

**“Now What?”**

The Reverend Pen Peery

**Date:** April 7, 2024



When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not be unbelieving but believe.”

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

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One of the things they teach pastors about preaching is to always keep three things in mind: the biblical text, the world, and the congregation.

A good sermon doesn’t just interpret one of those things – a good sermon interprets all of those things...and put them in conversation with each other.

I’ll get to the Bible and the world in a moment – but here is what I know about those of you who make up the congregation today: You’re the die-hards. It’s the Sunday after Easter. It’s stunningly sunny and beautiful outside today. For many, it’s the last weekend of spring break. And yet, here you are. Back in the pew. Ready to roll. Bless your hearts.

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I know about you. A lot of you are the ones who read every word of the newsletter even though you probably already knew what was going on at church anyway. You not only buy an Easter lily in memory or honor of someone on Easter, but remember to take a lily with you to bring it to someone who couldn't be at church. You write down the names you hear the pastors pray for in worship so you can pray for them yourself. You rarely if ever have a member of the Stewardship Committee have to call you in November reminding you to please turn in your pledge.

Yes. You are the Second-Sunday-Of-Easter-Is-Just-Another-Day kinds of church members – and...I'm really not joking now...you are an incredible lot. You don't hear a thank-you from me enough.

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Today's passage – the second resurrection appearance of Jesus in John's gospel – is often read on this second Sunday of Easter. I've preached on it a number of times. I've convinced my colleagues that I often preach on what is sometimes called "National Associate Pastor Sunday" to give them a break and because I want to deconstruct the myth that Senior Pastors are lazy on the weeks after the High and Holy Days when there aren't usually a lot of people in the pews. That's only partially true. Mainly, though, it is because I love this passage of Scripture.

Almost every other time I have preached on this passage I spend a lot of time talking about Thomas. If you haven't figured out after 12 years of sermons from this pulpit, I think it is important to validate the importance of wrestling with your faith...I think it is important to model for people...particularly, skeptics...that it is good to use your brain and ask questions about what you (or others) believe...I think there are too many people in our world who give up on church because they equate faith with certainty. I love the part of this story about Thomas because he challenges that – and I think that is a helpful word for our world to hear.

But today – taking seriously that you probably aren't the people who need to hear that message because you already get it – I wanted to focus on another part of this Scripture: the first part.

Jesus appears to the disciples – how, we don't really know – and when they were all there (except that slacker named Thomas)...together...hoping to make sense of what had just happened and ready to get their marching orders...Jesus shows up and says...well, not a whole lot.

I'll get back to that in a minute, but first I want to tell you a story that a preacher friend shared with me in the context of writing a paper about this Scripture passage for a study group that we are in together that met last year. As he worked on his paper, he was wondering what – exactly – Jesus was wanting his followers to do in light of his resurrection.

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My friend’s name is Dan and he is the senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Wilmington, North Carolina (where our former Director of Youth Ministry is now the associate pastor). It was the weekend before our study group was supposed to meet – and Dan’s wife and kids were away for a few days to give him the space he needed to finish up his writing and have a bachelor weekend to boot. Here’s what Dan shared (in his words):

“I went off to play tennis about mid-afternoon and had a great time, a good sweat, and picked up some craft beverages on the way home. Things were shaping up nicely. Just as I rounded the bend on our street, I noticed a car creeping slowly around that same bend, and a dog walking lazily through the landscaped front yard. I didn’t think much of it. There was no reason to think much of it. I should have gone right inside and begun my bachelor evening. Instead, what I did was walk back out to the street, cross the road to the bend, to where that car was still crawling along, the driver’s side window rolled down now. An attractive young woman said, “Hey, do you know that dog? I think he’s lost or something. I’d totally grab him myself but I’m like super pregnant.”

The phrase *Not my monkeys, not my circus* came to mind, but I didn’t say that. For some inexplicable reason I said, “Oh, ok. I guess I’ll try.” So I walked around to the rear of the car, to where the dog was still ambling along, and I called out to him, “Here boy!” He let out a bark and loped over to me. He was huge, tall and long limbed, with short, white ringlets like a doodle of some kind. But he was mangy too, with bare spots where his pink skin showed through. And he was old. Like, really, really, old. I grabbed his collar and checked for ID. Nothing, only a rabies vaccine tag (for which I was thankful).

I held him by the collar and wondered what to do next. I figured I could try a few doors down, where I’d heard multiple dogs barking many times before. I turned to tell the woman that, but she was gone now. Apparently she’d done her good deed for the day by alerting me of the problem. She was playing Hot Potato more than Good Samaritan.

I walked him three doors down and rang the bell, but got no response. I met our other neighbors along the way, who said they’d never seen him before. They did let me borrow a leash, so I wouldn’t be hunched over, back aching, walking this old dog all around the neighborhood. I remember thinking: This whole thing has gone too far. And now my craft beverages are getting warm in the backseat where I left them.

I took him for one loop around the block and asked everyone I met, Do you know this dog? Have you ever seen this dog before? I must’ve spoken to a dozen people at least, and not one could tell me a thing about this dog. One neighbor did offer to put it on the Next Door app, which I appreciated, but otherwise I had no luck and no help. I brought the dog home and into the front yard of our house, tied him to a tree there amid the shouts of protest from our dog, Millie, who was watching all this from inside. I just kept saying to myself: *I don’t need this, I don’t need this, I don’t want this dadgum dog.* The dog for his part was happy as a clam.

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I checked in with Susan (Dan’s wife) and the kids over Facetime and of course the kids were thrilled and, predictably, tried to convince us to keep him. That was a nonstarter, I said, but I did wish they were there to help care for our new friend, whom I’d decided to call Heckifiknow, because that was the answer to every question one could ever ask about him. Where did he come from? Where does he belong? What kind of dog is he? And above all, how did he become my problem?!! Heckifiknow.

He spent the night with us. What was I to do – just turn him loose? I knew Animal Control couldn’t be reached on a Friday night. So I decided to set him up in the backyard in Millie’s crate, with a bowl of her food and some water. He happily hunkered down for the night beside the azaleas. I remembered to turn off the sprinklers so he wouldn’t get soaked at 5am. I finally took Millie for her walk, long delayed, and I drank a warm craft beverage (or two).

In the morning, I discovered that it had rained on Heckifiknow at some point during the night, but he seemed no worse for the wear. Just wet now and even stinkier than he was before (which is saying something). Luckily Animal Control was available at 8am and they eventually agreed to send an officer out to get him. Initially, they’d asked: Do you think you could bring him on in to the shelter yourself? I had to take a moment to gather and censor myself before answering. Sensing my reluctance, the woman said, Ok, we’ll send someone out to you.

I tried to work on the paper as I sat by the window and waited for the officer to arrive, wondering what in the world I was going to say to you people about the nature and mission of the church. I couldn’t concentrate. Heckifiknow was tied to his tree again, barking now but not bothered really, just basking in the late morning sun. When the officer finally came, he parked out on the street, and walked up from the pickup truck to meet me in the front yard. He asked all the questions again. It took all I had not to respond with the name of the dog. He took the leash from me and led the dog out to the road and had to hoist him up awkwardly from his hind legs to get him up in the truck bed. He said he’d check him for a chip and also trace his vaccine record, see if he could learn something that way. I went back to my paper.

About ten minutes later I saw the officer coming back up from the road and so went out to meet him again. I can’t say for sure, but I’ve since wondered... Did he have a slight smirk on his face? “We ran the chip,” he said. “This dog lives right down the road.” I said, “What? What do you mean right down the road?” He said, “2215, I think. Right there at the bend in the road.””

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The lesson that my friend Dan drew from wasting an entire evening of his life playing caretaker to a dog who didn’t need anything, except – perhaps – an explanation for why Dan felt the need to abduct him from his own backyard was that, like a lot of other dutiful church folks (pastors and Second-Sunday-Of-Easter-Members), we

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have a way of getting and staying busy with a whole host of things that we are absolutely sure the world needs desperately and couldn't possibly do without.<sup>1</sup>

We are – and, to be clear, I'm here on the Second-Sunday-Of-Easter with you...I include myself in this “we” – we are **just sure** that being faithful to Jesus means we have to DO something. And if we don't know exactly what Jesus needs us to do, maybe we can find something to do while we wait???

What is challenging to me is that – at least the way the gospel of John tells it – the resurrected Jesus doesn't show up and give the followers who are going to carry on in his name a long list of imperatives. In fact, Jesus doesn't tell his disciples to do anything at all.

Instead he says,

“Peace”

and,

“Receive”

and,

“Believe”

I know. I know.

There is so much the world needs.

There are so many ways we can help to be Christ's hands and feet.

I get it! I feel it!!

But doesn't staying busy all the time kind of wear you out?

So much so that sometimes you forget why it is you are working so hard?

Heckifiknow!!

And – be honest – haven't you ever wondered if all the work we do as a church makes enough of a difference? Also, ironically, doesn't wondering that make you want to work even harder to keep those thoughts at bay?

It's not that I don't think the resurrected Jesus doesn't want us to be about healing, and justice, and kindness, and organization, and hospitality, and care, and generosity, and solidarity, and advocacy, and prayer...

...it's just that I think Jesus wants us know that those things don't save us.

And what matters – even more than what we do – is that we remember who does.

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<sup>1</sup> This line – as well as the entire story quoted above – are thanks to the Rev. Dr. Daniel Lewis, pastor of FPC Wilmington – from his paper for The Well (2023) on John 20:19-31. Obviously, my sermon is in debt to Dan's work.

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**First Presbyterian  
Church of Charlotte**

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.