



The Word Who Is Life
Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1--2:2; John 20:19-31
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

During a pastors' Bible study, a Presbyterian priest shared about an experience that occurred to her soon after ordination in her first post assignment. She was a chaplain at a local hospital and one day she was called to offer comfort to a dying woman. As she enters the woman's room she is greeted by the woman's brother. He introduced himself as a devout and practicing atheist. He became an atheist when he was sent to fight the Korean war. At hearing this, the green priest was shaking in her boots not knowing how she would relate to the man and what kind of resistance she would find to her ministry. In any case, she drew a deep breath and then struck a conversation with him. The priest was sent to see the dying woman, but she found herself spending over two hours conversing with the man. During the conversation, she found out that he had been raised a Lutheran. When all were satisfied with what had been said, the man leaned toward his sister and declared in a calm voice: "You have been a mean sister, but I forgive you." Then he promised the priest he would look for a church to go to.

One never knows how the Spirit of God is going to use us to change someone's life. When you see that happening you see a lightness in people's spirit, a glow and a peace, a relaxation, and a confident joy.

Such was the evangelist John's experience. In both the gospel and his first letter, John talks about the Word of God as light and as coming to the world to bring all people into that light. The experience of the resurrection is first of all the awakening of the soul to a reconciled partnership with God. That is the ultimate purpose of all the encounters of Jesus with individuals in John's gospel starting with Nicodemus coming to Jesus "at night."¹ Intimate union or reconciliation with God is a movement initiated by the grace of God who so loved the world to send his only Son to attract all creatures to himself. "That all may be One" was the heartfelt prayer of Jesus in the Gethsemane prior to his arrest, torture, and murder by the hands of state officials.

The renunciation to a life of sin, a life separated from God and God's creatures, requires a death to the world and the ways of the world. This kind of awakening from sleep, this spiritual rebirth, allows us to live *in* the world without being *of* the world, demonstrating our allegiance to God alone and to the ways of the kingdom. Following that first spiritual resurrection is the second and bodily resurrection.² John is familiar with the biblical recommendations to awake from sleep. Isaiah encourages Israel to "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."³ And the apostle Paul is clear when he calls people out of slumber and talks of the resurrection as putting on Christ and walking in a new life.⁴

¹ John 3

² Revelation 20:6;

³ Isaiah 60

⁴ Romans 13:14; Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 5:14; Romans 6



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The message of the eyewitnesses is a message of life eternal, a life grounded in the Word “that was with the Father and was revealed to us” (1 Jn 1:2). This message they pass on for the purpose of fellowship and total joy among the community of believers with the Father and the Son. The only way to maintain fellowship with God and cement community life is to remain in the light. People need to be honest with themselves and with each other. Truth telling is evidence of a life centered in the Word of God.

A genuine commitment to seek together the light and speak the truth with honesty and compassion attests at the unity with God and communion with one another. Indeed, how good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity. Christian fellowship is none other than hospitality offered to the Word of Life, in all humility and vulnerability, and, at the same time, to our neighbors in care and humble service. The eyewitness testimony of the disciples assures us that “the Word, who is Life,”⁵ has taken on flesh before their very eyes not only in the historical Jesus but also in the community of believers gathered by the Word and the Spirit after the resurrection of Jesus. It is that Word of Life that makes the community One Body. But the joy of being made One cannot be complete without the presence of those who are not part of the community, yet. When a community is fractured, when there are people missing around the communion table, when there are others left out and not included, when there are people not aware of the joy that coming closer to God may bring, the joy of the community is incomplete and there is a Spirit-led urgency in seeking that oneness.

John insists on the same theme in the gospel. Peace is Jesus’ first resurrection gift to the fearful disciples just as he had promised at the Last Supper.⁶ They are not totally surprised to see Jesus as they have heard from the women about the empty tomb, but they still experience fear and anxiety. They are still spiritually confused and grieving the way things were prior to their master’s arrest and killing. They still fear for their life not knowing what the Romans and the Pharisees will do and not knowing exactly how the resurrection of Jesus is going to make a difference in their lives.

Jesus appears to them showing his mortal wounds assuring them it is he indeed. There is no mistaken identity. There is no collective hysteria: they are not seeing things. The appearance immediately comforts and reassures them. The presence of Jesus fulfills his second promise made at the Last Supper: when you see me, your hearts will rejoice!⁷

A second time Jesus affirms the gift of peace. But as soon as our heart is at peace, we must know that we can’t relax with the Lord: Jesus follows that gift with a commission. Peace is not for us

⁵ The Jerusalem Bible translation of John 1:1

⁶ John 14:27

⁷ John 16:20-22



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to keep, it's to be spread to others: I am sending you the way the Father sent me, which means in unity with me and the Father, in the power of the Spirit and in the name of the Triune God: go, bring life, light, and truth, and reconcile the world through forgiveness. Just as those who see Jesus (truly see him), see the Father, those who now see the disciples, must be able to see Jesus. The disciples' testimony and modeling of life must be a proclamation of life and light in Jesus.⁸

Jesus' third promise at the Last Supper according to John, is the promise of the coming of the Spirit.⁹ Soon after giving the gift of peace, and the disciples experiencing joy, Jesus breathes on them the breath of new creation and gives them power over sin. Such a power is manifested in the ability to bind or to release, that is, the power to create a judgment crisis: as a response to their testimony, people will have to judge by themselves if they want to accept the Word of Life or reject it.¹⁰ "To represent Christ to a degree that forces people to make a decision in their lives is a tremendous empowerment."¹¹ This is also a huge responsibility for the disciples.

Now, Thomas, we are told, was not with them. When they finally catch up with him and tell him what has happened, Thomas shows some resistance. Of all the stories about Thomas in the Bible, this is the one for which he is often best (or worst) known. He doubts whether his friends have really seen the risen Jesus. For that reason, he is remembered as "faithless and doubting Thomas." But that is not a fair assessment. We shouldn't be afraid or ashamed of faith's doubts for that is when we have a chance to probe deeper into faith matters. In fact, public speaker and writer Anne Lamott helpfully observes, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty."¹² Certainty squashes any need to know more and one remains rather arrogant and stagnant, pretty limited in his or her knowledge of the Lord. Inquisitive faith, on the other hand, starts with a desire to know more, it's marked by an unsettling dissatisfaction which pushes one to know more, to want more, to ask for more, and thirsts to be filled. It's the bugging sensation of not being close enough, of being there but not really there.

By wanting to see and touch Jesus' wounds, Thomas wants to know if they are talking about the same Jesus. It's easy to be confused about Jesus if we follow our own agenda, if we promote sensationalism, triumphalism, self-glorification, ambition, and promises of prosperity. Too many people have used Jesus for their own purposes at the expense of others. How many times in the past two millennia, has the Church abused the Word of God to seek and maintain power, to harass and control?

⁸ John 13:20

⁹ John 15:26-27. See Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:9

¹⁰ John 3:18-21 and John 17:14-21

¹¹ Raymond Brown, *A Risen Christ in Eastertime*, p. 65

¹² Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, pp. 256-257.



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All Thomas wants to know is if the Jesus they have seen is the same wounded Jesus he knows. Centuries later, Martin Luther would distinguish between a theology of glory from a theology of the cross, following Paul's affirmation: "We preach Christ crucified."¹³ In other words, Thomas is asking: Does the Christ you preach have wounds? Or is your Christ a Christ by name only? And if he does have wounds, are you associating with that Christ or is it a customized version, a more spiritualized and personal Christ that fits your limited piety? Is your Christ the same who died for the abject, the unwanted, the unlovable? Can your Christ be found in the wounds of the abused, the exploited, the criminalized, the dehumanized? Or is he a Christ that seeks power?

As soon as Jesus invites Thomas to see and touch the wounds, Thomas exclaims the most revealing of faith statements: "My Lord and my God." Such was John's goal for writing the gospel, to help people to arrive at the conclusion he opened the gospel with: "The Word was God...the light of all people."¹⁴ And Jesus thus prays for those who will hear the proclamation of the gospel: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

John could have added many more stories and anecdotes about Jesus but he knows that what he has said should be sufficient to develop a life of faith. If not, go back to the gospel story, read it anew, let the Word of Life surprise you, live in the light, feel the joy, experience the peace, pick up the commission, and proclaim the crucified and risen Lord. May you be blessed as you do so. Amen.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 1:23-30

¹⁴ John 1:1-4