

“God’s Work in Our Lives”  
 The indispensability of the church  
 Sermon for 15 January 2017  
 Texts: John 20:19-31

Ownership. Owning the scriptures. I do not mean do you own a copy of the Bible, or do you have an app. on your device! I mean do you identify with the narrative in Scripture so entirely as to be able to exclaim with a wondering possessiveness, “You know what, this is my story. . . it is about my people, my God and me!” *Ownership of the biblical narrative* is what makes it possible to worship God with abandon, with unfettered joy, with gratitude. It is awesome beyond measure to know this is your book, your bible and it is talking about your Jesus, “My Lord and My God!” Those were the words of Thomas’ exclamation when Jesus removed all his doubt and gave him all joy in its place—these words ought to be owned by us.

It’s the first Sunday, resurrection day, Mary Magdalene had returned from her second trip to the open tomb of Jesus. On the first trip dealt with the facts of an empty tomb and a missing body. Peter and Joh followed up with an investigation. John got there first—the guard has disappeared and the seals are broken. Fine linen burial clothes were lying there and the **face cloth** was folded up and **in a separate place**. These were signs of an orderly exit, not of grave robbery or body theft. *It raised a lot more questions than it answered. I think we can all agree with that.* It is worth noting that John, who arrived at the tomb first, but entered the tomb second, when he sees the evidence, **saw and believed.** (20:8). John believed that Jesus had risen from the dead *before* he **understood the Scripture; that he must rise from the dead.** (Psalm 16:10: **For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption**(or, the pit). So see Psalm 49:7-9 **Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit.**) Belief outruns understanding—even as John outran Peter to the tomb! Here’s the situation, *bafflement*; **Then the disciples went back to their lodgings, perplexed** (v.10). The truth is that they do not know what to make of this.

Mary remained behind, **and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” She turned about and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know it was Jesus. . . . “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!”**(vv. 11-14; 15-16) *This is the first resurrection appearance!* Overwhelmed, she *embraces* him signifying to us that this is no dream, no vision, no chimera; it is real, physical resurrection body. Jesus makes it possible for her to “own” resurrection truth—to embrace all that He is. Can you imagine her state?! Totally excited, stunned, amazed—overwhelmed with joy . . . I believe ecstatic is the proper word! And there are times when we can catch a glimpse of him on each others face—as we worship with love, admiration, awe in a love quickened by awe.

And her extreme state may well factor into the disciples’ disbelief when they gather together later that same day. (They though er hysterical.) We are not told what the word on the street was, but the situation is intense and dangerous (the disciples are meeting

**behind locked doors**) because the word of the resurrection of Jesus is out. The Jews are busily trying to spin the great news as bad news, hiding the truth, paying off witnesses and searching for anything to discredit the rumors that Jesus had risen from the dead **just as he had said** (Mark 16:1-8). That is why **the fear of the Jews** is mentioned. And with this as prelude, we have come to the gospel reading for this morning (John 20:19-31).

Perhaps we should entitle this episode, “Jesus shows up for prayer meeting.”

It is to this first meeting of the “church in the making”—our church, still in the making after all these years. Still indispensable, still our spiritual home, our peace and resting place—all that I would draw our attention to that as we embark on a new year together. I would observe that Thomas is not present when Jesus makes His first appearance to the disciples—Thomas “missed church” so to speak. *We can all relate to missing church, can't we? And to playing catch up!* And, as it turned out, he had a struggle with the claims of those who were there for Jesus' appearing and saying these words: **“Peace be with you!”** **When he had said this He showed them His hands and His side.** Then again Jesus said, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you.”** **And when He said this He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”** Now, of all the times to miss church, this night was not it! Suddenly, at Jesus' word, everything changes: the world has become our mission field, our assignment; it is our theater of engagement.

Before we get to what Jesus' words (**Peace be with you. As the Father sent Me so send I you . . .**) meant here for those who are joined by faith to Jesus and to each other as church, let's take note: these **words** are Jesus' first words (to them as church). They are *life!* That is they convey, or communicate life. *And they do this because of Who Jesus, or who the speaker actually is! He speaks and everything changes!* For instance, when Jesus had declared, at the very outset of His ministry (as the Sent One, the pure and perfect Sacrifice for our sins, as the Lamb and the Atoning One): **The Kingdom of God is at hand!** It was just as He said because He, the King Himself, was standing there—right at hand! So we may see this force of presence and power to His words—all of them—no wonder men exclaimed **No man ever spoke as this Man spoke!** For none had, and none has ever so spoken since!!

I might well add this: not only was the King present, so also was the truth, righteousness, holiness and love, and majesty, all that God eternally is **incarnate!** Jesus is entirely God, entirely present, absolutely at hand as He speaks. Those who heard Him speak were hearing God speak in human accents, in human speech—and none of them, just like Thomas, could actually wrap their minds around the indisputable facticity of the event. And like Thomas, they needed the church to authenticate, to verify, confirm and establish. Now, let me tell you something you may not know, we, you and I, are equally as dependent on the church for the authentication of our faith **as were they!** **IF YOU DON'T TAKE ANYTHING ELSE AWAY FROM THIS MESSAGE TAKE THIS: THE CHURCH IS INDISPENSABLE TO THE PURPOSES OF GOD FPR THIS WORLD.**

Because no other man is Jesus, because only His words accomplish what He announces: we believe that He was exactly Who He said He was!

If I had to put words to this phenomenon, I would call Jesus' speech "performative discourse." PERFORMATIVE DISCOURSE IS WORTH REMEMBERING, TOO! This is not the first time that the Bible records "performative discourse." No, the first time has to do with Creation. **And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.** The Hebrew word for that is *dabar*= the word that is the act. Performative discourse is a divine activity. By that I mean, it is only something that God Himself can do . . . and does. Yes, does, for that is exactly what Jesus did when He "spoke" the Kingdom of God into existence. God's words and Jesus as God spoke things that altered physical reality—as in blind eyes seeking, ears being unstopped and leprosy disappearing. *All of which you had to be there for in order to fully appreciate. Jesus' personhood, His identity is conveyed by the words He speaks:*

**. . . so shall My word be that goes out from my mouth (God speaking); it shall not return to be empty (void), but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.** Isaiah 55:11  
What His words accomplish must be as He says (be effectual!), or He is a fraud!

For example, if He says **the Kingdom of God is at hand** because I the King am here, and it isn't actually there, then either He is not a king, or the kingdom has not actually come as He says it had. Both of which assertions we must confess to be true at the very moment He spoke them. *For if these words, the Kingdom of God is at hand are suspect at all, we have a problem Houston: we have no way of knowing if the Kingdom ever was, or ever will be at hand!* For a judge to judge, he must first be a judge! The same is true for a king, yes, even for the King go of Israel. Here's a way forward.

God has said, **I will give you a new heart . . . a heart of flesh, and not of stone** in Ezekiel 34:

**24 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules [Or my just decrees]. 28 You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.**

Either you have this new heart, believer, or you do not; if you do not, you are deaf and blind to the Kingdom of God (**you can neither see it, or enter it**); and yet if you do have that new heart you can "hear" what I am saying to you! And, again, if you can not hear, having missed church that Sunday (!), a new heart is the very first thing to ask Jesus for.

The "church in the making" had its challenges. We have our challenges. As it is written, John 20:30 **Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing (them) you may have life in His name.** Now some, I know, take these "many other signs" to be particular to the proof of His "resurrection reality" (because it says **in their presence**). And while I think that this is very reasonable. The passage also establishes that Thomas was not as far out there

in his “disbelieving” (which is not the same thing as doubting!), He was not alone in disbelief—they all wanted some ‘proving’ of the facts! However, the reason given in the passage for these signs is **that by believing** (the signs) **you** (we, the readers!) **might have life**. Yes, **life**, according to John from Jesus, and **peace** as well.

Now we are more ready, perhaps, to consider the words. **Peace be with you**. May we suppose that **peace** is in order because “panic” has ensued? Jesus, the crucified and risen, has appeared in their midst **demonstrating life after death (Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, v.19)** Even that was a *tour de force*. And then, on top of that, He shows them His resurrection signs (**hands and His side**). Yes, it is really Me—alive and present! This was unsettling. It was unanticipated and uninvited, sudden and intrusive. So Jesus says a second time, **Peace be with you**. The world says, it takes a village to raise a child—more significantly, it takes a church to produce a Christian!

Then Jesus moves swiftly to His agenda—there’s a purpose for this visitation *beyond proving He was alive! Beyond altering forever their understanding of life and death! Beyond signifying that sin and death had been defeated and they were free at last!* This is what He says: **As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you**. Our mission is not over, friends, there is even more of the declaring of the Kingdom of God to be done, even more proclaiming of forgiveness of sins through faith in King Jesus, Messiah—and *this leg of the divine mission has been assigned to us!* Oh, my goodness! Do we ever have our work cut out for us!

**And when He had said this**. When He had given us our marching orders, He adds to that commissioning and empowerment (or spiritual anointing)—*one which does not depend upon the day of pentecost to appear, or materialize!* **He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”** And it happened right then! Effectually, fully, fleshing out the peace He put in us, or on us. He always empowers us to obey. We are able to do it because He is Who He says He is! Then, just to be crystal clear, Jesus puts the focus on forgiveness of sins (not on healing, signs, miracles and deliverances!) because *that is why that all creation would be restored to the Father to the glory of His Name*. We may infer that forgiveness of sin is the big deal; it is what we are to do in Jesus’ name. People need to know 1. that sin is a problem; 2. it has always been the problem; 3. that God has conquered sin and death through the Son; so 4. forgiveness is possible (we are evidence of that forgiveness in our freedom and in our execution of forgiveness on behalf of others!) If we forgive, they are forgiven; if we do not forgive, they are not forgiven. That is a power greater than the power over life and death! Central to this is the “we” business. We, as church, possess this power of forgiveness—not as individuals, but as members one of another, loving and serving the body, being built up in love!

Well, that is rather a lot to miss by missing church! Jesus must have known about the “no one left behind” movement because He comes back for Thomas. He comes back to insure that Thomas is in on the ground floor. This is a great spiritual campaign, the greatest mission of all time. It brings opportunities, presents challenges and makes demands of us. What a joy it is to serve our risen Savior!

We serve Him as His people gathered at East Winthrop. He is our featured attraction—in us and among us! We must pray with diligence for all the Mary’s and Thomas’s out there. . . pray in the harvest. **He said to**. If we ask God to lead us to those He

has prepared for us to bring in . . . to those in distress, or grief . . . those in shock, doubt, or confusion. If we minister to them properly, if we evidence the joy of being His, they will want to minister with us—and will want to get to know Him with us. Church is where the action is: it is indispensable!

Who wants to miss out on that? Nobody, right?