

“It’s Not About Thomas”¹
John 20:19-31
Easter 1 C

Pastor John R. Pederson
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado

I don’t know why we single Thomas out for our disapproval. Thomas asks for nothing more than anyone else would ask for. When Jesus was with the disciples – at least the ones cringing in fear behind closed doors – he spoke the word of peace to them . . . and they believed. Mind you, Thomas wasn’t there. He was not within earshot of that blessing. How could he have come to faith? Later, when he *was* present, when he did hear the words that Jesus spoke to all of them, “peace be with you,” he came to faith. He did this apparently without conducting the examination he asked for. Listen for that again. Jesus offers himself to Thomas, willingly admitting to be examined. And Thomas comes to faith immediately, without performing his examination. It’s not about Thomas. It’s about the powerful blessing of peace that comes from the resurrected Lord.

Listen to that again. The good news of this post-Easter story is not Thomas or his insistence on evidence. The crucial point is what Jesus’ words *do*. The good news is in the power that is brought to bear on all the disciples by Jesus’ uttering the important words, “Peace to you.” That blessing, coming as it is from the resurrected Jesus, creates and nourishes faith. That uttered blessing causes belief, makes for trust among them all. Even Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus utters them into faith.

This uttering into faith may cause us some trouble before it brings good news even to us. For we have a very different way to thinking about *words* such as “blessing” and “peace.” We cast these words about casually. “Bless you,” we say when someone sneezes. A sneeze “blessing” is a kind of harmless note of superstition. We also use blessing sentimentally. When someone does something gracious and touching, someone may add, “bless her heart.” We have these nice, but trivial ways of uttering blessing and peace. This is a far cry from how “blessing” and “peace” was used in the ancient world.

“Blessing” to the ancient world was a performative utterance. Spoken “peace” uttered that very state into being. Uttered became the performance. British ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin coined this unfortunate expression “performative utterance” in about 1961.² A performative utterance is one that does not simply reporting the facts. That is what a scientist is

¹ The title and some of the outline of this sermon is from David Lose, “It’s Not About Thomas,” www.workingpreacher.org

² See especially J. L. Austin, *How to do things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Ed. J. O. Urmson. Oxford: Clarendon, 1962.

after. A performative utterance is a sentence that gets something done with words; makes something happen. In an accessible example Austin writes, “. . . when I say ‘I do’ (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife), I am not reporting a marriage, I am indulging in it.”³ Some words make something happen just in the speaking of them.

I have grand daughters who are proficient at throwing kisses. You know how it goes. The kiss is launched through the air. And, if it’s a good one, will smack the receiver right in the side of the face. They love the reaction. They love seeing what effect their action has. A performative utterance is like that. The ancient world understood blessing and peace to be powerful words that got something done.

You may recall the blessing swindled from Isaac by the younger brother, Jacob.⁴ Jacob, before his blind father, pretended to be his older brother, Esau. With the help of a cunning mother, the blessing intended for Esau was spoken to Jacob. When Esau – the rightful heir of the blessing – comes home he begs his father to repeal the blessing that went to Jacob and bestow it upon him instead. Isaac mournfully shrugs his shoulders and admits that a blessing spoken is a blessing that can’t be taken back. It’s out of his hands now. “. . . Isaac knows that the power of the blessing is larger than both of them. It will have its own way in spite of them.”⁵ It cannot be undone. A blessing is a powerful performative utterance. “Spoken words shape human life.”⁶

Fast-forward now to just after Easter in the Gospel of John. The resurrected Jesus, in meeting with various collections of disciples, speaks, “Peace to you.” Raymond Brown writes, “Obviously, in John . . . we are also dealing with a solemn context and should not assume the ‘Peace to you’ is an ordinary greeting. . . . Jesus’ words are not a wish but a statement of fact.”⁷ Speech performs the act. What you and I may take as a perfunctory sentence spoken uncomfortably in a worship service, “The peace of the Lord be with you,” the disciples take as a game-changing, life-changing bestowal of blessing from a resurrected Jesus.

These words spoken when Thomas is finally present results in the most direct confession in the Gospel of John, “My Lord and my God!”

It’s not about Thomas. It is first of all about Jesus powerful performative utterance of peace that can only be given by a resurrected Lord. These words are also spoken to you. “Blessed,” Jesus says, are “those who have not seen but, and yet have come to believe.” Jesus isn’t talking to Thomas anymore. He’s talking to you.

³ J. L. Austin, “Performative Utterances,” *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 222. Theologically, theses building on Austin’s work can be found in Ernst Fuchs, Eberhard Jungel, and Oswald Bayer, among others.

⁴ Genesis 27: 1-38.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 233.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 228.

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 1021.

At this end of the book, John comes clean. All these anecdotes about Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the wedding at Cana, John says, have been written down for *you*, so that *you* too might come, like Thomas and all the other disciples, to believe that Jesus is the Messiah..

John has been carefully considering what to tell and what not to tell, how to order his words for us. Jesus speaks “peace to you” in order to meet you and me with a claim about Jesus. The hope is that we, like Thomas, will be persuaded that Jesus is worthy of our attention, loyalty, and devotion. John has presented Jesus in such a way that you might receive Jesus’ powerful words as well.⁸ As with Thomas, Jesus “invites, persuades, even cajoles us toward faith in Christ.” But more than that, here near the end, Jesus – through John’s gospel – blesses us, and just as the blessing powerfully caused faith in Thomas, so establishes us in faith.⁹

Worship, I hope you remember is not about our doing something pleasing to God. Worship is God acting here and now, creating and nourishing faith. And so when, soon in our own worship, you get the opportunity to represent the resurrected living Christ, and you speak these words to another, “the peace of the Lord be with you always,” you are doing Christ’s work here and now. And when that powerful, faith-creating blessing bounces right back to you with the words, “and also with you,” you should not doubt that this powerful blessing comes directly to you as from Christ himself.

It’s not about Thomas. It’s about Jesus’ blessing, withheld from no one: “peace to you.” Thomas exclaimed, almost as if taken by surprise, “My Lord and my God!” And it is about you, John writes. And now you, in your life at home or in the marketplace, over that hospital bed, or the laboratory, over the spreadsheets, in meeting with that client, we will see if your life says as clearly, “My Lord and my God!” Amen.

⁸ “*Eirenen aphiemi* [“peace to you”] is, so to speak, the Revealer’s parting word of farewell. But it is more than just the good wishes that are normally expressed at a parting; Jesus leaves the *eirenen* behind him, virtually as a parting gift; he ‘gives’ the *eirenen* to those who remain.” Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. by G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare and J.K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 627. Bultmann makes this comment in the context of John 14:27, and writes later that this is the sense of Jesus’ use of “peace” in John 20.

⁹ Lose.