

“Layers of Belief”

John 20:19-31

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Focus: The gospel invites us to consider multiple layers of belief that unfold that first Easter day and the days that followed.

Years ago I belonged to a lectionary group that met weekly. This group of pastors met to discuss upcoming texts in worship. We met for lunch, prayer and study. It was a very meaningful time for me as a younger pastor when I would feed on the wisdom of the older and much wiser pastors.

There was an unwritten rule in the group of eight of us. When a pastor would put together his/her notes we would usually put together one page (front and back). Only one page! Do not put your reflections in a tome that we would not have time to read. Keep it to one page.

One year when we met to discuss the texts for this particular Sunday in the church year. “Tim” brought us a packet of information including sermon notes and ideas worth exploring. The packet must have been 10-12 pages. Someone in the group commented about his large cache of work. Another commented that he broke the unwritten rule. “Well, after serving as an associate pastor for years, I was almost always the preacher the Sunday after Easter.” The Senior Pastor of his church usually preached on Easter Sunday. He was relegated to the Sunday after Easter. Well, most of us don’t have associate pastors so we get to explore the text together. Today is sometimes referred to as Holy Humor Sunday. Churches are reimagining what ancient churches already started. That is, the joke is on evil. Jesus Christ is alive so we celebrate the day with laughter and clean jokes. It is a continuation of the celebration of Easter. For other churches, the text speaks loud and clear and it unravels its own unique sense of humor.

When I think about today’s text I find that there are multiple layers to unravel, or explore, within the text. **For example, we can study peace (v. 19).** What does peace look like in a post-resurrection understanding? Can we finally breathe a sigh of relief or is peace just an elusive experience that

happens periodically? Is this peace for the world or is it limited to those who have seen the resurrected Jesus? Surely, we know this is a kind of peace for the world just as Jesus came for the world.¹

We can explore this idea that the Holy Spirit is given to them when Jesus breathed on them (v. 22). On Pentecost we think of the Holy Spirit in terms of Acts chapter two but do we actually reflect on the breath of Jesus as the Holy Spirit? The breath here evokes an image that goes back to the creation account (Genesis 2:7). Could it be that this breath marks a second creation where new life is made possible?

We can pull back a layer of forgiveness (v. 23). Jesus states, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” This is probably the layer we want to skip over quickly because we don’t like this kind of theology. Our reformed understanding thinks of sin in terms of God. At least that is how I see it. I don’t think about retaining the sins of others. I don’t imagine I have that kind of power. As I reflect on this part of the passage I am reminded of the communal nature of the community here. This admonition is not given simply to the apostles. It is intended for the overall community to live in unity with one another.

Then there is a layer that deals with Thomas (vs. 24-29). Thomas is one of the disciples who has yet to see the risen Jesus. The others have said to him that they have seen him but Thomas is not convinced. “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.” Thomas is making a rational statement here. He heard about the gruesome death. He knows that criminals are carried from a cross. No one lives in that kind of scenario. So, most of us would argue that Thomas’ statement is appropriate. He has not seen what the others have witnessed. Notice the time delay in his statement and verse 26. A week later.

It makes me wonder what kinds of conversations he had during that particular week. Did people ask him about Jesus? Did they wonder if he ever saw him? What kinds of discussions popped up in conversation? The text moves to the house where the disciples are gathered. Thomas is with them and Jesus appears to them and utters the greeting we long to

¹ See John 3:16.

hear sometimes, "Peace be with you." He looks at Thomas and wants him to touch his body. It sounds a bit creepy at first but we know it is Jesus' way of reaching Thomas. "Do not doubt but believe."

Thomas responds with a confession for the ages, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus offers hope to those who have not seen and yet still believe.

One more layer to unravel might be the gladness of the disciples (v. 20).

Did you catch that? We often get caught up in the doubting part of Thomas that we fail to see the other disciples and their joy. "The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

That line in the text struck me. I think it is an understatement, actually. They were probably overjoyed to see the Lord. Dr. David Read was the long-time pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. He tells the story of when he was much younger. David was a chaplain for the British Army during World War II. He was captured and taken prisoner. He was held captive for five years. The first allied soldier he saw when he was liberated was an American Colonel. "Sir," he said, "I am so glad to see you - and that's an understatement."²

Read goes on to say that the disciples' joy stemmed not just from the fact that someone came back from the dead. It led them to joy because hope had been restored. New life was on the horizon now that Jesus had returned.

I have entitled this sermon layers of belief because I believe the overriding purpose of the text is to move us to belief (v. 31) in the resurrected Christ. I realize that it may take time for some (like Thomas) and countless others. But, God still walks through the closed doors of our lives to offer hope in the midst of a suffering and broken world.

I invite you this week to consider the different layers of this text and how you might come to understand your own belief in Christ. Let us be God's people sharing that belief this Easter season.

Let us pray.

² Motter, Alton M., editor. Preaching the Resurrection. Muhlenburg Press, 1959, Philadelphia, pp. 135-141.