

God's YES! John 20:19-29

Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV Second Sunday of Easter (April 3) 2016

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The sermon title almost was something else.

Have you ever seen the experiment on a video clip, where you are asked to watch the video carefully and count exactly how many times the basketball is passed from one person to another, whether it be a direct pass or a bounced pass?

I remember the first time I saw it, I was pretty intense. The ball was passed quite fast, and the number of men and women on screen passing the ball moved around fairly rapidly. But at the end of the video, I felt pretty confident that I had the correct number. When the lecturer asked for the results, I was pretty amazed at how many people had a different count than mine. Some were off the "right answer" that I had determined by as many as 6 or 8.

Then the lecturer asked THE question: "How many times did the Black Bear move from one side of the screen to the other?"

The WHAT?! A black bear? There was no black bear. The video was replayed for us, and sure enough: a human dressed in a pretty pathetic black bear costume was moving from left to right – never hiding behind people – just moving back and forth. I NEVER saw the bear. And NO ONE in the room full of people (who had not been part of this same experiment somewhere else) – NONE of them saw the Black Bear.

We usually only see what we are looking for.

The sermon title was almost: "Did you see the Black Bear?" But, I decided there's something even more important going on here.

What was the black bear in today's Gospel lesson?

Let me put it this way: **How many of you focused on the action involving “Doubting Thomas”?** So much so, we even call him that – “Doubting Thomas” – even though that's not a term ever used in scripture. When we hear this scripture, it's hard to NOT focus on the disciple Thomas.

But there's a black bear here, that we need to focus on.

It's hard to see what we are not looking for. **It's hard for us** – particularly in a scripture that is repeated so often (almost every year, on the second Sunday of Easter) **to have BEGINNER'S MIND.**

I've talked about “Beginner's Mind” before, but let me review briefly: When you first learn how to drive a car, your mind is practically on STIMULUS OVERLOAD. There are all the pedals, the gear shifter, the steering wheel, the horn (I missed that altogether the first few times I drove, until my father pointed it out to me, once, when someone almost pulled out in front of me from a parking place.) There is so much in the car, and even more outside the car that takes absolute full concentration to take it all in. You are using 100% of your brain cells to try to get it all. Then, after you pass the driver's test, and you've been driving for a year or so, all of that information overload seems to pass into the background. They even have to pass a law that prohibits your trying to read and send text messages while you are driving – people are so no longer in the information overload they had when they first began.

And it's very hard to GO BACK to BEGINNER'S MIND, after we get so used to certain things.

HARD, but not impossible. It just takes effort, focus, and practice.

So, I invite you to focus here on today's Gospel – like you were hearing it for the first time – and WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

This is Jesus – He had been crucified, and how He has come back to life through the power of the resurrection, and He has a Resurrection Body. **None of these disciples had ever experienced any thing like this; this is ALL completely NEW.** They are very much on information overload.

AND they are trying very hard to connect all the dots. What does all of this mean?

On the other hand, Jesus is hanging around, before He ascends to heaven, in order to PREPARE these disciples to take over what He started.

There's an old joke that when Jesus ascends to heaven, he meets the angel Gabriel who welcomes Him home, and asks Jesus, **“Who’s going to run the operation on earth now that you are back home, Jesus?”** And Jesus says: **“My disciples.”** Gabriel reminds Jesus of how dense they were while He was with them, and how they deserted Him when He was being tried and crucified, and how they are generally an unreliable group. Then Gabriel says to Jesus, **“So, what’s Plan B, Jesus?”** And Jesus says, quite solemnly, **“There is no Plan B. It’s all up to them.”** And Gabriel walks away shaking his head.

So in today’s scripture (and in all the scriptures during this season of Easter – until Jesus’ Ascension to heaven) Jesus is preparing His disciples to take over. He is giving them their final instructions on how to BE THE BODY OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD.

And, if we have a BEGINNER’S MIND, we can also hear how WE are to be the BODY OF CHRIST in the world TODAY.

So, here is the Black Bear, in the midst of today’s lesson – that you might have missed, if all you focus on is the disciple Thomas – because that’s what most sermons on this scripture have been preached about.

The Black Bear is found in verses 21-23:

²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, **even so I am sending you.**” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³**If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.**”

Jesus is telling them: Pay attention. You are going to take over my job.

Lesson ONE: God says YES!

Oh, that's right; those aren't the exact words. Let me unpack it.

Lesson ONE: If you forgive anyone, they are forgiven. If you withhold forgiveness, then YOU HOLD ONTO IT.

Let me illustrate. Let's say John Smith said or did something that offends me. I decide that he owes me an apology. He doesn't apologize to me and so I don't forgive him. Now, the strange thing is that John Smith has long ago forgotten the untoward thing he said or did to me. But not me. I have withheld forgiveness because he didn't ask for it. And guess who suffers? It truly is, as someone in worship committee put it: **To withhold forgiveness from someone is like drinking poison and waiting for that other person to die.**

That's the problem with withholding forgiveness – **YOU who withhold it are the one who suffers.**

But wait – there's even more to this Black Bear lurking in the midst of this Gospel passage. **It's not just about withholding forgiveness; it's about not saying YES.**

Unfortunately – and that's why it takes **BEGINNER'S MIND** to get behind a long history of doing it wrong – unfortunately (as my instructor put it in the OnLine course I signed up for, as a followup to the Monday night class we took during Lent): Unfortunately, **CHRISTIAN HISTORY IS A NON-STOP SEARCH FOR WHO IS NOT WORTHY.**

Yes, Richard Rohr nailed it when he said that: **CHRISTIAN HISTORY IS A NON-STOP SEARCH FOR WHO IS NOT WORTHY.**

When we begin with the notion of who is not worthy, it makes it very hard to ever getting around to saying YES!

If we start out in the Garden with a “NO – YOU ARE STAINED WITH ORIGINAL SIN” – then it is hard to ever get around to the **YES! OF GOD'S**

ORIGINAL BLESSING, not original curse. **If you start out with saying that a little baby is born in sin – as innocent as that baby is – then it’s unlikely that you will ever get around to finding a YES when you start with that NO!**

Let me give you an example that is so easy to see, although it might not make us very comfortable.

Look at the last verse of today’s Gospel lesson:

²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Almost everyone that I hear make a comment about that verse says something along the lines of: *“Boy, he busted Thomas’ chops, didn’t he? There are others who believe without seeing. They are blessed but not you, Thomas. Not you at all. You are unblessed, because you asked for touching; you asked for seeing.”*

See? **That’s beginning with a NO!** Busting somebody’s chops. **Making somebody not worthy.**

After Jesus went through all that he did to meet Thomas’ self-perceived need – in order that Thomas could experience a YES!

And now, Jesus says that those who come after this who don’t get this opportunity can also get a YES!

But, see how we have a tendency of taking Jesus’ YES! to everyone and trying to make a NO! out of it for somebody.

Whether it is forgiveness – GIVE IT, Jesus did – even on the cross.

Or whether it is anything – **God says YES!**

And this is the message that Jesus gives to His disciples as Lesson #1 in their preparation for becoming the Body of Christ – or, as He said, **“will also do**

the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.” (John 14:12)

You’ll remember the Good News we heard on the first Sunday of March, where scripture announces that **“In Christ was God was reconciling the world to himself, NOT COUNTING THEIR TRESPASSES AGAINST THEM, and entrusting TO US the message of RECONCILIATION. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making the appeal through us.** (2 Corinthians 5:19-20) **God, through Jesus, says YES!**

You’ll remember the Gospel that we heard just last week, and the weeks before, when Jesus announced that **“And I, when I am lifted up from earth [on the cross] I will draw all people unto me.”** (John 14:32) **God, through Jesus, says YES!**

Yet, somehow, as Richard Rohr made the sad commentary: **CHRISTIAN HISTORY IS A NON-STOP SEARCH FOR WHO IS NOT WORTHY.**

Well, Jesus said there is NO PLAN B. And he is counting on us to set the record straight, even if some toxic practitioners of the faith have decided to tell their own story of saying NO! and trying to say that it is Jesus’ story.

It’s up to us to set the record straight. **God says YES!**

- **Is there someone that you have been holding back on saying YES to?**
- **Have you set up a higher standard that Jesus does?**
- **Are you drinking poison waiting for it to kill somebody else?**

Jesus has a plan for the redemption of the whole world. After his resurrection conquered death forever, He came back to set his disciples (and us)

straight on how that redemption is going to take place. And Lesson #1 is **God**
says YES!

Work on that this week. Practice it, practice it, practice it. And next week,
we'll look at Lesson #2:

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.