“Notice Anything Different?”

“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Do you notice anything different about me?

It’s one of those questions for which there isn’t always an obvious answer. The person who asks the questions clearly believes that there is something that has changed about them that should be noticeable by others, but the one who is being asked might not see this in the same way. It might be an outward change: a new haircut, or a significant weight loss, or a new wardrobe. The change might be an internal one: the person has been able to quit smoking, or eat healthier, or has a more positive outlook on life. Whether it is noticeable at first or not, something significant has changed in this person’s life that they believe should be perceptible to all.

When Thomas first encounters his fellow disciples following the death of Jesus, he doesn’t notice anything different about them. They are the same persons who have been his companions since each was called to follow Jesus. They are the same people who often quarreled with each other about who was the greatest, the same people who time and again didn’t seem capable of grasping the message Jesus was teaching, and the same people who fled and hid in fear after Jesus’ arrest. When Thomas is reunited with the other disciples a week following the first Easter morning, nothing about them appears to be different.

But what Thomas does not realize is that there is something very different about his fellow disciples because of what happened to them while he was absent. We do not know why Thomas was not among the gathering of disciples who encountered the risen Lord Jesus on the “evening of that day, the first day of the week, [when] the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19). This gathering of “disciples” (mathetai), like that at Jesus’ farewell meal, likely included the core group, but there is no indication that it was limited to them. The gathering of disciples represents the faith community in general, not only those who would be entrusted with the apostolic leadership of the early church. When we encounter them, they are a people who are cowering in fear — fear of the authorities who had played a role in Jesus’ death, not of the Jewish people. They were hiding in fear that Jesus’ fate would soon be theirs as well.

It is in the midst of this gathering of fear-filled disciples that “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’” These words were a common greeting in the ancient world (many of Paul’s letters begin with a greeting of peace: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” – Romans 1:7), but here the greeting serves an additional function: with these words, Jesus fulfills the promise from his Farewell Discourse of the gift of his peace: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (14:27). This peace is given by the Risen Christ to a community that will experience the world’s hatred and persecution, and who are currently lock in out of fear; it is Jesus’ assurance to his disciples that “they need not face the authorities anxiously, but can do so with the peace of Jesus.” (Gail O’Day).

After greeting them with the blessing of his peace, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [which] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7), Jesus “showed them his hands and his side,” the marks of the nails and the spear which had pierced his body, underscoring the continuity between the earthly and the risen Jesus. When the disciples see the wounds on the body of Jesus, they “rejoiced when the saw the Lord” (20:20), fulfilling Jesus’ promise that their pain will turn to joy when they see him again:
“Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” – 16:20-22.

The disciples can now receive Jesus’ words “peace be with you” as his gift of peace and not simply as a greeting after they recognize that the person who speaks to them is “the Lord.” Jesus follows his second offering of peace with his message that “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (20:21), words that are a direct echo of his prayer on behalf of his followers before his Passion: “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” (17:18). Jesus commissions the faith community to continue the work God sent him to do.

The commissioning of the disciples is accompanied by Jesus’ bestowing the gift of the Holy Spirit that will empower the community to continue Jesus’ work: “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (20:22). The word “to breathe” (emphysao) occurs only here in the New Testament and evokes the description of God breathing the breath of life into the first human being in Genesis (“... then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” – 2:7), as well as the breath that gives life to the dry bones in Ezekiel (“Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breath upon these slain, that they may live.’” – 37:8-9). Through this gift of the Holy Spirit, “Jesus’ followers receive nothing less than the fullness of the glorified Son. They lives can therefore accomplish ends similar to his life’s, insofar as they reveal God.” (Matt Skinner).

To the faith community that has been empowered by Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit comes a corresponding responsibility: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (20:23). Forgiveness of sins is to be the work of the entire community, not only its apostolic leaders; forgiveness is the Spirit-empowered mission of continuing Jesus’ work in the world.

The understanding of “sin” in this passage is quite different from our normal understanding of it. In John’s Gospel, “sin” is a theological failing, not a moral or behavioral transgression. To have “sin” is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus. Jesus commissions the faith community to continue his work of making God and Jesus known to the world, bringing the world to the moment of decision and judgment with regard to sin:

“If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.” – 15:22-24.

The community is to continue the work God sent Jesus to do, so that “they can be a part of seeing others come to believe in Jesus and what he discloses.” (Skinner).

When Thomas is reunited with the other disciples, at first he does not notice any difference in them. Their announcement to him – “We have seen the Lord” – is the same announcement that Mary Magdalene had made to them after Jesus’ Resurrection. But to Thomas, there is nothing different about those who bring this announcement; they are the same people that he has known for years, with all of their faults, their petty jealousies, and their inability to understand Jesus’ teachings. There is no reason why he should look upon them differently or take their message at face value; so Thomas insists that “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.” (20:25). Thomas demands proof, not merely the second-hand message of others, if he is to believe what they have proclaimed.
While Thomas does not see anything different about his fellow disciples, there are in fact two fundamental differences that have occurred among them:

1. The message that they bring to Thomas is not their own but is inspired by the Holy Spirit that Jesus has breathed into them. Therefore, their message is not their own but is God’s Word that they have been empowered to proclaim; as Jesus had promised his followers before his ascension, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8).

2. Fear is no longer present among them, as it had been before Jesus’ appearance. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, fear has been removed; for those who are in Christ and blessed by the Holy Spirit, “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:18).

It is to Thomas and these Spirit-empowered disciples that Jesus appears again and for a third time greets them with “peace be with you.” He then offers to give Thomas exactly what he demanded: “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” (20:27). Unfortunately, our English translation is not very accurate, because the word “doubt” occurs nowhere in this passage. A literal translation reads “do not be unbelieving (apistos) but believing (pistos).” Jesus exhorts Thomas to move from unbelief to belief. This story does not focus on doubt and skepticism, but on the grounds of faith. Jesus meets the conditions that Thomas set for belief, with the result being that Thomas cries out “My Lord and my God!” (20:28), which is the most powerful and complete confession of Jesus in John. It is not touching Jesus that leads Thomas to this confession of faith (there is no evidence that he ever accepts Jesus’ offer), but Jesus’ gracious offer of himself.

Jesus’ response to Thomas’ confession of faith has also been frequently misunderstood; he does not disparage the faith of the first disciples, which was grounded in sight, but promises that belief will not be limited to those who see what Thomas has seen; for “blessed are those who have not seen and have come to believe.” (20:29). Future generations will be included in the joy of the resurrection that the disciples seen, good news that they will receive both through the continuing witness of the faith community to the resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit that empowers us to embrace this gift that we cannot receive by ourselves:

- “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common true faith. Daily in this Christian Church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins – mine and those of all believers. On the last day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.” – Martin Luther, Small Catechism.

Today’s Gospel lesson concludes with the Evangelist speaking directly to all readers of every generation so that they may also interpret the signs of Jesus’ resurrection and come to faith: “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (20:31). The truth of Scripture “lies in its power to make the presence of God in Jesus available to the faith community in each successive generation.” (O’Day). We believe that God’s Word is a living word that speaks to us anew every time we hear it; it is a Word that has the power to transform our lives, so that we may believe that Christ is risen and that if we have been “buried with him by baptism into death … as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:4-5). As the disciples were transformed from fear-filled persons hiding behind locked doors to bold witnesses to the resurrection through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, so too are we changed by the gift of the Holy
Spirit that frees us from the bondage to fear so that we “might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” (Luke 1:74).

“‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.’ Can we really do that? No. Can the story make us feel as if we can? Yes. If we open ourselves up to it. If we believe, because believing is all the Holy Spirit needs to bring the story to life. Or to put it more precisely, believing is all the Holy Spirit needs to bring us to life, breathing on us the same way Jesus breathed on his disciples.” — Barbara Brown Taylor.

Do you notice anything different about me?

We may not appear any different than we have before; our hair may be exactly the same, our weight unchanged, and our clothes the same outfit that we have worn many times. But the truth is that there is something different about us; because in Holy Baptism we were “reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.” When we were baptized through water and the Word, we became children of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit “to proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9). When we are reborn as God’s holy people, members of the same community of faith that bore witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we “regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:16-17). We no longer look upon each other as we once may have, for now we have been given “grace-healed eyes” so that we might see the difference that has occurred in every person who has been blessed by God’s Word and empowered by God’s Spirit.

“We may be abominations, but we are still God’s pride and joy. All of us in the church need ‘grace-healed eyes’ to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. ‘To love a person,’ said Dostoevsky, ‘means to see him as God intended him to be.’” — Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace?

We are different because we are God’s children, and therefore we are no longer enslaved by the power of fear. As the first words that the angels speak at both Christmas and Easter are “do not be afraid,” so also does God call us every day to “fear not,” because no matter what happens in our future nothing can separate us from God’s love that is ours in our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

“Whenever in such fear we cry to God, God cannot refrain from helping us. Just as Christ did not stay long outside, away from his frightened disciples, but soon was there comforting them and saying, ‘Peace be with you, I have come, be of good cheer and do not be afraid,’ so it is still. When we are afraid, God lifts us up and causes the gospel to be preached to us and thus restores to us a glad and sure conscience.” — Martin Luther, 1526.

Do you notice anything different about me?

Yes – you are a child of God! You are born anew of water and the Word. You have been empowered by the Holy Spirit so that you too might believe the good news of the resurrection, and know that as Christ lives we shall live also. You no longer are a slave to fear. You live every day in the joy that Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.