

What Resurrection Changes

When we read our scriptures describing the events which began on the third day after Jesus' body was laid in that borrowed tomb the focus of those verses seem to be on relating how Jesus' resurrection changed their lives and their actions changed the world. Yet even though we celebrate that discovery of the empty tomb and declare that Jesus is risen, how do we demonstrate our confidence that it changed the world...because often looking around the world a case could be made that the world has not actually changed...the vision which Jesus told us indicated that God's reign was near doesn't seem to be any closer to be realized than it was on that day described in John's gospel account. Today's reading from John is one of four post-resurrection stories in that gospel. The first is that Easter morning narrative, in which Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds the stone removed. She notifies Peter and the Beloved Disciple, who then come back to the tomb with her but go back home. The next story describes the risen Jesus' appearance to Mary and her recognition which converted her tears to joy. She complies with Jesus' request to go and tell this news to his brothers. Today's reading has moved the story into an event of that same evening...eleven of the disciples are together in a locked room...gathered in fear, not joy over Mary's declaration and message from Jesus. They are in or near Jerusalem and have retreated to meet behind locked doors because of their fear. The text says the locked doors were because of their fear of the Jews, but that is misleading as they were Jews. Perhaps they were fearful of the religious authorities or of those in Rome's employ but on that evening they themselves were Jews. Whether they gathered to make plans or discuss what had happened is not clear. It seems clear however that they did not believe Mary's declaration or if they did it did not bring them comfort or joy. But what if they did believe Jesus risen and were fearful of Jesus' reaction to their desertion of him when he faced arrest, trial and crucifixion? The text does not imply that but their betrayal of Jesus must have been on their minds while they strove to understand Mary's proclamation. The twelfth disciple who wasn't there that evening was Thomas the Twin. No reason or comment is made about why he wasn't there or where he might have been. But the verbs used are ones which indicate actions which are continuing...Evidently he was not always gathered with them but was maintaining contact. So Jesus comes into this locked room and said Shalom...translated as "peace be with you." This greeting expresses a wish for the one addressed to have wholeness...to be totally well in all aspects of their life. These words alone evidently didn't totally reassure the disciples because until he showed them his hands and side, they did not rejoice in this sight of him. Jesus continued by again wishing them shalom and then gave them their mission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." They are to continue to proclaim God's kingdom near which was Jesus' self-proclaimed mission. In John's gospel Pentecost occurs now as Jesus' breathes on them saying they are now receiving the Holy Spirit. Not as dramatic as the arrival described in Acts, but their recognizing Jesus produces belief and they take up the mission, beginning with the convincing of Thomas who missed Jesus' appearance. Within John they are told they have the power to forgive sins...and the sin which is to be forgiven or not is the primary one according to John, the sin of unbelief, of being blind to who Jesus is. The final section of today's gospel passage comes with the re-introduction of Thomas into the group. A week goes by during which the eleven disciples are telling Thomas essentially the same thing Mary proclaimed...Jesus has been seen. Thomas' response, for which he has

become forever known as a doubter, is not that different from that of the eleven to Mary's declaration. He only asks for the same things which he had seen which convinced them. Not much has changed in the lives of the eleven disciples...as when the week has passed and Jesus appears again, they are still gathered together in a room with shut doors...they have not yet accepted being sent to proclaim the message. So Jesus comes again into their midst when all of them are present. He again greets them with Shalom and offers Thomas the opportunity to see all that he has asked and as the others have already seen. Jesus tells Thomas: "Do not doubt but believe." Thomas's response is immediate: "My Lord and my God!" Thomas not only recognizes Jesus but claims that relationship...Jesus is not the Lord to him, but his Lord and his God. Often what Jesus says then is taken as a rebuke to Thomas for needing this proof, but he has only asked what others have received. The comment seems to be more related to John's narration about Jesus' resurrection than a comment for Thomas. John's gospel records that Jesus did many other signs which are not written down, but these things John is related is for our benefit...so we might believe. The comment Jesus makes at the end is to give a blessing to those who have not had the opportunity to see what those disciples saw, but still have come to believe. John's purpose is to provide the witness that proclaims Jesus' life and ministry and the gift of grace brought through him. The text is not about the doubts of the eleven or even of Thomas, but about ours. Their acceptance of Jesus' resurrection brought about great changes in them. They not only left staying in locked rooms, going out into Jerusalem but also into Samaria and Asia Minor and the whole of the known world with the message Jesus gave them, to proclaim the way as it was first known. The major purpose of the letter we know as 1st Peter appears to be an appeal to Christian believers not to turn away from the gospel they have heard proclaimed. The majority of these believers were probably members of the Jewish diaspora living outside of Palestine and a few gentiles living in Asia Minor who had heard the message. The letter seems to have a focus on strengthening the faith of the baptized as they find themselves living as exiles in an alien culture. These folks were probably new believers who were encountering a hostile environment. They were now foreigners in their own country because of their election, their worship of God, their origin, their lifestyle and their innocent suffering; all of which the letter addresses. The message is fashioned for those who have suffered much for their new faith. It is a call to remain faithful and hold on to their hope in the face of a world full of decay and death. Historically the first century was not a time when there was empire wide persecution of those to whom this letter was addressed for following this new faith. However, Christians who were not citizens were vulnerable to abusive treatment by their neighbors and by local authorities. As resident aliens and visiting foreigners they were culturally and religiously different from the majority population. They paid taxes and contributed to the local economy, but they could not inherit property and they were denied legal protections that citizens enjoyed. They were people who stood out because of their ethnic background and the differences in their religious practices from those who remained orthodox. They were outsiders, easily identified by their behavior. God has given them a sense of belonging, the inheritance and the honor that their society denies them. They have been reborn into God's own family. Their neighbors may see them as worthless, but God sees the tested value of their faith as more precious than gold. Through the resurrection of Jesus, God has given them new life in the present and the promise of salvation and an eternal home when Jesus is revealed. In the meantime they are told to live in hope. Such hope is not any mere

wishful thinking but it is a hope founded on their firm confidence in God's character and God's saving actions. God has raised Jesus from the dead and given them new life. God has showed them who God is and what God can do. Though they did not witness the resurrection of Jesus, and though even now they do not see him in the flesh, they know him and put their trust in him. This trust, this confidence in the One whom they have come to know and love, sustains them even when their society strips away everything else that might give them a sense of worth and a sense of place. Because God loves and protects and honors them, they can endure their neighbor's scorn: more than that they are brimful of joy over God's life-giving power and lavish mercy. God's actions in the past and God's promises for the future have transformed their lives in the present. These verses from 1st Peter obviously has a message for those whom society rejects...but also for those like us who feel at home in our society...our broken world of the in-between time when God's reign is only briefly glimpsed. The message might be because perhaps we are too much at home in this world. We have been blessed to have received the good news of God's mercy, but have we been transformed into that new life which truly proclaims and promotes God's rule. This blessing of faith reminds us where our value lies. God loves and welcomes and honors us. Our worth comes not from human opinions, but from God's—God who made us and who gives us new birth. Easter is not only about eternal life after we die. It is about the new life that God gives us in the present, in the here and now, in the midst of the world's brokenness. It is about constantly living into the glimpses of God's reign and proclaiming them as how the world should be.

As we have no choice but to live in the between times, there is an old gospel song which speaks to how we are to approach this life. The lyrics in part are these: I don't know about tomorrow, I just live from day to day; I don't borrow from the sunshine, for its skies may turn to gray. I don't worry over the future, for I know what Jesus said; and today I'll walk beside him for he knows what lies ahead. Many things about tomorrow, I don't seem to understand; But I know who holds tomorrow, and I know who holds my hand. That song expresses simultaneous feelings of anxiety and hope, like those felt today. The events of our time create anxiety because the world around us is changing in ways we did not anticipate and do not clearly understand, and for the most part, are out of our control. There is uncertainty about the near future, however this should be overshadowed by the blessed assurance we have that Jesus knows and holds our hand as we move into the future. And like those who gathered in that locked room to receive Christ's blessing of Shalom, knowing Christ is risen, we too are to leave fear of the world's opinion behind because we are sent to make the proclamation that Jesus is present in our world and God's reign is near. The resurrection changes how God's reign can enter into the broken world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.