

If we dissected today's Gospel as a piece of literature, we would probably all agree on Jesus as the protagonist. Think of the dramatic effect: Having left behind an empty tomb, he now shows up within a locked room to greet his fearful disciples with "Peace be with you."

If we had to select an antagonist, the secondary character who stirs things up and stands in opposition to the protagonist, we might choose Thomas for that honor. In fact, Thomas' brings so much meaning to this scene that the reference "Doubting Thomas" is widely understood by Christians and non-Christians alike to this day. It even has its own Wikipedia entry, defining the term as "a skeptic who refuses to believe without direct personal experience." Merriam Webster defines it as "an incredulous or habitually doubtful person."

Whether St. Thomas deserves attribution for these definitions is another matter. To be honest, I'm more interested in another apostle featured prominently in today's readings: Peter.

Yes, Peter, who while not mentioned by name in our Gospel this morning, was most certainly present in that Upper Room. Peter, formerly known as Simon the fisherman, also remembered as the disciple who walked on water before fear overcame him, the trusted disciple who denied Jesus three times in his most crucial time of need, a man who most likely one of Jesus' most intimate friends—a leader among the group of 12 apostles—who finds himself hiding in fear after the crucifixion, yet eventually becomes the rock upon whom Jesus builds his Church, and ultimately dies a martyr for the cause of Christ.

Peter is certainly a man of stark contrasts. Among them: failure and competence, fear and confidence, doubt and devotion.

This the same Peter we hear today address the crowds in Acts 2:14, which presents an odd time warp of sorts, as it's a passage we'll encounter again at the end of May—the 50th day after Easter Sunday. In Acts 2, the disciples gather in Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost. Jews from many nations—as far away as 1,000 miles—come for this festival. We know this day best as the day the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus' followers—sparking the birth of the Church.

Peter preaches to the crowds: "Listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you...this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." Bold words that broke through barriers in language, culture, religion, and class.

Peter's confidence shines through as well in the Epistle, where he addresses Christians scattered throughout the northern regions of Asia Minor, or modern Turkey. He says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

Two passages that occur a considerable time after Jesus's death—text that reveals much about the growth of the early Church. Yet here we are reading these passages alongside John's account of Jesus appearing just after his death to his closest disciples, who remain in this upper room for several weeks

after the crucifixion, frozen by fear. The contrast in these stories—and in the disciples they speak of—is jarring.

We are all a study in contrasts: fear and courage, failings and gifts, apathy and love. Today's stories collectively reveal a Jesus who meets us where we are, accepts us as we are, and invites us into new life. Like Peter and the other apostles, it's a journey of transformation. Jesus calls the disciples to do much more than they're capable of. Yet despite their inadequacies, they move out into the world, manifesting the hope of resurrection.

A resurrection that is a lifelong pilgrimage, the word "formation" itself being a key part of that word. Formation being that continual story of growing into the image of Christ, a process that takes place in community, where together we experience the Holy Spirit guiding and challenging us to grow into the persons God created us to be.

Jesus's story might have reached its climax at the crucifixion. And the disciples' story may have ended there as well. But after the empty tomb, after seeing their teacher reappear, the disciples come to a turning point: Would they allow Jesus's teachings to die on the cross? Or would they be able to move beyond their fears and carry his teachings into the world?

Indeed, into the world they go, spreading Christianity from Jerusalem to Damascus, to Asia Minor, to Greece, and Rome. Many of them die as martyrs. All live out their days in community and ministry, transformed by the power of the resurrection and the promise of their salvation.

We can trace the history of that salvation through today's scripture: In Acts 2, Peter speaks to his fellow Israelites of Jesus emerging from the Davidic line. In 1 Peter, he tells the Romans to "rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—...may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." John's Gospel says, "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples...so you may come to believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

And while we can trace that history, it's not a simple history lesson. It's a living connection that carries through to us sitting here now. Theologian and author N.T. Wright says, "...the resurrection of Jesus means that the present time is shot through with great significance. What is done to the glory of God in the present is genuinely building for God's future. Acts of justice and mercy, the creation of beauty and the celebration of truth, deeds of love, and the creation of communities of kindness and forgiveness—these all matter, and they matter forever."¹

At this point in history, we may find ourselves full of confusing contrasts, often stuck at the intersection of fear and doubt. Almost daily, we hear of more innocent lives lost to gun violence. We see the ongoing marginalization of people of color. We witness the persecution of members of the LGBTQ+ community. We feel terrified by the world around us.

With all this, we may wish to remain hiding in our safe spaces, away from the darkness of the world.

¹ N.T. Wright in *The Meaning of Jesus*, by Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright

And yet, from that darkness, hope springs forth. We see all around us the beating heart of new life emerging in the beauty of God's Creation. We witness acts of love and justice, mercy and kindness, people striving to be peacemakers and advocates for those oppressed.

Just as he appeared to the first disciples, Jesus comes to us, saying "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Through believing we have life in his name—a resurrection people, empowered to leave our safe spaces and go forth, sent to play our own parts in God's great salvation story.

We needn't feel fully formed or fully capable, for just as Thomas and Peter and all the saints before us have wandered, lost their footing, and found their way again, we too can embrace the mysteries of God's at work in us.

Jesus meets us here and now, just as we are, showing us his wounds born of love—driving us to seek out new paths. Let us raise our voices in praise together, come to the Lord's table, and stretch out our empty hands to receive the fullness of grace we can see, touch, and taste. And may we always be open to the resurrection's transformative power in our lives.