

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.

John 20:19-31

Mark Twain is purported to have said something to the effect that people who complain about not being able to understand the Bible are missing the point; "It isn't what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me," he said, "It's what I do understand."

So much happens in this story. Some parts I do understand, and some I don't. I could work harder to understand the part that escapes me, but there's enough that I do understand to keep me busy for a while. If we would just do the stuff we've already figured out, we'd probably be able to understand the rest when it becomes necessary.

So here are the disciples huddled together in a room, hiding from the authorities. Obviously, there are parts of this story they don't understand, either.

When we think of the resurrection, it's always a joyful thing to realize that Jesus, our savior, is alive. We don't have to do without him. People who have experienced the grace of God through the presence of Jesus can't imagine life without that presence any

more than they can imagine life without air. Jesus is alive! That means we can count on an abundance of grace, an abundance of mercy, an abundance of forgiveness -- the resurrection means victory, not only over death of the body, but over the thousands of little deaths we experience through the course of our lives.

It means something else, too, that may not be quite so comforting. Like the Pharisees, we find that we can't easily get rid of that other Jesus, the pesky one who keeps calling us to repentance. We can't count on saying anything that won't be heard, or doing anything that won't be seen, or even thinking anything that Jesus won't be aware of. Jesus won't be left behind, or conveniently stowed away in a grave with a lid. What if the disciples were cowering in fear, not just because they feared the Temple authorities, but also because Mary had told them that Jesus was alive -- that would mean that the very same Jesus they had deserted, the same one they had let down, the same one they had denied, the Jesus they had failed -- that same Jesus was coming to look for them. Maybe I'd cower, too.

Jesus appears to these disciples, but his appearance has changed. Remember that Mary didn't recognize him earlier the same day, and neither did the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He shows them his hands and side to demonstrate who he is, and the disciples seem to accept this. He says some interesting things to them, things that are reminiscent of the Great Commission in Matthew and the day of Pentecost in Acts. It's just like Mark to present in this concentrated form what others take much longer to say. We'll note that Thomas is absent; that's significant, but we'll save it for later.

Listen to what Jesus says to these disciples: “²¹Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

The first thing Jesus says is “Peace be with you.” The disciples were in need of peace. They were agitated, upset, worried, distracted, troubled, careworn, apprehensive, bothered, frightened, fretful, tense tormented, overwrought, perturbed, abashed, terrified and somewhat nervous. Their whole world had fallen apart. Now it’s being put back together again. Peace, indeed.

It gets even more interesting from here. The next thing Jesus says is, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This is the “Great Commission” part. The disciples are told that they must take up the mission of Jesus to proclaim the good news, and then they’re equipped for the task when Jesus says, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” a kind of mini-Pentecost.

It’s this next part that’s so difficult to understand.

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Does Jesus mean to say that human beings are to decide whose sins will be forgiven and whose won’t? Do the disciples have veto power over who gets into heaven? I’m not sure I know the answer to the question. My first reaction is to say, “No, that can’t be right.” It reminds me of the scribes in the second chapter of Mark who accuse Jesus of blasphemy when he declares that the sins of the paralyzed man who has just been lowered through the roof are forgiven. “Only God can forgive sins,” they said. And in at least one important way, they are absolutely right. Only God can offer the kind of forgiveness that leads to eternal life.

There are other ways of understanding sin and sinfulness. We know that it’s about more than a laundry list of things you’re not supposed to do; we know that sin is the state of our heart when we’re moving away from God. Do we also remember that we can commit sins against each other as well as against God? When we say the Lord’s Prayer together, we say “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Perhaps Jesus is talking about those sins that move us farther away from

each other. Eugene Peterson translates it this way in "The Message": "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?" William Loader of Murdoch University in Australia says these verses give the disciples to provide structure and discipline in the community of the church.

What we can know for sure from this passage is that Jesus sends his disciples out to continue the mission he started, and that God gives his children everything they need to continue the mission. We have the authority to do what is needed in order to fulfill the mission; what we do with that authority, whether we are forgiving sin or retaining it, has to be done because the Holy Spirit leads us to do it, not just because it's what we personally want to do. These are tools for proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

Thomas wasn't there for the discussion. In many ways, Thomas represents us. If we're going to participate in the mission of calling people to discipleship, or forgiving sins, of healing and reconciliation, we're going to have to find a way to see Jesus, too. Trouble is, we don't always remember to look for him, and maybe for the same reasons that those disciples were locked up in a room on the very day Jesus rose from the dead.

The resurrection is Good News. It's the Best News. It's because I've let down the Christ who calls me to be more than I need the Christ who forgives without hesitation; it's because I betray the Jesus who urges me to stand up that I need the Jesus who fills my life with grace. Jesus has the authority to forgive and to retain sin, and in my case he's forgiven some whoppers.

My weakness was nailed to the cross; my sinfulness was crucified; my betrayal was executed; my stupidity was put to death; my sinfulness was terminated. Jesus is alive...while it may be difficult sometimes to admit my worthlessness to the risen Christ, it is always a joyful thing to know that because Jesus lives, I can rise again, too. I can be resurrected from my failures to be part of what God is doing in the world. Easter means that just like Jesus, I can also rise again -- not just on the last day, but every day.