**Learning to believe**

John20: 19-31 4/27/2025

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We have gone through the Lenten season and Holy Week in devotion, meditating on the mystery of the Lord's death and resurrection. Now we meditate by faith on Christ’s exaltation—He is alive and walks with us.

**Illumination Prayer** Holy God, We come before You, desiring to hear the word of life. As we seek You in Your word, Be present with us and meet us. Grant us Your wisdom and hope, Open the eyes of our hearts so we may understand Your truth. In the name of the Lord Jesus we pray, Amen.

Last week we celebrated the resurrection of the Lord — His victory over sin and death.
But it’s quite clear that, from last week until today, sin has not left the world. Many things show that this world is still bound by it.

The passing of the beloved Pope Francis has also left many feeling that Easter, perhaps, is a season touched by disappointment.

Looking at our hearts, homes, and work, each year we experience the joyful proclamation of Easter while also sensing sorrow, guilt, chaos, and hopelessness. There is a wide gap between faith and life. This gap challenges us and can swallow up fragile faith.

The Gospel of John confronts Easter disappointment head-on, facing two great challenges to faith:

1. Jesus is risen.
2. Because He is risen, everything has changed.

John 20:31 says, “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.” The author wants to help us “learn to believe” in things that are difficult to believe, so we may gain life by faith.

Thomas in the Gospel of John is someone who lives in the gap between the proclamation of the resurrection and real-life experience. He is stuck in this gap. He wasn’t there when the risen Lord appeared to the other disciples. But when he heard Jesus had risen, he did not believe. His Lord had died; he was heartbroken and disappointed. Now Thomas just wanted to leave and live the life he chose. Yet, behind locked doors, Jesus appeared.

This is John’s writing style—subtle but purposeful. Thomas is often called “Doubting Thomas,” but John introduces him as “Didymus,” which literally means “twin.” This name hints that Thomas may have had a brother or sister we never heard about, but John uses this name intentionally—to suggest Thomas is like our twin brother.

Many artists and musicians have drawn inspiration from it. This is a familiar gospel story。 Jesus said, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side.” Thomas touched Him and responded, “My Lord and my God!” In the end, Thomas believed.

We must remember that moment—but even more, the moment that followed. Jesus said, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (20:29).

This statement sounds a bit resigned. To Thomas and to all who doubt like him—including myself—Jesus says, “Look, I won’t keep doing this. There is a better way to learn to believe and experience the truth of resurrection than by touching My side.”

Jesus teaches the other disciples a better way. He breathes the Holy Spirit into them. This requires explanation.

Again we see John’s literary style—not stating things directly but conveying deep meaning. John presents a “second creation story.”

Just as God first breathed into Adam’s nostrils, now Jesus breathes new breath into the disciples and says, “He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven’” (20:22–23).

Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit—the power that belongs to God alone. Forgiveness is a sign of new creation, bringing radical transformation, not just for the disciples, but for all humanity. The Lord breaks the chains of sin that cause death to our souls and wipes them from the universe.

Let us reflect on the creation story. Humanity in Eden was under the rule of rebellion, pride, shame, blame, anger, and fear; man and woman in conflict, woman and serpent in conflict—all had turned away from God.

Now, when the disciples fear their enemies and shut the doors, the risen Jesus comes among them and gives them a complete, new version of the human story. As the Holy Spirit enters their hearts, bitterness and blame are replaced with forgiveness and freedom.

Jesus comes into this fear-filled, fragile, collapsing group and breathes into them the “blameless Spirit,” bringing peace and wholeness. The disciples are to carry this Spirit into the world. Jesus says, “As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you... If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (20:21, 23).

John emphasizes that the forgiveness of sins is the Church’s most fundamental message. This is something we, who want to be Jesus’ disciples, must practice. Practicing forgiveness is practicing belief in the resurrection. New life begins with what He finished on the cross. Believing in the crucified and exalted Lord means everything has changed.

Thomas wanted to believe, but he needed to learn, in pain and disappointment.

In 2014, New York Times photographer Peter Hiogo did a photo essay in Rwanda.

Theme: **A Mending Feud**, expressing forgiveness between the Hutus and Tutsis, two ethnic and cultural groups. In 1994, genocide claimed nearly a million lives.

Twenty years after the horrific genocide, these photos show what once seemed impossible and unimaginable.

One photo shows a woman resting her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brother.

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Another shows a woman casually leaning against a man who stole her property; that man’s father helped kill her husband and children.

Many photos show pairs without affection, yet standing together. Each photo expresses the forgiveness survivors offered to those who had harmed them.

Those who agreed to be photographed participated in reconciliation efforts by the government and the AMI association of innocent victims. This nonprofit organized months of dialogue between willing Hutus and Tutsis, culminating in the offenders formally requesting forgiveness. If victims chose to forgive, offenders would bring a basket of food, grain, and banana beer. They reconciled through singing and dancing.

These commissioned photographs were part of Rwanda’s 20th anniversary memorial, exploring the theme of forgiveness. They were exhibited in Rwanda’s memorial centers and churches.

Jesus said to His disciples, “Peace be with you! Receive the Holy Spirit!”—a spirit of peace, wholeness, and harmony. The Spirit of God sets us free from deep loss and unfillable emptiness and fear, which we try to fill with fame, status, money, or sex. We must remember, only the love of God can heal and fill us.

Forgiveness is not mainly a feeling—it is a practice or a hard process. It often takes time—perhaps many years, or even a lifetime.

“Forgiveness has many layers.” We must face them one by one. Forgiveness is the work of the Holy Spirit. It challenges natural feelings and instincts. When we suffer, we want those who caused our suffering to also suffer, to pay. If we were wronged, if someone who should have loved us abandoned us, if innocent lives were taken... Every society, including Israel, believes in “a life for a life” as the best form of justice.

Indeed, that’s a form of justice—moral justice says those who cause others to suffer should be punished and suffer too. In many cases, this kind of justice works well; our legal system uses it. Overall, we support this justice (a zero-sum strategy); it sees “elimination” as final and permanent.

But the gospel demands a different justice: **restorative justice**. Its premise is that God has overcome death. His power can heal all wounds. He gives new life where people only see death and destruction. This is resurrection justice—Christ’s new creation.

As John says, Jesus draws near to His disciples, who were hiding in fear from “the Jews.” In John’s Gospel, “the Jews” refers to religious authorities. At that time, whether or not people followed Jesus, they were all Jewish. The disciples had to choose—what kind of justice? What must they learn and pray for?

Jesus calls them to decide: “If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” This is **restorative justice**.

To be Jesus’ disciples, we must receive the Holy Spirit, have the Spirit’s power and new creation, and slowly learn—in our personal lives, our families, and communities—to open space for God to work. So we can choose to walk out of death and into life. Will we seek reconciliation in alienation? Or choose to hold onto sin, pursue punishment, not erase, not reject, not embrace? In truth, we must make this choice daily, in every situation.

**Restorative justice**—the forgiveness of sin—is the fruit of faith. It is the power of God, surpassing our suffering, born from faith, working within us to heal. Forgiveness is the expression of faith. Most of our faith comes from experiences of being forgiven and forgiving others again and again.

Looking at human relationships through John’s Gospel, we understand why the exalted Jesus made forgiveness the first lesson for His disciples. They were hiding out of fear. Jesus calls them to lay down fear, saying, “Peace be with you!” The Spirit brings the power to act. Christ gave them strength to turn hatred and fear into true relationships, even into tenderness. Isn’t that what the Hutus and Tutsis did?

They set aside their natural feelings toward enemies, stepped away from emotions rooted in resentment and unimaginable suffering, redefined their enemies, and saw them as their own people. May the Lord help us.