

The Secret to Encountering the Resurrected Lord

On that first day, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

Thomas was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to 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 hand into his side, I will not believe."

In John's Gospel, practically every detail is carefully written and is pregnant with symbolic meaning. So when John mentions that Thomas "was not with them" he is not simply stating that Thomas was out buying groceries. John is trying to teach us an important lesson through metaphor. John is telling us that Thomas did not encounter the Risen Lord precisely because he had left his loved ones.

Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

A whole week went by as the disciples were ecstatic with joy (*We have seen the Lord!*) while Thomas pouted in the corner of the room. It is not simply that Thomas didn't get to see Jesus. He missed out on so much more: Jesus twice bestowed peace on them, he breathed the Holy Spirit upon them and he gave them a new mission (*As the Father has sent me, so I send you*). Thomas has no peace, no Holy Spirit, and no mission—all because "Thomas was not with them."

A week later Jesus appeared again and this time "Thomas was them." I'll bet he was! I'll bet he never left their sides! And because Thomas is now back with the others, he too encounters Christ. This encounter is so wonderful that he no longer insists on tactile evidence. It turns out that he didn't need to touch the wounds after all. He simply needed to stick with his fellow disciples in order to encounter the Risen Christ.

John wants you and I to know that we need each other if we are to encounter the Risen Christ. He makes this point at least two other times. First, after having heard from Mary of Magdala that the tomb was now empty...

Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there.... Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed.

Note how the Evangelist is at pains to tell you that the two needed to work together. Though John got there first, he knew better than to go inside the tomb without Peter. They needed to have this experience together.

Finally, John makes this point about sticking together in the story of Jesus on the seashore.

Together were Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, Zebedee's sons, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We also will come with you."

Note that the others (including Thomas!) would not allow Peter to exit the community. "We're going with you," they insisted.

....When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something." So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish. So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he jumped into the sea.

Note how Peter did not have the gift of discernment. He needed the help of the other disciple. Perhaps Peter would have never figured it out had he gone fishing alone as he intended. Note, too, that the other disciple seemed to lack the courage of Peter.

Though the disciple discerned Christ's presence, he did not swim out to meet him. He needed Peter's passion to lead the way.

The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net with the fish. When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you just caught."

Jesus was cooking fish on the shore for them, but he made them bring some of the fish that they had just caught. Why? Did Jesus miscalculate how much fish to fry? Of course not. Jesus is trying to teach them (and us!) that we all need to work together in order for the world to be fed by the Resurrected Lord.

What about you? Would you like to encounter the Risen Lord? Then you must learn from Thomas, who only encountered Christ when he returned to his loved ones. You must follow the beloved disciple, who did not get ahead of Peter in experiencing the empty tomb. You must follow the lead of Peter's companions who, when seeing that Peter was going off by himself insisted, "We're coming with you."

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