

## Recognizing Jesus

Shepherd's Grace Church

April 7, 2013

<sup>19</sup>When 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."<sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."<sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.<sup>25</sup> So 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."

<sup>26</sup>A 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."<sup>27</sup> Then 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."<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.<sup>31</sup> 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. (John 20: 19-31) (Also read Acts 5: 27-41)

One Thanksgiving morning, I remember my dad coming in to the kitchen to help prepare the meal. Dad didn't help in the kitchen often though he was a great open fire cook on a campout and an unbelievable dutch oven meal maker. Dad didn't come into the kitchen at home because things were just too organized for him there. He wasn't one for measuring or recipes. He mostly liked to wing it. Actually his style reminds me of what I witnessed last weekend as the men prepared breakfast for the church. There I witnessed men trying to figure out how many cups in a quart and what the relationship of water to milk to powder to be. If you missed the conversation, too bad for you! To say it was chaotic is a bit too much but to say it was confused might not be enough. Anyway, that is the same kind of feeling my dad had in the kitchen.

On this particular Thanksgiving however, mom was way behind, dad could see the tension on her face and asked if he could help. She had him cook the rice. It was instant rice and as he was preparing it we could all see what was going on. He carefully measured 4 cups of water and put it on the stove to boil. Then he added one cup of rice and another and another and by the time he got to the fourth cup rice was boiling all over the stove and I remember him saying to mom, "I don't think I am going to be able to

get the fourth cup in here! Rice was everywhere! What started out to be a few grains turned into thousands!

In today's passage from the book of Acts we can be surprised by many things. There are two I would like to note. First, consider the boldness of the disciples. Peter, the one who denied Jesus three times on the night of His betrayal, who stayed at a distance when Jesus hung on the cross, who saw the empty tomb and said nothing, this Peter found a voice in the face of incredible adversity. When brought to trial Peter said, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. <sup>30</sup>The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree." Where did his boldness and confidence come from? How did he find the strength to speak with such courage, this one who showed such cowardice?

Second, there is the argument Gamaliel made to the council. He said that there was great danger in prosecuting this small band of men for speaking of Jesus. He suggested that by raising their actions to the level of criminal offense there was risk of giving them status that would only allow their mission to spread! Gamaliel, a well respected teacher, the teacher of Saul of Tarsus in fact, had just put the rice on the stove! He has just named the spread of those who choose to follow Jesus! In fact, he has just made the connection between the actions of the apostles and our Gospel reading for this morning.

To understand the connection, we must first understand God's attention to the detail of time. In the passage John shares today the reference he makes to the evening of the first day of the week clearly takes us to God's time. See, God has carefully laid out His calendar and has clearly orchestrated the coming of Jesus the Messiah, the offering of Jesus as our redemption and the spreading of the good news! God did all of this over 3500 years ago and commanded...in case you missed it, that is a little stronger than a suggestion; commanded that all people rehearse in anticipation of what He was about to do! The rehearsal is a part of the harvest calendar starting with 3 festivals in the spring; first Passover, then festival of first fruits and finally still to come Pentecost. Jesus is the fulfillment of all of these celebrations in His first coming. There are four more fall celebrations that God commands. Jesus will fulfill these at His return!

In Leviticus 23, the Lord says that the day following the Sabbath at the end of Passover is the day of first fruits. This is a Holy Day and a day of offering to the Lord! Today we build our calendar based on Roman influence. It works for us mostly. We have to adjust it every four years because it takes about 365 and a quarter days for the earth to make its way around the sun. We call the adjustment leap year and we base our time on the sun. God, however uses a lunar calendar and has since the beginning of creation when it is written in Genesis 1, "There was evening and there was morning on the first day." Evenings mark the beginning of the day in God's calendar. New moons mark the beginning of months and spring marks the beginning of the New Year.

The time of God's redemption of God's people is marked by Passover which takes place in the first month of the year during the spring. Passover is a 7 day festival that is marked in several ways. First, all the old leaven is removed from the house. Leaven is symbolic of sin. Then in a house that is clean and ready, a lamb with no blemish is invited in. This lamb lives with the family just as Jesus lived with us in the temple every day in the week of Passover leading up to the preparation of the meal. The first part of the preparation is to take the lamb, slaughter it, and put some of the blood on the lintels and doorposts of the family home. This reminds the people of God's redemption of His people as He passes over them in the last of the ten plagues and He leads them out of slavery in Egypt. Jesus, our sacrificial Lamb, the Lamb of God, has his blood spread on the lintel and the post of the cross at the same time the lambs are slain in the temple. Rehearsal for Passover is complete, the fulfillment of God's redemption is at hand on the cross!

There is more however. Our gospel lesson today continues to unfold God's plan as God has intended even from the beginning of His relationship with us! The evening of the first day of the week marks the beginning of the "festival of first fruits." This is a harvest festival where offerings of the harvest are brought before God! It takes place on the first day after the Sabbath at the end of Passover. Since we are at evening of that First day of the week, we are at the festival of First Fruits.

According to the commandment of Leviticus, a sheaf, the first sheaf of the barley harvest is to be brought as an offering to the Lord. The purpose of the offering is to remind us of God's grace and love in providing all we need in our lives. On the evening of this day, Jesus comes. The rehearsal all these years now brings the real performance. That which was remembered and anticipated is now at hand! Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world accomplished God's plan for redemption with His work on the cross. Now He is the First Fruit of God's plan for eternal life.

Jesus, the one who was planted in the ground has now come up. In John 12: 24 Jesus reminds us Himself; "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit!" Jesus, the one who was dead now comes to bear much fruit! The fruit comes not, however from his decaying body, but from His Holy Word! John 1: 1 tells us that in the beginning was the word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God and all of creation came from Him!

Jesus, the one who tilled and planted and brought creation into being now brings forth a new creation, once again with His word! Like Adam, the first farmer who was to till the soil and bring forth fruit from the land, so now, Jesus is to till the world and bring forth God's redemption! Jesus Word, the first fruit of redemption brings forth eternal life and that word is planted today at the festival of first fruits.

Jesus, the planter, enters a locked place. Extending the metaphor, Jesus opens the possibility for harvest by entering a closed place. Just as the farmer opens the ground, so Jesus also opens the way. The doors are shut and locked out of fear but Jesus enters and plants. Any good farmer will tell you that

planting begins with preparation. The ground must be fertilized properly so the seed can have the best possible chance to germinate. The fertilizer Jesus offers is peace. "Peace be with you," he says. Shalom is the Hebrew word. In addition to peace the word means "Nothing Missing, Nothing Broken." The word is complete and offers a complete preparation for what the farmer is about to plant.

Jesus then shows the disciples who He is. They examine His body and rejoice in His physical presence. It is important to understand here that Jesus is not a spirit or a ghost, He is alive! New life is found in Him and He wants to share it with all of creation whom He has been sent to redeem. (You can find reference to this in John 6: 37-41) John has told us this earlier when he said, "The Word became flesh and walked among us filled with grace and truth as the Father's only begotten Son." The farmer is in this world so the produce He grows can be a part of the world.

With the soil, this dark, closed place now prepared, Jesus plants His seed. He breathes on them and they are germinated with the Holy Spirit, then He fills them with what they are to become. Just as He is one who forgives sin, they are also to go forth with a mission of forgiveness! They are to become the seed of love and grace that His mission has been all about. "God so loved the world that He gave His only son, not to judge the world but to redeem the world." (John 3: 16-17) The Planter has planted, he has prepared, and now He leaves to watch His harvest grow!

As all farmers know however, crops are unpredictable. Sometimes they come up as planned, sometimes they do not come up at all. What Jesus has planted does not react as God intends or as we might expect. We think that when God planted the disciples as missionaries for His Kingdom they must have surely grown up as He intended.

Here is where we need to remember what God was working with as seed. It wasn't the best. This seed scattered at the night of Jesus betrayal. This seed denied Him at trial. This seed stayed far away at crucifixion. This seed said nothing when the empty tomb was discovered. It is important that we understand this. God doesn't take the best to use, but God will use all and make the best. When we resist God's call because we think we are not worthy, we need only remember that the disciples did not initially respond as God intended. This seed has received the early rains from the one who is "Living Water," but there seems to be a problem.

Thomas is the one who helps us identify the problem. He was not there to be prepared by Jesus. He was not there to hear the Word which was planted in the others. Now the others find him and tell him, "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas says, "Really?" You have seen the Lord have you? Yes! They replied! He talked to you did he? Again they answer yes! He breathed on you did he? Again with a yes they respond. He sent you out to become the seed of His Word did he? Yes! Yes! Yes!...Now I can imagine Thomas pausing before speaking his next words. Then in a thundering voice I can imagine him saying,

“Then Why Are You Still Here!” If he sent you, what are you doing here? I can never believe you, because if indeed the Lord sent you, You would be gone! I will never believe unless I see it for myself!

Thomas has been accused of doubting because he has not seen. I think today we need to understand Thomas doubt in a different light. He did not need to see Jesus to believe but he could not believe because the disciples had not followed Jesus instructions! They were still there! They did not go! They did not produce fruit!

The truth is I think this is why a lot of people do not respond to Jesus message of forgiveness. We share it with them in our words but they do not see it in our actions. Instead of us going out, we respond like the disciples. We wait around for further instruction and the seed of God’s word never gets lived out in us. If we accept the resurrection of Jesus as an act of faith then we have the opportunity to also accept the Living Jesus as He desires to enter the dark places where we live. Many of us live in the same fear and doubt that we find the disciples in this day and we say we have opened our heart to Him. What others see in us however cause s the same doubt Thomas expresses. “I can never believe,” they say, “because I see no change in you!” How do we live the change we want God’s word to be? How did the disciples live it?

So now we wonder how the disciples, these men who did not bear fruit at that festival of First Fruits came to be so bold in the book of “Acts.” In the writings of the prophet Zechariah, we learn what every farmer reading this message already understands. Jesus, the living water provided the fertilizer and the early rains, but Zechariah tells us God provides not only the early rain, but also the late rains. The disciples do not go at first, but Jesus, the “Living Water,” returns to water them again.

A week later the disciples are still in the dark. The doors are shut and Jesus comes to them. For a third time he prepares them as he says, “Shalom!” Then Jesus brings the latter rains, the ones that will bring the seed to fruition! Again He shows Thomas the physical reality of His life and invites Thomas to explore. He implores Thomas. He waters the seed which was planted by saying, “Do not doubt but believe!” He does not say know, he says believe because He knows that it is not through knowledge but by faith that His word will be accepted. At this latter rain, the seed germinates in Thomas who responds, “My Lord and my God!”

At Thomas profession of faith Jesus reminds him and the others that they have been blessed with the gift of sight. They have observed the growing process. Others will have to grow not by sight but by the Word of God that is now growing in the hearts of the disciples! With Thomas’ acceptance, the latter rain brings forth a strong harvest. The others now begin to grow as they witness Thomas’ growth and they become filled with the word.

Thomas, we know goes to the farthest corners of the world spreading the seed that is growing in him. There are records of churches established in India and other eastern places who claim he was their founder. The disciples, strengthened by this latter rain go forth with the boldness we witness in the book of Acts today! They profess the faith not in the worldly powers who stand before them as accusers, but in the Living Jesus who they have come to trust as their Lord and Savior.

We are generations removed from this first seed and from the first fruit fulfilled in Jesus, but we are the product of that fruit! We are the seed, the word of God that continues to grow in the world. As we travel through our lives, we have the opportunity to spread that seed so it can continue to grow. God commands that we offer the first part of our lives to Him. He will then come into the darkest part of our lives and transform that darkness to love and grace. In love and grace we can then offer forgiveness to others and to ourselves! Our lives can begin to take on the shape of the life growing inside us, Jesus who lives within us!

Depak Chopra suggests that as a rule for life we not try to think "outside the box," but rather that we eliminate the box altogether. Jesus, the risen Jesus wants to eliminate that box also. He wants to fill you so completely with His word that you can go as the very breath of God! He wants to see your life ride on the wind carrying the fullness of His message where ever you go!

Gamaliel suggested that persecution of the disciples might perpetuate the mission they were on. Today over one billion have heard the word and have come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the son of God. There are still many more who do not yet know the good news. Our opportunity is to live life as if there is no box, no boundary, no border, no limit to the way we will share God's good news.

There was an e-mail sent to me earlier this week with a glass of water that was half full. I thought of Thomas. If Thomas went to a psychologist the counselor might ask him, is the glass half empty or half full. I can imagine Thomas lifting the glass, looking at it and drinking it; responding, "I am a problem solver."

We do not need to wait for someone to tell us if the glass is empty or full, we need to drink the "Living Water," and allow it to bring the seed of God's word to fullness in our lives so that we might bear fruit as the Planter intends. Thomas made the profession of faith, "My Lord and My God!" That is the germination, the beginning place for each of us. God invites us all to make that profession today so that others might see the signs in our lives and come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God and so they might have life in His name.

During Passover we ceremonially remove the leaven from our homes. Leaven symbolizes sin. In this act we are to actually pray that God will remove sin from our hearts and lives. Through the work of Jesus on the cross, this removal is accomplished. He who knew no sin takes on the sin of the world so that the

world might be redeemed through Him! Jesus does this once and for all time and He does it for us. During First Fruits, the flour of His offering brings a new leaven into our lives. In His word are the seeds, the flour and yeast that will rise to new heights as we spread the word to the world. This new leaven adds a taste to our meal that was missing before. That taste is the taste of God's goodness in Jesus!

Some have asked me why we eat leaven in our communion bread when Jesus used unleavened bread for the last supper. The answer lies in the festival we celebrate this morning. In Jesus, our first fruit, leaven is added to our lives. He is the leaven we eat and share. When he broke the bread he said, "Take, eat, this is my Body!" When He arose and became the fulfillment of the celebration of First Fruit, that body was transformed into a risen loaf! We recognize Jesus in our profession not of knowledge, but of faith and as we share communion this morning, we also recognize Him in the breaking of the bread! Let Him enter the dark places of your life today and speak His words of Life! Amen!