

“Signs for Life”

“But 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.”

A “dramatic aside” is a device used by playwrights in which a character addresses the audience directly, often without the other characters realizing that this is taking place. These asides are used to express a truth, reveal a feeling, or comment on the events of the story. Purposes of an aside include foreshadowing, revealing the character’s intentions, revealing vital information, or comic relief. One of the best-known uses of dramatic asides is in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, in which the villainous Iago has many asides where he reveals the true intentions of his actions and scheming. The action involved in a dramatic aside “*transcends the text and makes audiences feel they are directly involved in the story by offering information other characters cannot hear.*” (www.backstage.com).

Of the four Gospel writers, John makes the most frequent use of dramatic asides in the Fourth Gospel. The Evangelist often steps away from the gospel narrative to offer additional information for readers or to make comments to the readers that will help them understanding the meaning of the good news of Jesus Christ for them. In his account of Jesus’ meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, John informs his audience that “*Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans*” (4:9) so that they may better understand why this episode was so unusual at the time. In his passion narrative, John steps away from his account of the soldier piercing Jesus’ side with a spear to comment that “*he who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.*” – 19:35). In today’s Gospel lesson, John turns to his audience after his account of Jesus’ appearance to Thomas and the disciples to offer a comment as to what this means for those who are reading these words:

- “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But 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.” – 20:30-31.

John's account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ begins when Mary Magdalene, who all four Gospels agree was a witness to the crucifixion, comes to the tomb early on Sunday morning and discovers that the stone had been removed from the tomb. Assuming that someone has stolen Jesus' body, Mary runs and tells Peter and John that "*they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.*" (20:2). Both disciples run to the tomb and discover the linen wrappings lying where the body had been placed after Jesus' death on Good Friday, but "*they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.*" (20:9). The disciples leave, but Mary "*stood weeping outside the tomb*" (20:11). When she looks into the tomb a second time, she sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been laid; the angels ask her, "*woman, why are you weeping?*" to which Mary replies that "*they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him*" (20:13). Unlike in the Synoptic Gospels, the angels make no announcement of the resurrection; instead, when Mary turns away from the tomb, she sees a man standing there who John identifies as Jesus, "*but she did not know that it was Jesus*" (20:14). The man she assumes is a gardener asks her, "*Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?*" (20:15). Still believing that Jesus' body has been stolen, Mary begs the man "*sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.*" But then something unexpected happens: the man says her name, "*Mary.*" It is at this moment that she recognizes who it is, and she cries out "*Rabbouni! (which means Teacher)/*" (20:16). Mary Magdalene is the first person to come into the present of the resurrected Jesus, and she is the first person commissioned by the Risen Lord to share the good news of Christ's victory over death: "*Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But 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 becomes the first person to proclaim the Gospel of the resurrection of Jesus Christ when she announces to the disciples that "*'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to them.*" (20:18).

Jesus' second appearance to his followers following his resurrection happens on the evening of that first Easter Sunday, where the disciples are cowering behind locked doors out of fear that the same authorities who had put Jesus to death would arrest them, and they would suffer the same fate. But despite the doors being locked, "*Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'*" (20:19). The "peace" (*Eirene*) of which Jesus speaks is not the mere cessation of warfare or a fragile cease-fire; it is the gift he offered his followers in his Farewell Discourse in the hours before his death:

- “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.

After Jesus greets his fear-filled disciples with this word of peace, he shows them his hands and his side, the wounds he suffered in his crucifixion, so that *“the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”* (20:20). But then Jesus offers the same blessing a second time: *“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”* 20:21). It is not by accident that Jesus offers his gift of peace twice to his disciples; *“this word of peace from the resurrected one is necessary to calm the disciples’ fear, to settle their hearts and minds that are still caught in the grip of doubt and unbelief, first at the unexpected outcome of Jesus’ ministry, his crucifixion, and then at the still-unbelievable story told by Mary Magdalene.”* (Gennifer Benjamin Brooks). As eyewitnesses to the risen Lord Jesus Christ and recipients of his gift of peace, the disciples are now blessed by the gift of the Holy Spirit so that they may be sent forth as apostles to proclaim the message of the resurrection: *“When he has said this, Jesus breathed on them and said to them, ‘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.’”* (20:23).

For some reason, Thomas is not present when Jesus first appears to the disciples. When he returns, the other disciples tell him that *“we have seen the Lord.”* (20:25). But Thomas will not believe based solely on their words; he demands the same proof that the others had received when he proclaims 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). This proof is given to Thomas when Jesus appears to the disciples a week later; even though they are still hiding behind locked doors, Jesus comes into their presence and again greets them with the words *“peace be with you.”* (20:26). He then turns to Thomas and invites his disciple to *“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). Jesus offers Thomas the opportunity to have the proof that he said he required; but when Thomas stands before the Risen Lord, he has no need to physically touch Jesus’ wounds, crying out that Jesus is *“My Lord and my God!”* (20:28). Jesus’ dialogue with Thomas ends with a beatitude, announcing that *“blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”* (20:29).

It is at this point that the Evangelist turns aside from the narrative and addresses the audience, those who have indeed not witnessed Jesus’ resurrected body but have come to believe the Gospel message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. John has previously referred to the disciples’ experience after the resurrection

(*“After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he has said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”* – 2:22). In his aside following his accounts of Jesus’ resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and Thomas, *“the Fourth Evangelist interrupts the flow of the narrative to ensure that the reader grasps the significance of what has just been recounted.”* (Gail O’Day). The Evangelist underscores for his readers that Jesus’ words of blessing are addressed to them; they are the ones who *“have not seen and yet have come to believe.”* It underscores the fact that the Gospel of John is a missionary document, intended to bring people to faith and to support and sustain the faith of those who already believe. John begins his aside by reporting that *“Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.”* (20:30). To identify Jesus’ resurrection appearances as “signs” means that, like Jesus’ other signs in the Fourth Gospel, the theological truth of the resurrection lies not in the appearance itself, but in that to which it points (*“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”* – 2:11). The resurrection appearance stories are about something other than Jesus’ miraculous return from death. In 20:1-10, the theological truth that is revealed by the empty tomb is Jesus’ victory over death and the ruler of this world:

- “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world is driven out. And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.” – 12:31-32.

In 20:11-18, the revealed truth is Jesus’ continuing presence among his people as the Good Shepherd, the one who *“lays down his life for the sheep ... For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.”* (10:11, 17). In 20:19-23, Jesus’ appearance to his disciples points to the gift of the Spirit/Paraclete and the truth of his promises to his disciples in the Farewell Discourse:

- “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you.” – 14:15-17.
- “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” – 14:25-26.
- “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you

the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” – 16:12-15.

In each of these stories, were Jesus’ appearance taken only as a miracle and not as a “sign,” its revelatory power would be lost. This is most dramatically clear in Jesus’ appearance to Thomas; *“Thomas sees through the physical miracle that he demands to that to which it points: the full revelation of God in Jesus ... it points to God in Jesus and so leads to faith.”* (O’Day). The truth to which the signs of Jesus’ resurrection appearances point is not his return from death, but the completion of his “hour” (*“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”* – 12:23). The reader, like the other disciples, is not summoned merely to believe in the resurrection, but to believe in the revelation of Jesus’ identity and relationship with God, of which the resurrection is a sign. In this respect, even Jesus’ wounds act as signs: they reveal that he has overcome death and that his claims to be divine are true. The appearance to Thomas concludes by turning the focus from those to whom Jesus first appears to later generations of disciples. The fact that these generations did not see the Lord firsthand does not make their faith in the risen Jesus any less genuine; the Gospel stresses the importance of the apostolic witness to Jesus that these eyewitnesses, empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit, will proclaim: *“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.”* (17:20). The Fourth Gospel *“is John’s testimony to the reality and power of the risen Jesus, and by reading it later generations of readers can believe in Jesus as the Son of God.”* (Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV).

After beginning his aside by stating that there are many other signs that Jesus performed in the presence of his disciples that were not included in John’s Gospel, the Evangelist states the purpose of those that he chose to include in his narrative: *“But 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 Fourth Gospel is written not as a mere historical document of the life of a remarkable man from Nazareth; it is the living Word of God that proclaims the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to every generation so that they may receive the gift of *“forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation”* which are the blessings of the Gospel meant for all people in all times and places. The Gospel is an invitation to receive *“life in his name,”* to communion with God *“to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who are born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God”* (1:12-13). As the disciples who saw the risen Jesus *“penetrated beyond the startling appearance to believe that Jesus is Lord and God”* (Raymond Brown), John has recorded these

appearances so that the reader who believes without seeing the risen Jesus may also come to faith:

- “The signs of the post-resurrection period reveal that the work of the hour has been completed, that Jesus is glorified and now gives eternal life ... Unless Jesus is the true Son of God, Jesus has no divine life to give.” – Brown.

As dramatic asides include the audience in the action happening on the stage, John’s aside in his account of the resurrection appearances of Jesus to his followers includes us in the Gospel story of salvation for not only that first generation but for every generation who has come to believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour because of what we have heard through the witness of generations of faithful Christians who have passed on the story of Christ’s resurrection so that we may be assured of the good news proclaimed by Peter, that *“by his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you”* (1 Peter 1:3-4). As the Evangelist assures us that his account of the signs of Jesus are shared so that we may have life in the name of our crucified and risen Lord, so does the Apostle assure us that *“although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls”* (1:8-9).

- “Despite all the movies that try to entice us with technicolor portraits of Jesus walking through the Galilee, it is false romanticism to think that our commitment would be improved had we been there to experience his ministry or, like the apostles, seen the risen Lord. Then and now it is finally by faith that we lay hold of the promise that provides hope for our final end and joy for the days until then.” – David L. Bartlett.

The Gospel proclaimed by John and all the Evangelists is not merely an account of what the first generations of disciples of Christ experienced; it is the good news for every generation who sees in the message of the death and resurrection of our Lord signs for life in his name so that we might believe that the Word of God is a message *“for us and for our salvation,”* that we might also believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and might have life in his name, the name that brings us *“strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”*

Amen.