

Past, Present and Future

John 20:19-31

Today's gospel has something to say about our past, our present and our future.

Something like the story of old Scrooge that we hear every Christmas, today's Gospel offers us insight on where we've been, where we are and where we're going from here.

First the past.

Have you ever been tagged with a nickname that just isn't you?

If so, you have a friend in Thomas!

What's Thomas' name down through the ages?

Doubting Thomas!

And what does he do to deserve that?

He's out getting plate lunch for the boys, who are scared to death, hiding out in that locked-up-tight upper room, when suddenly Jesus is there with them!

And Jesus "shows them his hands and his side."

And they are overjoyed!

Thomas comes back later with an arm full of beef stew, and when he hears this amazing news says:

"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."

Which, when you think about it, is pretty much exactly what the others got to do themselves before they believed!

But only Thomas gets the nickname!

Poor Thomas!

It's even worse when you read about Thomas elsewhere in John's gospel.

Because when Jesus sets out to raise Lazarus from the dead, and the Keystone Cops who are the apostles start moaning that the Jewish leaders will kill Jesus if they see him again, it's Thomas who says, "let's go and die with him!"

Brave Thomas!

Or when Jesus is saying his goodbyes, assuring them that they will follow one day, it's Thomas who says: "But Lord, how can we follow, we don't know the way."

Leading Jesus to share one of the deepest depths of our faith, as he responds, "You do know the way, I am the way, the truth and the life..."

Insightful Thomas!

And then of course, as we hear this morning, Jesus does appear again, Thomas is there, and Thomas is the very first person in all of John's Gospel to finally and at long last recognize Jesus for who he is:

"My Lord and my God!"

Enlightened Thomas!

Alas, no one calls Peter "Denying Peter," nor do we call St. Paul "Killer Paul," but poor Thomas, despite his bravery, insight and enlightenment, for forever and a day, he shall be called, Doubting Thomas.

That part of today's gospel speaks to our past; but remember, a nickname, even if it sticks, can never really define who you are: and know this, God knows you in your depths, in your complexity, in your truth.

The gospel speaks to our present as Jesus breathes on them, giving them and us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the same breath God breathes into Adam at the dawn of creation, forever uniting humanity with divinity, the secular and the sacred, heaven and earth, and with that gift, giving them and us the power that until that moment was reserved to God: the power to forgive...

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Many folks take that to mean that we get to choose what and who to forgive; that it's perfectly okay to forgive some stuff and not other stuff — leading many to keep a kind of secret list in their heads of stuff that is forgivable and stuff that's not.

You can do thus and so to me or my family, but if you pull that one...all bets are off!

But maybe that's not what Jesus is actually saying.

Instead, remember that when we read scripture, we aren't reading the Owners Manual for our car!

It's not enough to just read the words.

We need to pay attention to the context, and to always be on the lookout for the humor or irony or even sarcasm that runs wild throughout this holy book...

Today, the message that Jesus gives them "the power to forgive" practically drips with irony, and if you miss the irony, you miss the message.

Where are the apostles?

They're in a room, locked, dark, cowering with fear.

These are the guys who just days earlier betrayed, denied and ran away from Jesus at the very moment of his greatest need.

And if the root of sin is separation from God, denying God, well then, where does their sin line up in the panoply of sins, I ask you?

Probably gold medal territory, blue ribbon, first place!

So when Jesus says what you forgive is forgiven, what you don't won't be, do you think these guys could in their wildest imagination dream of NOT forgiving anyone anything...????

.....given what they have just now been forgiven???

I think not...

And this is crucial for our present lives precisely because of that secret list in my head of what is forgivable and what's not.

Today, Jesus tells us: those secret lists gotta go; not because we must become super human or super moral; but because we too have been forgiven unforgivable sins...

And even more than that, Jesus knows that refusing to forgive creates prisons, not only for the wrong-doer but for the victim as well, and Jesus is here to give us

freedom; that lightness of being that puts all things in God's good hands, trusting that all will be well.

And now to our future.

Ask any group of churchgoers what our destiny is and 9 out of 10 will say we die and go to heaven...or hell...

But our true destiny is not an immortal soul in heaven, but a resurrected body on the new earth!

Now there's a reason so many opt for Plato instead of Jesus when it comes to our true destiny.

We tend to fall in love with the idea of the immortal soul that zooms into heaven while the dead body rots in the grave, for a few reasons.

One, it suggests that we have an immortal soul that is independent of our bodies, perhaps even independent of God, and so we have some kind of entitlement to a next life.

We like entitlements!

Second, if we can rid ourselves of what actually happens in the resurrection of Jesus, of his fusing together of heaven and earth, of his actual, constant, totally real presence and activity here and now, if we can get rid of all that, well then, we can get back to a life where God is in charge of heaven, but, by golly, we are in charge down here!

That kind of thinking allows for half-trillion dollar military budgets, and the richest one-percenters to kneel in church without a thought for the folks at the bottom, and con artist TV evangelists to promise riches to some of the most vulnerable if only the most vulnerable send their last \$100 to the con artist.

With immortal souls and rotting bodies, we have an earth run by human rules with only the slightest nod to the rules of heaven.

That is not our faith.

The revolution that Jesus sets in motion, the revolution of the Kingdom of God invading our world, like the mustard weed invading the garden, like yeast blowing up the dough, the revolution that Jesus sets in motion means that God's ways are replacing our ways, that our best thinking is now exposed for the shallow sham that

it is; and that in the resurrection of Jesus, raised bodily from the grave, the secular and the profane embrace, heaven and earth kiss, as we are grasped by God's stunning promise that one day we too shall be raised from our graves, made new, transformed, like our brother Jesus, who is, after all, the first born of the dead.

This is our faith!

This is our hope!

This is our destiny, thanks be to God!

+amen