

## **“AMONG THEM”**

John 20:19-25

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I know, you're probably thinking, "wait, there's more to Thomas's story!" You're correct: there is, and we'll get to it... next week. Usually, when this part of the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John is read, we would continue on through verse 31. But this part of John's Easter story is worthy of our attention on its own. And although it's short, I realized as I started looking at it, that a LOT is going on in these few verses.

On reading it, what we notice first, I think, are the things that Jesus says, and there are basically three of them. Each one of these remarks of Jesus has to do with a big topic: Peace. Mission. Forgiveness. You could – people have done – write volumes on each of those subjects. But here Jesus seems to just drop one sentence, kind of out of the blue, first about peace, then about sending, then about sins.

It's hard to tell whether this is just John giving us the main points of the conversation only, but I sure would like a little more context and explanation! As it is, what strikes me is that each of the things Jesus says to his disciples – and by extension to us, since that's why they are recorded here – each of the things he says is a hard thing.

Even "peace be with you." True, these are words of comfort and reassurance. They sort of echo the way angels in various Bible stories greet the human beings to whom they are bringing a message from God: they always say, "Do not be afraid." An angel visit is inherently a bit frightening, and so is the sudden appearance of a person you believed to be dead. Some calming words are definitely in order.

Jesus' "peace be with you" is probably also an acknowledgement of the fear and turmoil his disciples were already feeling. They'd been through the trauma of Jesus' suffering and death; they were afraid they themselves might become targets... and then they'd heard what Mary said about having seen Jesus alive, which at the very least must have been disorienting. They can't have been feeling very peaceful. We can understand what that's like. Words of peace are exactly right for this circumstance.

But hearing the words and having them mean something are two different stories. We sometimes feel the same need for Jesus to bring peace into our lives. "Peace be with you," we read. But sometimes I want to say, "Ok, Jesus, let me tell you about my life right now, how frantic I feel, all the things I'm worried about, the people I'm at odds with. And our world... I'd tell you about that, too, only, where do I start?????" You know what I mean? Finding a way to be at peace with the world around us, in our relationships, and in ourselves is *hard*.

Then Jesus say, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." I guess this is supposed to be motivational but since it sure looks like God sent Jesus to be rejected and suffer and sacrifice and

die, I wonder how the disciples received it. It might not have seemed like good news. Is this the nature of our mission in life, as well?? This also is a hard thing to wrap your mind around.

Finally, Jesus has something to say about sins and forgiveness... and what he says is kind of startling: "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Can he really be saying that some of us or all of us merely-human-beings who are his disciples have "say" over whether someone's sins will be forgiven? If so, does that apply just to sins against us? Any sins? How can I have the right to forgive a sin against someone else? Surely God wouldn't withhold forgiveness from somebody just because I was being petty? Isn't forgiveness ultimately up to God? And what is this "retaining" sins all about anyway? However we understand it, Jesus seems to be handing his disciples a lot of responsibility. This is hard, too – really hard.

Lots more could be said about each of those three sayings of Jesus, but suffice it to say that it is all really challenging. And at first I was kind of puzzled about how all of these things fit together... they seem almost like non-sequiturs.

Then I started to look at the other words around Jesus words, at the setting and narrative that shape the story. And I realized that paying attention to the context gave me a different sense of those difficult sayings.

The first thing I noticed is that John tells us "Jesus came and stood among them." He didn't send them a message of peace from afar; he came *among them*. It's his presence that made "peace" more than an abstract noun. Throughout his gospel, in fact, John equates peace with Jesus' presence. And here, when they realize that it's him, actually there with them, the fearful disciples begin to rejoice.

Then Jesus breathes on them, and says "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is reminiscent of the Spirit of God blowing over the waters in creation, or God breathing life into the human creature. Maybe it's John's version of Pentecost – quite different from Luke's, but then John often tells the story in his own way. In any case, we should probably understand what's happening as a sort of "new creation" story... Jesus breathing life into the church.

I was beginning to see here how significant it is that the disciples are together as Jesus speaks words of peace, as he breathes on them, as he asks them to receive the Spirit, as he says, "I'm sending you."

He says and does these things, not to one person, but to a community. We ought to hear the word "you" here as a plural. Y'all. Or "yins," as they say in Pittsburgh where I'm from.

Peace is not an impossible ideal for *me* to live up to or for you to chase.

Peace is the reassurance and courage and belonging we experience as Jesus is present in the community of faith.

Being sent is not a lonely, difficult, dangerous mission to save the world but a shared project of embodying the love of Jesus, as the Spirit.... Not something any of us can do adequately on our own.

The context of these hard sayings is community, by which I just mean the other followers of Jesus in whose company we are hearing his words and encountering his presence.

I'm not trying to remove the challenge from Jesus' instructions. These are still not easy things. But it makes a difference that the disciples were *together* and Jesus was *among them*.

What about "forgiving" sins and "retaining" sins? It seems to me that recognizing the communal context helps a little with understanding. There's no license here for any one of us to stand in the way of somebody else receiving God's grace. But the community of Jesus' followers has responsibilities with respect to sin. We are supposed to be instruments of God's grace... practicing forgiveness with each other, helping others to experience God forgiveness. It's certainly possible to be *obstacles* to someone finding forgiveness – faith communities sometimes are. But that's not how we are called to be. On the other side, it seems it's important for the community of faith to take sin seriously: not dismissing, not excusing, not forgetting sins and hurts and injustices that still need mending... something else that takes a village, a community.

As if to reiterate how important the context of "community" is here, John concludes his story of the first Easter evening by noting one disciple who was *not* there to see Jesus and be reassured by his presence and hear his words. Thomas wasn't present, and John tells us that he was unwilling to believe. I've always wondered *why* he wasn't there, and now I wonder if John ends this part of the story with reference to the absent Thomas as a way of emphasizing how critical community is for faith.

There is more to Thomas's story. But that's a story for next week. Peace be with you. Amen.