



**THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
**APRIL 19, 2020**  
**“TO FORGIVE OR NOT TO FORGIVE? THAT IS THE QUESTION.”**

**JOHN 20: 19-31**

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”



Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

## **SERMON**

At the end of worship, the pastor asks the congregation, “how many of you have forgiven your enemies?”

The entire congregation raises their hands except one elderly woman.

“Are you withholding forgiveness from your enemies?” Asks the surprised pastor.

“Oh no, pastor,” the woman replies, “I just have no enemies.”

“This is very unusual, the pastor says, “how old are you, if I may ask.”

“Ninety-eight,” she states proudly.

“My dear lady,’ responds the pastor, ‘could you tell us how it is possible for someone nearly one hundred to have no enemies?’”

With a big smile, she shouts, “I outlived all those idiots....”

One of the damaging falsehoods spread by ungrounded and unfounded Christianity is that we have to forgive.

Yet you just heard me read the spiritual guidance by Jesus to his disciples immediately following his resurrection: “receive the holy spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”



Jesus puts the matter of forgiveness into our hands and gives us the choice: forgive or do not forgive. Forgiveness becomes a matter of spiritual discernment.

Pop psychology has jumped into this forgiveness issue and urges us to always forgive. Putting forth the notion that forgiveness may not change the other person, but if we forgive, we somehow get some kind of peace out of it.

What usually happens, though, is that the person who hurt, wounded, or damaged us just gets to do it all over again.

But, I'm supposed to sit in my living room and forgive the person who denies traumatizing me, and open myself up to their abuse again?

I don't think so. That would be masochistic on my part.

James lee burke, one of the best writers around, states: "when we allow others to victimize us in order to prove our own worth, we invite a cancer into our lives."

You see, we can feel self-righteous because we have forgiven someone, but we just end up getting betrayed again and re-wounded if the other person does not change....

Recall that the primary new testament Greek definition sin is a word picture of an archer who takes an arrow from the quiver, aims at the bull's eye and misses. For the new testament, sin is literally missing the mark.



Let's bring this spiritual practice, this spiritual discernment down to earth. I will use my marriage to deb as an illustration of both forgiving and withholding forgiveness.

There are words and actions, over twenty-six years of marriage, where we forgive one another. We both recognize that we each have bad days, there are times where each of us is cranky or irritable. And it really helps when we tell one another what is going on.

More than that, I can fool around too much which can be annoying to deb. It comes out of trying to manage my anxiety. Early trauma leads to later drama. Deb can be anxious and full of feelings. We've learn to forgive and let go of holding these aspects of our personalities against one another. Uh, right deb??!!

But there is the other choice where we do not readily forgive when the other misses the mark. There are ways in which we ask one another to change. Which means, forgiveness is withheld.

Since I'm a bigger mess than deb, I'll use myself as the example.

Coming into the marriage, I brought a lot of debt. Certainly, part of that debt was from supporting my ex-wife and children during the time of separation and divorce. But I was too loose in my spending habits. For example, after we were first married, I would buy deb lovely gifts for our anniversary and not tell her I had charged everything. And, since she managed our day-to-day finances, she would have to find a way to pay off the credit card. Deb could not and should not have



had to forgive this. She withheld forgiveness, held my feet to the fire, and asked me to change my spending patterns. And, as I did, I found out I was pretty good at investing until it came time to turn our retirement over to a financial adviser.

And, I no longer buy deb a present without being able to pay for it out of my own money....

I also came into the marriage as a big old slob. If you're familiar with the Myers Briggs type inventory, I am a perceiving type.

I like to be loose and casual. Keep plans to a minimum. Resist organization. I create piles of books, record albums, papers on my desk. I procrastinate in making decisions, including "I wonder where I should put this?" Oh, I'll just stick it under the bed or shove it in a closet."

A guiding principle in working with the Myers Briggs and your own personality is that "type is an explanation, not an excuse."

It was not up to deb to humor me and let me turn the house into a junkyard. She withheld forgiveness and rightly asked me to change.

It never seemed right and fair to ask deb to become a bigger slob when she loves beauty and order.

So, in withholding forgiveness, one is not actually doing something negative.

And that may be where we have to change our thinking. Many of us think we should be nice and not say anything. If there was one thing Jesus was not, was



nice. And he called people out. To the pharisees, the original uptight, judgmental, self-righteous, arrogant authorities, Jesus said, “the whores are streaming into the kingdom of heaven before you.” Sound nice to you??!!

In withholding forgiveness, one says, “this behavior of yours is not working for me. You have hurt me again and again in the same painful place and I don’t want it to go on any longer.”

This forces each of us, out of love for the other, to go deeper into ourselves and work to do it differently.

I share this with you because the pandemic forces all of us to be a lot closer. And our patterns of behavior may really rub one another the wrong way. Rather than fighting and arguing, identify the behavior you would like your partner to change. Ask for a change in positive language when you’re not full of emotion.

For better or worse, I see that this pandemic is asking us to grow up and mature as spiritual people....

After the moment of resurrection, Jesus must show his disciples the wounds in his hands and side in order for them to recognize him.

This is such an important aspect of well-connected relationships. We have to be willing to show one another the wounds we carry and bring into our relationships.



One of the positives of this pandemic is that deb and I have had more deep and meaningful conversations in six weeks than we've had in years. And many revolve around the wounds we both carry that continue to impact our relationship.

When we show one another our wounds, we are being vulnerable....

I mourn the loss of the singer/songwriter, John Prine, who just died. He once gave advice to Jason Isabell whose songs we're doing today. He said to be a good songwriter one has to be vulnerable.

To be a person with depth and soul, one has to learn to be vulnerable.

In order to be transformed, one has to be vulnerable.

Which brings us to old doubting Thomas. He usually gets a bad rap, but isn't it being vulnerable to give voice to your doubts?

Doubt has such a bad name among certain Christian circles, as if it is humanly possible to always believe, to always trust, to always have faith.

No way! Thomas is the saint within all of us when we are faithful to our own experience and give voice to our doubts. Who doesn't carry doubts in this pandemic?



In giving voice to his doubts, Jesus provides Thomas with exactly what he asks for: “come on, Thomas. Stick your fingers in the wounds of my hands. And shove your fist—this is the literal Greek—shove your fist in the wound in my side.”

In this grim process, Thomas begins his transformation.

Legend has it that Thomas eventually goes on the India to share his experience of Jesus. And today, there are still four million Thomas Christians in India, existing as one of the oldest Christian traditions in the western world.

Out of the resurrection, Jesus meets us where we live, insisting, inviting, imploring us to be transformed.

The creation is calling out to us. Be transformed.

The universe is insisting that we must transform the way we relate to all people and all creatures.

We are all Thomas. Jesus, you mean me? I have to think about all this? Can't I just be filled with joy like all the other disciples?

No, we are all Thomas. This is why he stands out among all the disciples after the resurrection.





Consider what you need from Jesus in order to mature and deepen. In order to be the person God calls you to be. And be careful what you ask for, for clearly Jesus will give it to you....

Deb and I would have remained children if we had insisted we accept one another just as we are. Unconditional love is the language of God, not the language of human relationships.

Once we are no longer infants, we bear the responsibility for making ourselves lovable.

In this, we all must balance two contradictory statements.

Everything is fine the way it is. And there is a lot of room for improvement.

For example, if I don't hold the two statements in tension, I either remain that old messy, slob, I always remain in debt or else I play the wounded spouse who my wife is always criticizing.

We must be grounded in knowing we are foundationally okay and yet that we need to work on ourselves.

After the resurrection, this is the hard work of rising to the new self.

Instead of right belief, Thomas models right practice. We learn about dying and rising by living it. We learn to trust by voicing our mistrust. We become strong by displaying our vulnerability. We learn about forgiveness by not forgiving.



Learning to live out of the spiritual energy generated by Jesus and his resurrection takes a lifetime.

But we're all being given the opportunity now to practice, learn and deepen into what Jesus is showing us when we stick our fingers and our fist into his wounds.

### **SERMON SONG**

*IF WE WERE VAMPIRES* BY JASON ISBELL