

Wow! This gospel has a lot going on; I hear two distinct and important stories that are interwoven.

In the first story, we have most of the disciples sitting in a locked room, feeling fearful: probably with good reason. Remember Simon Peter, waiting while Jesus was interrogated by the high priest before the crucifixion? People accused Peter of “being with him,” being “one of them” and being “a Galilean who must be with him.” This is the same Simon Peter who only hours before had declared he would lay down his life for Jesus. Now he was so fearful, he denied all the accusations.

Many of the other disciples were fearful for similar reasons. Most of them ran away when Jesus was arrested, so they were not present during the crucifixion. **They** probably were feeling guilty.

I can imagine some of the conversation,

“What are we supposed to do now?”

“You and Peter went to the tomb this morning? It was empty?”

“Do you think someone stole his body? Why would they do that?”

“I heard Mary Magdalene claims she saw Jesus alive. She said she talked to him.”

The disciples had a lot of anxious questions. The room was filled with fear, guilt, and general confusion.

Suddenly, Jesus stood in the middle of the room, and he said, “Peace be with you.” How comforting is that? More than that, it’s a sign of forgiveness. The living Jesus offered soothing and forgiving words of peace. To further soothe their angst, he showed them the marks on his hands and side. The disciples were ecstatic, it was really Jesus. Mary Magdalene was telling the truth.

But then, Jesus gets down to business, as it were. He again shares peace with them, and then he begins to answer that burning question, “What are we supposed to do now?”

He gives them a commission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” He empowers them by breathing on them and saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This is the first time this commission is given, but definitely not the last. Each of us received it at our own confirmation.

When I first became an Episcopalian, I was a little put out because I needed to be confirmed. I grew up in a tradition of baptism at the age of twelve. In order to be baptized, one must make a confession of faith, accepting Jesus Christ as one’s Lord and Savior in front of the whole congregation. I still remember how intimidating that was. In that tradition, I was a full-fledged member of Christ’s church, so why did I have to be “confirmed?”

As I struggled for the answer to that question, I learned one thing about confirmation still leaves me amazed, apostolic succession. Another bishop laid hands on the bishop who laid hands on me. There is a continuous chain through the centuries to Peter, one of those onto whom the risen Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit.

Whenever each of us was confirmed, as the bishop laid hands on us, he or she said these words: “Strengthen your servant with your Holy Spirit; empower them for your service and sustain them all the days of their life.” Different words, but in the same sense, we too received the Holy Spirit and **we were commissioned**. We were, and are sent to the world to share the love of Jesus and serve as he would. I like the way President Kennedy put it in his Inaugural Address, “...here on earth God's work must truly be our own.”

The second story belongs to the disciple Thomas. He wasn't present when Jesus made his appearance on that first evening of the Resurrection. When the other disciples told him what they had seen and heard, Thomas was skeptical. “I have to see him and touch his wounds before I believe,” he said. Consequently, we speak of him as “Doubting” Thomas and it carries a negative spin. We might call a flat-earther, or someone who considers this pandemic a hoax, Doubting Thomas.

Jesus did not see it that way. A week later, the disciples had gathered again and this time Thomas was with them. Jesus appeared again and told Thomas, “Do not doubt, but believe,” and allowed Thomas to examine his wounds. Immediately, Thomas recognized him as the Christ; “My Lord and my God,” he said. In my mind, I see him dropping to his knees, awestruck as he said it.

So, how is Thomas's response different from the other disciples? Well, when they examined Jesus hands and side earlier, the Gospel records only that they rejoiced. They were thrilled their master and friend was alive.

Thomas' statement is far more powerful. He recognised Jesus as "My Lord and my God." Jesus blessed that recognition, but he also used it as an opportunity to address future generations who will believe without seeing. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That blessing is probably more for you and I than Thomas and the other disciples. In fact, the Gospel concludes by telling us that "...these (signs) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah."

I haven't seen or touched Jesus in the flesh, have you? Yet, we believe without seeing. We have Jesus word that we are blessed simply by believing. But don't forget we are also commissioned by confirmation to serve the world. I like to think I serve because I am blessed, I know I am blessed when I serve.