

April 24, 2022
John 20:19-31

Easter 2
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“The Mislabeled Disciple”

“But these things 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.”

On a recent visit to the supermarket, I noticed the label on the products on the shelves and found myself thinking about how dependent we are on accurate labels. This dependence becomes clear if we have ever had an experience with mislabeling, when the label on the outside does not match the product on the inside. It may be when you buy a can of tomato soup, only to discover that there are baked beans inside; or you buy a jar of mild salsa, but when you dip into it you find out that it is the very spicy version; or you buy a novel by Danielle Steele, but to your surprise and shock come to the realization that it is a novel by Stephen King. Mislabeling can be an experience that makes us question the accuracy of labels on the products we buy and our dependence upon them.

Mislabeled products is an experience that can be inconvenient; but mislabeling of a person can have far greater consequences. People are often labelled in ways that demean them or destroy their reputations; they are labelled as “losers,” “failures,” “dishonest,” “corrupt,” or “immoral.” In political campaigns, mislabeling one’s opponents often becomes a tactic intended to gain an advantage, even if the labelling has no correlation with reality. Mislabeling a person can destroy a person’s career, their reputation, even their lives. As Soren Kierkegaard once warned, *“once you label me, you negate me.”*

One person in the Bible who has had a label attached to him for centuries is Thomas, one of the Twelve Disciples who followed Jesus throughout his ministry and would be commissioned as an apostle to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth. But whenever we say his name, a label is almost immediately attached: “Doubting Thomas.” The phrase has even gotten into the vernacular to describe a person who expresses doubts or reservations in any situation; it is not a complement if someone ever labels you a “doubting Thomas.” The source of this labelling is in today’s Gospel lesson, when Thomas refuses to believe the news his fellow disciples share with him that *“we have seen the Lord”* (John 20:25), insisting 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.”* Countless sermons have chastised Thomas for his

doubting, and have cautioned congregations not to follow his example, to follow the words of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to “*do not doubt but believe*” (20:27). Next to the betrayal of Judas and the denials of Peter, the doubting of Thomas is used as a cautionary tale for how one should not live as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

But before we place such a label on Thomas, we need to look at today’s Gospel lesson, in which Jesus appears to his disciples after appearing to Mary Magdalene and commissioning her as the “apostle to the apostles” with the message that she is to “*go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’*” (20:17). Mary Magdalene proclaims the Easter Gospel for the first time when she tells them “*‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*” (20:18). On the evening of that first Easter Day, the disciples were gathered behind locked doors because of their fear of the same authorities who had arrested and crucified Jesus. This gathering of Jesus’ followers included the core group of disciples, but there is no indication that it was limited to them; “*this gathering represents the faith community in general, not the apostolic leadership.*” (Gail O’Day). In spite of the doors being locked, “*Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’*” (20:19). This was a conventional greeting at this time (“*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” – Romans 1:7), but here it functions as the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise of 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 to the community who will experience the world’s hatred and persecution (“*If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.*” – 15:18). It is a reminder that the faith community need not face opposition anxiously, but can do so with the peace of Jesus, “*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 4:7).

Following his greeting of peace, Jesus shows the disciples his hands and his side, the wounds he suffered at his crucifixion that underscore the continuity between the earthly and risen Jesus. At the sight of his wounds, “*the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord*” (20:20); this is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that the disciples’ 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 to joy ... 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.

Jesus then repeats his greeting “*peace be with you,*” which is not meant to merely duplicate his initial greeting. The disciples can receive Jesus’ words as the gift of peace only after they recognize that the person greeting them is “the Lord.” His words relate to his commissioning of his disciples to continue the work God has sent him to do: “*as the Father has sent me, so I send you*” (20:21). The disciples are now commissioned as “apostles,” persons who are “sent out” to proclaim the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, fulfilling his prayer that “*as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*” (17:18). Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples is followed by his breathing on them that is accompanied with his words “*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.*” (20:22b-23). Jesus’ breathing on the disciples bestows on them the gift of the Holy Spirit which “breathing” (*emphasao*) evokes a description of God’s breathing the breath of life into the first human at creation (“*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*” (Genesis 2:7) as well as the Lord’s word to Ezekiel, calling upon him to “*prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon the slain, that they may live*” (Ezekiel 37:9). Jesus’ commissioning of the apostles closes with his words about forgiving and retaining sins. These words are addressed to the entire faith community; forgiveness of sins is the work of all followers of Jesus, for “*the forgiveness of sins must be understood as the Spirit-empowered mission of continuing Jesus’ work in the world.*” (O’Day). In the Fourth Gospel, “sin” (*hamartia*) is a theological failing, not a moral or behavioural transgression. To have sin in John’s Gospel is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus; Jesus brings people to judgment by his revealing work and presence in the world. The community is to continue what God sent Jesus to do.

- “The beginning of the community’s life is not separated from the story of Easter; indeed, in John, the gift of the Spirit and the commissioning of the church occur on Easter Sunday evening. The Johannine Easter narratives are a reminder that the church’s life is intimately bound to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. To celebrate the resurrection, the Fourth Gospel suggests, is also to celebrate the beginnings of the church’s mission in the world. Jesus lives, not because he can walk through locked doors and show his wounds to frightened disciples, but because he breathes new life into those disciples through the gift of the Spirit and commissions them to continue his word.” – O’Day.

For reasons that are not explained, Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to the disciples; so, they announce to him when he returns that “*we have seen the Lord,*” the same announcement Mary Magdalene made to them. Since the disciples at first did not seem to believe Mary’s announcement, Thomas is acting no differently from the other disciples when he demands that “*unless I see that 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 for tangible proof of the resurrection are exactly what Jesus has given his disciples; he needs to see for himself so that he may also be a reliable eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

One week later, the disciples are again in the same house, and this time Thomas is with them. One major difference from the previous week is that no mention is made of fear; the presence of the Holy Spirit given by the risen Jesus has driven away their fear, a reminder of the teaching that “*there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear*” (1 John 4:18). Even though the doors of the house are once again shut, “*Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you’*” (20:26). He then turns to Thomas and offers him exactly what he has demanded: “*Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.*” (20:27). Jesus makes his body available to Thomas, and Thomas cooperates with Jesus’ instructions to examine his hands and his side so that he can proclaim, “*My Lord and my God!*” (20:28), the most powerful and complete confession of Jesus in John’s Gospel. There is no mention of Thomas touching Jesus’ body; it is not touching Jesus that leads Thomas to this confession of faith but Jesus’ gracious offer of himself.

The labelling of Thomas as “doubting” is largely due to Jesus’ statement after he offers his hands and his side to this disciple: “*Do not doubt but believe.*” Unfortunately, this is not the most accurate way to translate this verse; in fact, the word “doubt” does not occur anywhere in this text. A literal translation of Jesus’ statement reads “*do not be unbelieving (apistos) but believing (pistos).*” Jesus exhorts Thomas to move from a position of unbelief to belief; the story does not focus on doubt and skepticism, but on the grounds of faith. “Believing” also includes an element of trust, so that Jesus’ invitation could also be understood as encouraging Thomas to “*not be distrusting but trusting.*” Jesus offers Thomas the proof he needs so that he might believe and trust in the Lord and proclaim the Gospel as an eyewitness to the resurrection of Christ. “*Jesus will meet the conditions that Thomas set for his belief; indeed, he explicitly identifies his offer of himself as the motivation for Thomas’ move from unbelief to belief.*” (O’Day). The gift of trust that Jesus gives Thomas and all the disciples “*is an indispensable precursor for what Jesus is asking*

his disciples to do – continue his ministry on earth, commissioned by the Holy Spirit.” (Rene Such Schreiner).

After Thomas confesses Jesus as *“my Lord and my God,”* Jesus responds with a question and statement that have also frequently been misunderstood. In our translation, Jesus’ response is in the form of a question: *“Have you believed because you have seen me?”* (20:29); this can also be translated as a statement in which Jesus proclaims that *“you have believed because you have seen me”*; Jesus does not disapprove of Thomas’ faith but simply declares that Thomas has arrived at full Easter faith because of the tangible proof that has been given to him. This statement leads to Jesus’ beatitude where he declares that *“blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”* Belief and trust in Jesus will not be limited to those who see what Thomas and the apostles have seen; future generations will be included in the joy the first disciples experienced at the sight of the risen Lord. The beatitude stresses the importance of the apostolic witness to Jesus by the disciples who received tangible proof of Jesus’ resurrection (*“He who saw this has testified so that you may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.”* – 19:35). Later generations will come to faith through the testimony of the first apostles, so that even though they will not see the risen Lord in the flesh they may hear the proclamation of his resurrection and come to believe that he is indeed *“my Lord and my God.”*

Our Gospel lesson concludes with the Evangelist speaking directly to those who will read this Gospel, offering a purpose statement for the writing of this work. John acknowledges that *“Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.”* (20:30). Indeed the other Gospel contains accounts of miracles and healings that are not found in the Fourth Gospel; in fact, no one Gospel contains all of the accounts of all of Jesus’ ministry, his works, and his signs which point beyond himself to the Kingdom of God that he has come to proclaim. But the purpose of what is written in John’s Gospel is clear: *“these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that in believing you may have life in his name.”* (20:31). As the presence of the risen Lord gave Thomas and the apostles what they needed to believe and trust in the Lord and the Word of God which is the *“word of eternal life”* (6:68), so does the presence of God in God’s Holy Word assure us that what we are hearing spoken to us is truly *“the Word of the Lord; the Word of God, Word of life,”* that our Lord is present among us in God’s Holy Word and that this word is the source of life and salvation for all who believe and trust in what the Lord is speaking to us. *“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).

It is clear that Thomas is a “mislabeled disciple.” There is no evidence that he doubts or is skeptical about the resurrection of Jesus; he knows that if he is to be a reliable eyewitness in being sent forth to proclaim this Gospel message that he needs to see for himself so that he might believe and trust that Jesus is his Lord and his God, and that future generations might share in this liberating faith in the Gospel that is “*an invitation to heavenly life, to communion with God.*” (Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV). If we are to label this apostle, may he be known as “*trusting Thomas,*” and may we share this same trusting faith that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour, that he died and rose again so that we might all walk in newness of life in the perfect love of God which casts out fear and assures us that there is life, love and joy in the good news that **Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Amen.