first earthling Adam, animating them to new life in Jesus' name. Verse 23a seems to suggest that forgiveness was another grace of such a transforming life for the disciples, and by extension to John's audience. And as we who also claim the risen Jesus as Lord and God, this grace of forgiveness is also available to us. But some may ask: what about the second half of the verse, which was often translated as "if you retained [the sins] of any, they are retained"?

Sandra Schneiders, the New Testament scholar who gave her 2010 presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association that later published as "The Lamb of God and Forgiveness of Sin(s) in the Fourth Gospel," cautioned against reading the second half of 20:23 through the lens of Matthew, who speaks of Peter's authority to bind and to loose (16:19). Instead, Schneiders pointed out that the second conditional clause in verse 23 did not include the word for sins at all. Her translation is "[o]f whomever you forgive the sins, they (the sins) are forgiven to them; whomever you hold fast [or embrace], they are held fast." It is the persons, not sins, in the second clause that is the "object grasped."

When I recall my experience of obsessing with some persons who have wronged me, the feeling comes close to this notion of grasping onto described by verse 23. Now just to be clear, I am not saying that forgiving means forgetting as if it never happened or that the wounding is not real. Neither does forgiving erase the necessity of reconciliation, because claiming forgiveness without reconciliation would be cheap grace. And I most certainly am not picking on the wounds of the injured party further, by shaming them on their inability to feel forgiving. In fact, I remember praying to God, when I have been justifiably angry and cannot forgive, that I am

going to turn over this person [to God], in a way not unlike shaking the dust off my feet, and I ask God for the grace of forgiveness, which has been promised as part of a transforming life in Jesus' name.

Last but not least in today's gospel passage, we have the story of the disciple Thomas in Jesus' appearance in Jerusalem from verse 24 onwards. He had been commonly nicknamed the doubting Thomas because of this story. But what do we know about him before this incident and after this time? In spite of his nickname, Thomas was actually not a timid person. When Jesus talked to his disciples in John 11 about returning to Judea for Lazarus who was ill, they cautioned him how the crowds had almost stoned him when he was there last, it was Thomas who said "Let us go also to die with him (11:16)." Church tradition tells us that Thomas, after he was convinced of the resurrection of Jesus, traveled east further than any apostle to evangelize the good news in India, which to this day has churches tracing their heritage back to his efforts.

Thomas is the kind of seekers or disciples that did not substitute what he needed to be convinced in order to believe, with what others needed to be convinced to believe. But neither did he deny the truth when he came across the risen Jesus. If you take time to consider his request for authentication, Thomas was not just asking for some objective proof or evidence of resurrection. He might or might not have put his fingers through Jesus' wounds. But Thomas was seriously asking for an experiential encounter with the risen Jesus, and got his answer. Speaking to John's audience, the Jesus in John's gospel affirmed that those who had not seen and yet have come to believe were indeed blessed. John was not speaking of what some people called "blind faith," he was affirming the grace of trust that a transforming life in the risen Jesus will experience, and continue to experience.

And so in this gospel passage today, we glean three graces of a transforming life in the risen Jesus - the grace of joy in the midst of fear, the grace of forgiveness by the Holy Spirit, and the grace of trust in God. These graces are not only for the disciples at Jesus' time, they have been extended to John's group in a later time, and to us who claim the promise of resurrection for our lives today. Our gracious God is always ready to give us graces. They may not be what you think they would look like. But ask and you will receive, seek and you will find. Amen.