

LECTIO DIVINA

JOHN 20:19-29

INTRODUCTION

Let me make a few introductory remarks about what I will try to do with you in our short time together. I have just read the NRSV translation of our passage, probably the best available English language translation from the Greek that is both quite faithful to the Greek and good, readable English. But as I comment on the text you will see that some very important theological and spiritual nuances are literally “lost , if not distorted, in translation.” So, when I read the text again at the close of our session I will read it in literal translation (which is not fluent English in places) and you will see some very important nuances of meaning that I hope will stick in your minds whenever you read or hear the text in the future.

As you know “lectio divina” means “spiritual reading” or reading primarily for the purpose of transformation rather than simply information. But transformational reading can be primarily literary or theological or moral or pedagogical or homiletic. Each type of reading will lead to different ways of dividing up the text, emphases on different features of the text, relationships drawn between different parts of the text, and so on. All of which mean that a biblical text does not have one correct meaning. Although some readings are patently wrong there are many readings that can be legitimate and fruitful. Like a play, or a poem, or a novel, the biblical text can speak to us in many ways and on many levels, and to different people very differently or to the same person differently

when they are in different life situations. Which is why our sharing of our reading of the text is important.

This does not mean that a text can mean anything anyone says it does. All interpretation is normed by the text itself, in the original language in which it was written, within the theological framework in which it is embedded by its author — but in interaction with the whole of the Christian tradition of which it is a part. And it is important for our purposes that the reading we are doing here today is controlled by the place this text holds in the liturgical lectionary. The Church puts together, in one reading, these two pericopes, the appearance of Jesus to the disciples on Easter evening and the appearance of Jesus in the same place, at the same time, a week later, but with one important change in the cast of characters. Thomas the Twin (an important figure only in the Gospel of John) is the central actor in the second scene. This is a vital clue to the meaning of the whole second half of John's Resurrection Narrative, John 20:19-29. It is important that the Church assigns this diptych, these two scenes a week apart, to be read together. The absence of Thomas in scene one and his presence in scene two therefore is not just an historical fact or a dramatic or narrative decoration. Thomas the Twin, whom I will suggest is us, our spiritual twin, is critical to the theological and spiritual meaning of the Easter event as John presents it. So let's begin our commentary.

The first half of the narrative we are reading today takes place on Easter evening. The first half of John's Resurrection Narrative, the two pericopes that precede this one, take place on Easter morning. In scene one Mary Magdalene (alone, not with other women as in the Synoptic Gospels) discovers the open tomb, reports this to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, who run to the tomb. After

examining its contents, namely, Jesus' empty burial wrappings and the face veil that was the official testimony to the death of a person being buried, the two disciples leave and we are told that none of the three, MM, the BD, or SP understood that the absence of Jesus' body meant that he was risen. However, we are told that the Beloved Disciple "saw and believed," raising the question for the reader, "What, then, did he believe?" if not the Resurrection?

That question is answered in the second pericope, the appearance of the Risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene after the two male disciples had gone home. So, the reader knows two things at this point: through the Beloved Disciples' response to the wrapped up and definitively "retired from service" face veil in the tomb, the reader knows that, unlike Peter and Mary, that disciple "saw and believed". But what did he believe? And what do we, the readers, know through that disciple's insight? What we know is that Jesus is *glorified*. He has, as he had predicted several times in the Gospel, returned to the one who sent him. He is not in Sheol, disappeared among the dead. He is divinely alive with God, now in the fullness of his humanity.

But, we are told that, although one of the three, the BD "saw and believed", none of the three *as yet* understood that he (Jesus) must *rise from the dead*. In other words, the Fourth Evangelist makes a very important distinction between what really happened to Jesus in his death on the cross and what was perceived by the disciples who witnessed it. Jesus, in John's Gospel was *glorified* by and in his death on the cross. His death, throughout the Gospel, is referred to by Jesus as "my glorification," my "lifting up," my "return to the One who sent me." The face veil of his earthly humanity has been laid aside in human death but Jesus, the New Moses, is now eternally glorified in God's presence, with the glory which he

had as Word of God before the world was made, as Jesus had said of himself at the Last Supper. Jesus, through his real human physical death, is glorified as incarnate Son of God in his return to the One who sent him, the one he calls “Father.”

In the second pericope, Mary Magdalene who does not leave the garden of the tomb, encounters the glorified Jesus in the Garden and realizes that He is not only glorified in the presence of the One who sent him; He is also returned to his own as he had promised he would. He has risen in their midst. So the Resurrection, in John, is not simply identical with his Glorification. The Glorification is Jesus’ return to the One who sent him, his definitive entrance, as a human being, as the Incarnate Son of God, into the presence of the One who sent the Son into the world to save it. This is what took place in Jesus’ death on the Cross which, in John, is called his Glorification. The Resurrection, which Mary is the first to experience, is Jesus’ return, in his glorified humanity, to his disciples. So the reader understands that, in John, Glorification and Resurrection denote two aspects of Jesus’ destiny: his revelation as both Son of God and Risen Savior.

So, our passage, Jn. 20:19-29, the first stage of which takes place on Easter night, is the return of the Glorified Jesus to his own, a return he had promised at the Last Supper, “I will see you again and your hearts shall rejoice and your joy no one will take from you.” So, the narrator tells us, “His disciples *rejoiced* at seeing the Lord.” This was the fulfillment of the promise Jesus had made way back in chapter 2 when the authorities asked him what sign he could give to justify his prophetic action in the Temple at the outset of his ministry. Jesus had replied , “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” and the Evangelist

intervenes to tell the readers, “Now Jesus was speaking of his body”, i.e., the New Temple, the new place of encounter with God, namely, the glorified and risen Jesus.

We don’t have time to do it here, but if you read the first pericope of our reading for today against the background of Jesus’ long discourse to his disciples at the Last Supper you will see how Jesus fulfills all the promises he made to them at the Supper before his Glorification on the Cross. He returns to them after the “little while” of the Passion when he “went where they could not follow him,” namely, through death into the presence of God. Now they see him again as He had promised they would. He breathes on them the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit, recalling for the reader, by this verb, “breathe” which is used only here in the whole New Testament, the creation of the first human by God’s breathing into Adam the breath of life and the promise of the re-creation of Israel, by the breathing of Ezekiel over the dry bones of the People of God. The Glorified Jesus in rising in their midst on Easter night, bestows on them, as He had promised, the “peace that the world cannot give.” He causes their “hearts to rejoice” with a joy “no one can take from them.”

And finally, the Glorified Jesus, Risen (resurrected) in their midst, incorporates them into his own mission from God. God had sent Jesus, as John the Baptizer first identified him, as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Now the Glorified Jesus who has finished the work God gave him to do, commits his mission to his followers: “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” As Jesus’ mission from his Father was to take away the “sin” (singular) of the world, the root of evil brought into the world by Adam, so his disciples will now mediate that divine reconciliation to the whole world, taking away in Jesus’

name, the “sins” (plural) that spring from that first rebellion. So, Jesus says, as he breathes into them his Spirit of divine life, “As the Father has sent me, I send you.” His disciples will be his presence in the world until the end of time, doing what Jesus as the presence of God in the world, did: forgiving the sins that express the Sin of the World and holding fast in divine communion those who have been forgiven.

Most of our texts very poorly translate the Johannine divine commission as “Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you retain they are retained.” Besides making no theological sense since God never keeps anyone in a state of alienation from God, much less empowers any human being to do so, this translation is, in my view, a very poor rendering of the Greek. And the Greek word, usually translated as “retain” actually means “to hold fast” in the sense of embrace, like the women in Matthew’s Resurrection account who “embrace” the feet of the risen Jesus whom they meet on the road as they leave the empty tomb. What the text actually says is “Of whomever you forgive the sins they are forgiven to them; those [people, not sins] you hold fast [in the sense of clasp or embrace] are held fast.”

There are five texts in John’s Gospel, which we cannot read now, in which Jesus describes his own mission as receiving from the Father and “holding fast,” i.e., embracing, protecting from Satan, those whom God has given him. So, as the Father has sent Jesus to take away the root sin of the world (in the singular) and to hold fast in the divine embrace all who have been liberated from Satan’s power and given to God in Jesus, so Jesus sends his disciples to do the same, namely, to forgive the sins (plural) that are the expressions of the fundamental root “sin (in the singular) of the world,” the sin of Adam, and to hold

fast in the communion of life that Jesus has inaugurated with his first disciples all those who have been forgiven. If we read only the words that are actually in the text (not adding a few as most translations do) and misreading John as a paraphrase of the Matthean text about “binding and loosing”, what Jesus really says is, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you. If of anyone you forgive the sins, they are forgiven to them. And whomever you hold fast (i.e., embrace) is held fast.” As Jesus said several times (5 times in fact) during his public life, any one whom the Father gives him will come to him and he will never cast them out; nor can anyone, even Satan, snatch them out of Jesus’ hand. Now, he entrusts that mission of taking away sin and holding fast in the community of salvation all those down through the centuries whom the Father will call to salvation in Jesus through the ministry of his disciples.

Now, the text tells us that one of the Twelve, Thomas the Twin, was not there on Easter night and so the others announce to him the Resurrection, the return of Jesus to his own. But Thomas, whom John presents several times in the Fourth Gospel as a kind of ideal disciple, not always the brightest or most nuanced, but the one, for example, who was ready to go back in to Jerusalem where Jesus’ life is in danger, and “die with him” if need be, when Jesus decided to go back to Jerusalem at the request of Martha and Mary because Lazarus was dying. But after the brutality of Jesus’ crucifixion, Thomas, like Mary Magdalene, was fixated on Jesus’ physical body. As she wanted to take away the corpse, which she thought was all that was left of him, so Thomas wants to examine the wounds of the Crucified One to verify his reality and his identity. Thomas, like Mary Magdalene, has to transcend that equation of Jesus’ Body with his pre-Easter physicality, and realize that Jesus’ risen body, his glorified humanity, was present

in the witnessing of the Church, Jesus new bodily presence and self-manifestation in the world.

When Jesus invites Thomas to do as he had asked, to physically verify Jesus' corporal reality by probing his wounds, Thomas is jolted into salvific faith in the Glorified One and exclaims, "My Lord and my God," the profession of paschal faith that the later Church would adopt as its ideal acclamation of faith in the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and Jesus' sacramental presence in the Church and its actions.

Many believers identify strongly with Thomas and he is presented as "the Twin", in fact, our twin. We are meant to find ourselves in him. Unlike us he knew the pre-Easter Jesus, but like us he now lives in the post-Easter dispensation when Jesus' presence is mediated in the proclamation of the Church, the shared meal of the Eucharist, the community of believers rather than in his historical humanity. This presence in signs, in sacraments, is no less real than Jesus' physical presence was in his earthly lifetime. But, like Mary Magdalene, who had to realize that Jesus was not a dead body, a corpse to be venerated, but the living body of Jesus' sisters and brothers that we call Church, Thomas had to realize that Jesus was not a resuscitated corpse whose wounds could be examined but One who was sacramentally present in the gathered community, in its proclamation of Jesus, in the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist flowing from the glorified wounds of the Risen one.

In short, the Johannine Resurrection Narrative, half of which we read on this first Sunday after Easter, is not so much a record of events in the first week after the Resurrection of Jesus in the first century as it is a description of and exhortation to the embrace of our experience as Easter people today. In this time

of biblical proportioned plague that keeps us from even being together for this meditation on the first Easter, we find ourselves in these narratives.

Traumatized but open to the message of the Risen One, “I am risen and am still with you; bear my message of forgiving love to my stricken people. Be my risen presence in a crucified world. Hear my word which effects what it expresses, “Peace be with you; As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Whose sins you shall forgive are forgiven. And those whom you hold fast in love are held fast in my love.”