



The Odd One Out
John 20:19-31
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Years ago in seminary, three of my friends formed a singing group. We were studying Greek, so of course they gave themselves a theological name: *The Synoptics*. The word 'Synoptic' describes Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the three gospels that sound so much alike. My friends fit the name. They had beautiful voices. They blended. They belonged together.

And me? Let's just say that I became their manager. They gave me a name: *The Gospel of John*. Like John, I was the odd one out.

John is an outlier. His Gospel is a work of art; carefully crafted, theologically rich, and strikingly different. During the weeks that led up to Easter we met Nicodemus in the night, stood with the man born blind, and wept at Lazarus' tomb. More than 90% of John's material doesn't appear in the Synoptic gospels. John tells the story of Jesus his own way.

Today, John gives us a unique post-resurrection story. It's Easter evening. The tomb stands empty. But disciples don't go out to celebrate. They stay inside. Doors locked. Windows shut. Christ is risen... let's double-check the locks. They're inside, breathing stale air. They're afraid, for good reasons. The same authorities who arrested and executed Jesus could come for them at any time.

Fear is not unique to these disciples. It's a thread that runs through scripture, and at times through each of our lives. Children fear the dark or being lost. Teens fear not belonging. Adults fear making the wrong choices, losing what we love, or not having enough. As we age, we fear loneliness and the loss of independence. Details of our fears shift, but the uncomfortable companion remains.

Fear can be situational. Some of you know about my fear of heights. Back in 2012, I led a youth work trip to Chicago. At the end, we went up to the 103rd floor of the Willis Tower to The Ledge at Skydeck. We did this for fun! I could barely get near the windows. My legs felt unsteady, my stomach dropped, and every instinct in me said, *stay back*. But the youth wanted me to step out with them into a glass box jutting out from the building. They coaxed and cajoled and then became more insistent. Against my better judgment, I backed out onto The Ledge, heart pounding, trying to smile for a picture while quietly panicking.

The disciples are afraid. They feel it in their bodies, their stomachs, their breathing, their sweaty palms. What a shock when the Risen Christ comes and stands among them. No knocking or unlocking. Just Presence. And Peace. No scolding or asking questions. Simply, "Peace," bringing the same promise he gave them just days before: "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27). This isn't peace as the world gives. This peace meets them behind locked doors, *in* their fear.

Jesus shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. They recognize him. Fear gives way to joy. Real, startling joy. And then he does something else astonishing. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And he breathes on them.

In John's Gospel, that breath *is* the Holy Spirit, the life of the risen Christ shared with them. This Spirit-breath reminds us of other biblical stories: God breathing life into dust in Genesis, God breathing life into dry bones in Ezekiel. Now, in a locked room, the same Spirit-breath fills fearful disciples. Jesus doesn't just calm their fear; he gives them his life and his purpose. He will send them as apostles. If you're used to the Holy Spirit coming fifty days after Easter, at Pentecost, John's version can feel confusing, because it is. That's part of the Bible's beauty: it doesn't flatten the story into one simple version. The Synoptics tell it one way; John tells it another. And we're given both. We'll celebrate Pentecost later next month, but today, here in John, Easter and Pentecost are one moment: resurrection and Spirit, breath and sending, all at once.

But there's a problem. Thomas isn't there. He's the odd one out. He misses the moment.

We know what it is to miss a moment, a moment that won't come back. The call we didn't return, and now the voice on the other end is gone. The goodbye we thought we'd have time for. The opportunity to say what mattered. The conversation that could have changed something, the door that quietly closed while we hesitated. The chance to say thank you... or I'm sorry... or I love you.

Later, when we realize what slipped past us, there's a hollow feeling, regret mixed with longing. If only we had been there. If only we had paid attention. If only we hadn't stepped out of the room.

Thomas carries that ache all week. His friends have a moment he can't replay a memory of Jesus standing among them, speaking peace. Thomas is left with the silence of what he's missed, trying to catch up to a joy he hasn't yet known. They tell him, "We have seen the Lord," but it isn't enough. And honestly, can we blame him?

Well, through the years, Christianity has been hard on Thomas, reducing him to "Doubting Thomas." But John invites us to look again. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus commands his disciples to love one another. In John's telling, Christ's presence becomes known through that love, and the trust it requires.

Thomas' struggle, then, isn't only about doubt; it's also about trust. He can't receive the witness of his peers as enough. He wants his own encounter with the risen Christ.

A week later, the disciples are still inside. Doors shut. This time, Thomas is with them. And here's the good news, the surprising, good news: Jesus comes back. He returns to meet Thomas. To give him the second chance so many of us long for. Thomas speaks:

I remember the room, the doors shut tight, the air thick. My friends said they had seen him, but I couldn't believe them. I needed more. I needed him. And then, a week later, there he was, not a memory, but Presence. I heard his voice, "Peace." And then he looked at me, really looked. He knew exactly what I needed. "Put your finger here." I didn't move. I didn't have to. It wasn't my hands that opened, it was my heart. And all I could say was, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas speaks one of the clearest, boldest confessions in all of scripture - not despite his doubt, but through it. Faith is not the absence of doubt; it's what happens when patient Love meets us there. Which means that faith is less about certainty and more about relationship; about recognizing and trusting the One who keeps showing up.

If you see yourself in Thomas, be encouraged. Christ is not put off by your questions or your need for clarity. The Risen One comes to those who aren't sure, those who missed the moment, those still waiting for something real.

Over time, in worship and community, we begin to see glimpses of resurrection in one another; love and mercy at work, lives held in forgiveness and belonging. Little by little, faith rises, not because we have seen everything, but because we have been seen and known, and met.

And when fear rises, because these days it will, when it crowds our thoughts and catches our breath, we learn to center ourselves in community, in Christ's presence and peace. Peace that holds. Peace that finds us.

Over time, by grace, Thomas' words become our own: My Lord and my God!
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.