

THE MISSION**Scripture Readings:** Acts 2:2a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:17-23; John 20:19-31**Texts:** Acts 2:31-32; John 20:19-23

The passage from the gospel of John contains a mystery; where was Thomas on that first Easter evening? We could speculate that he was scouting the area or out shopping for supplies though it is not as though he could find a 24 hour Kroger.

Rather, I think a couple of his statements might give us a clue. The first one he uttered when Jesus decided to return to the Jerusalem after Lazarus had died. The disciples didn't want Jesus to return because they knew that those in power wanted to kill him. Thomas, though, says, "Let us also go that we may die with him." I suspect that he makes the statement because Thomas suspects a revolution; he wants to throw out the oppressor and remove the collaborators and put Jesus in charge.

The second statement comes when the disciples find Thomas after Jesus appeared to them the first time. Thomas declares that he will not believe unless he can see and touch the wounds from Jesus' execution. His declaration is not disbelief about the resurrection—after all he had already seen one with the raising of Lazarus—but more to do with the fact he couldn't believe an executed Jesus could be resurrected. Thomas had come to Jerusalem hoping for a revolution; what he got was an execution by the state. We believe that state executions are okay violence because the state needs to keep order and to remove bad dudes. Perhaps Thomas is angry and disappointed that Jesus died as a traitor, a criminal—why would God resurrect someone like that?

I begin to suspect that Thomas is missing because his anger has driven him from the community of disciples. He may want nothing to do with them and thus community is broken.

In this particular story, we can get so hooked on Thomas that we miss the importance of the other parts of the story on that first Easter evening.

The disciples are hiding in fear, confusion, and grief. They have locked themselves away from a dark and threatening world. Perhaps they wonder how they can escape the dangers of Jerusalem and the rest of world to find another bolt hole—another place to hide.

Suddenly Jesus appears among them despite all their precautions. The first words out of Jesus' mouth are, "Peace be with you." Those words probably translate into Greek from the Aramaic/Hebrew word, "Shalom." Shalom is a marvelous word, that one greeting contains the ideas of peace, wellbeing, prosperity, and wholeness for the individual and for the community. Shalom is more of a blessing than a greeting, and Jesus offers this blessing to this group of broken and imperfect people. I mean, think about it, if we had been in Jesus' place, would we have blessed the disciples? One betrayed him, one denied him despite furiously defending Jesus in the garden, all of them had scattered after his arrest, not one of them except the Beloved disciple were at the execution, none of them gathered his body after the execution or helped bury him; and on Easter morning, only the Beloved disciple and Mary believed! Most of us would have fired the lot—except maybe the Beloved disciple and Mary—and started with a new crew. But, instead, Jesus blesses them.

Not only does he bless them, he shows his wounds and blesses them again! Then he charges them to leave the locked room and to go into the world just as God had sent him. After that he breathes on them—the gospel writer's version of Pentecost—and seemingly gives them this extraordinary power: if they forgive sins, they are forgiven, if they retain sins, they are retained.

The forgiveness/retention statement is not an invitation for the disciples to go around picking out who will be forgiven and who won't—rather I think he intends the statement as a description of the community of faith. I mean, could the disciples really retain anyone's sin when they had just received the absolute gift of grace in light of all their failures? Jesus is saying that community can only really exist when we extend forgiveness—if we try to keep sins, then community becomes impossible.

Jesus has given the disciples a very simple mission: go into the world and forgive so that people might become part of God's kin-dom. The disciples in the gospel immediately take up the mission by going to Thomas and inviting him back with good news. Thomas states his belief/disbelief, but, did you notice, not one of the disciples reject him for his cynicism. Thomas is present when Jesus shows up again and community is restored—the exact intent of the mission.

The mission of the church is to go out into the world and forgive. This mission sound incredibly easy but, in reality, not so much. Our church becomes more a shield against a broken and hurting world and we seem so reluctant to take our faith with us into the world. Even within church walls, we don't always do a good job of forgiving one another. I have known churches to split or for people to leave in a huff because the organ had been moved, or the new carpet was the wrong color, or because the

church took on a building project. Really? Would we actually retain sins over such things?

What does it take for us to live such a mission?

I am reminded of the story of Michael Donald, and the story is actually more about his mother, Beulah Mae Donald. Michael has the dubious and arguable distinction of being the last African American lynched in the United States.

In March, 1981, in Mobile Alabama, a jury did not convict a black man who had been accused of killing a white police officer. Bernie Jack Hays, the Titan of the United Klans in Mobile, was so angry that he declared, “If a black man can get away with killing a white man, we ought to be able to get away with killing a black man.” His son, Henry Hays, and James Knowles took that statement to heart. On the night of March 21, 1981, they got into their car and looked for a black man; they found 19 year old Michael. They forced him into their car at gunpoint and drove into the next county. When Michael tried to run away, they beat him senseless with a tree branch and hanged him; they also cut him to make sure he was dead.

The next day, Beulah Mae was notified that Michael’s wallet had been found, and later that his body had been found. The Mobile police decided that Michael had been killed in a drug deal gone bad. Michael’s sister and friends protested the decision with a rally at the police station. Another protest took place in August with over 8000 people and the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

The FBI was asked in to investigate the case and when that investigation started to fizzle, Thomas Figures—brother of Beulah Mae’s attorney—who was assistant U.S. attorney in Mobile appealed to the FBI for a second investigation. This time, the investigation turned up Henry Hays and James Knowles. Knowles turned state’s witness, both were convicted in 1983 with Henry Hays receiving a death sentence.

The story begins to take an unexpected turn at this point. Beulah Mae was opposed to Hays death penalty—she was a very faithful woman—and she said, “You can’t give life, so why take it?” Beulah Mae had also been contacted by Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center and Dees wanted her to sue the Klan in Alabama. Dees had been threatened by the Klan, listed as #2 on their assassination list, and had one of his law centers burned down by the Klan. Beulah Mae agreed.

Beulah Mae decided to go to the civil trial in 1987—she just couldn’t face the trial in 1983—and she listened to the testimony of James Knowles. When the jury handed

Beulah Mae the \$7 million award against the Klan, James Knowles asked permission to address the court.

Knowles apologized for his participation in Michael's murder and he hoped that his testimony would be example for others to do the right thing. He then turned to Beulah Mae and said, "I can't bring your son back. God knows if I could trade places with him, I would. I can't. Whatever it takes—I have nothing. But I will do it. And if it takes the rest of my life to pay it, any comfort it may bring. I hope it will."

Beulah Mae responded, "I do forgive you. From the day I found out who you was, I asked God to take care of y'all, and He has."

Thank God we have people who take the mission to heart.