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Disciples' Job Description

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Have you ever wondered what the disciples of Jesus were supposed to do? What was their task or job? Most of the time in the Gospels all they seem to do is follow Jesus around, ask questions, run errands, and get things wrong. Were they company for Jesus? Protection? Comic sidekicks? Foils for Gospel writers?

When you think about it, most professions and vocations come with an understanding of what the person in the profession or vocation is supposed to do. Plumbers like my father protect the health of a person, family, community, and even the country by making sure clean water is where it is supposed to be in buildings like homes, schools, churches, restaurants, stores, and other places; and dirty water goes where it is supposed to and makes sure the two kinds of water do not mix. Postal workers make sure mail gets to where it is addressed. IT technicians make sure computers, devices, internet and Wi-Fi systems function. Teachers help students learn. Students explore, question, discover, try, and learn. Writers, artists, and musicians create what we call works of art, books, paintings, music. Even clergy have tasks; writing sermons, teaching, leading and creating liturgy, listening, empowering the followers of Jesus.

It seems less simple to figure out what the disciples of Jesus did. Perhaps because we don't really read a clear direction from Jesus on the subject until after his resurrection. According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into the world teaching, making disciples, and baptizing. And if you were to read any number of articles by church consultants, you would read that as many parishes in all denominations are experiencing decline, most consultants are strongly advising these struggling parishes to go back to that Great Commission of Jesus and make more disciples.

But today in John's Gospel, we heard the Risen Jesus give a different command to his disciples who were hiding behind closed and locked doors. The first part of today's Gospel takes place on the very same day Mary Magdalene discovered the empty tomb, had an extraordinary conversation with the Risen Jesus and ran and told the same disciples she had seen the Risen Lord. Now it is later that same day, and the disciples haven't moved. They were still afraid, even after Mary's witness. Who can blame them? No one had anticipated the incredible events of that day; or what Jesus' resurrection would mean to those who followed him.

Suddenly Jesus appeared, even though the doors were closed and locked, and Jesus' first gift to those in the room was his greeting of peace, which can also be a way of letting them know Jesus forgave them. But they didn't say anything until after he had shown them the marks of crucifixion that are forever a part of the Risen Jesus; those marks tell us a great deal about resurrection life; that it is forever linked with the terrible suffering and pain and death of the crucifixion. The two things cannot be separated; and indeed in both of Jesus' appearances in today's Gospel it seems those wounds are how Jesus was recognized by those who followed him.

Those wounds also teach us something about forgiveness. It is a common misunderstanding that forgiving and forgetting are the same thing. If that were true, the Risen Jesus would not have kept those reminders of his crucifixion. Forgetting merely perpetuates the same old cycle of sin. The only way to break that cycle is forgiving, remembering, and moving on in a new way, hopefully a better way. That is the new creation that is part of Resurrection Life, and why the Risen Jesus bears the marks of crucifixion and why his forgiveness is so incredible; it breaks the cycle of sin.

After the disciples figured out they were looking at Jesus, the Risen Jesus gave them two other remarkable gifts: the gift of the work Jesus had for them to do and the means to do such work.

The work of those who follow the Risen Jesus is to go out into the world where they were to do one task: forgive. Jesus didn't tell them to build churches. He didn't tell them to go after Pilate. He didn't tell them (in this Gospel) to make more disciples, he just told them to forgive. Those whose sins they forgive will be forgiven and those they don't forgive won't be forgiven. Sounds like pretty heavy work, work many of us might be quick to say it is God's job, not ours. But that is the task Jesus gave his disciples, as overwhelming or intimidating as it might be.

To help his disciples with the work of forgiveness, Jesus also gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that they might understand they aren't gods themselves, they aren't putting themselves in God's place, they are letting God work through them, as God is with them through the Holy Spirit. It is an awesome responsibility, to go out into a world that is unfair, unjust, prejudiced, power-hungry, sometimes angry, sometimes hurting, broken in places, deeply indebted and pronounce forgiveness, which is why we need the Holy Spirit.

Forgiveness and the Holy Spirit are the gifts of resurrection. These are the agents of peace, of wholeness of wellbeing, of the creation of new life that Jesus wanted his disciples to plant and scatter throughout the world, into the hearts of real people, in real places, in real need.

Many scholars, commentators, clergy, and artists argue that although the names have changed, the command is still the same; the job description hasn't changed in over 2000 years. Those who follow Jesus in this 21st century are to take up the work of planting, scattering, and giving the much needed forgiveness in a world that still suffers from greed, ignorance, arrogance, hurt, division, fear. This might sound just as intimidating as it might have to the disciples hiding in the room; as it might seem much easier to give judgment, revenge, criticism, and heartbreak than it is to forgive. Indeed, some might argue strongly that in some cases, things like judgement and criticism are important, they can be helpful. So can skepticism. Just going around blindly forgiving everyone could cause lots of problems, and could easily perpetuate things like environmental degradation, sexism, racism, ageism, and all those ism's that cause division and harm, especially if operating under the incorrect assumption that forgiveness is also forgetting. Questioning, investigating, probing, testing, can be helpful in overcoming such problems.

Which is where the disciple Thomas comes in. Thomas who often asks good questions. Thomas who missed the first visit Jesus made to his disciples. We don't know why, and can't really guess why. Thomas who wanted only to see what all the other disciples had already seen; those telling marks of crucifixion. Thomas wanted to make sure it was Jesus who made such an outrageous demand of his followers. Thomas who shows us a person of faith can be trusting without being naive, and how exploring and questioning can lead to a deeper faith.

Perhaps Thomas was suspect because the Risen Jesus did not act like so many characters in so many stories who appear to come back from the dead. You know, those battle worn heroes who we thought met their end in a spectacular explosion show up at the last desperate minute in some action adventure story bleeding, angry, and armed who finally kill the villain, get the girl, and the respect and admiration of all the other characters in the story. Such heroes vow revenge on those who caused their suffering, and the suffering of their loved ones. Which is how we get sequels'. I've read plenty of those kind of stories, seen a lot of movies like that. When it comes to creating fiction, our created heroes are pretty good at keeping the destructive cycle of violence going, even if it appears to be for the force of some greater good. They don't forget. Neither do they forgive.

That is why I can easily see why the Resurrection of Jesus seems unbelievable. Because the idea of someone coming back from the dead and then forgiving everyone who caused his death won't sell books or movie tickets. It is too contrary to the way most people think. Or behave. Yet that is what the Risen Christ did; not only did he forgive, he commanded his followers to do the same. And that may be why when Thomas, who wasn't in the room the first time the Risen Jesus appeared, saw

those marks of crucifixion he proclaimed, “My Lord and my God.” For only God could love humanity enough to forgive humanity for doing our worst and then tell us to do the same; to remember, forgive, and move forward into God’s new creation in peace.

The good news in today’s Gospel is the Risen Jesus gives forgiveness, gives us our mission, and doesn’t leave us without the Holy Spirit to do such work on our own. That is one reason why every Sunday we celebrate Holy Communion, where we ask the Holy Spirit to come and transform bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus, which we then consume, so that we can feel Christ is with us as we go out into the world to forgive, and show what forgiveness can do in opening a new way to live.

That might look a little different for each of us, as we go into different places when we leave church. Each place we go offers an opportunity to do what Jesus commanded his disciples to do. N.T. Wright has written about an art student who received a lot of cruel criticism from his professors when they discovered his Christian faith. Instead of antagonizing or arguing with them or leaving the program, the student started creating abstract icons, which the art professors found beautiful and were surprised when the student explained what they were. This brought a sense of peace between professor and student, who could work together in a new way. In each of our lives, and in the life of the parish, we too might look for what opportunity we have to bring that peace, that wholeness that comes with forgiveness. If that challenge feels intimidating, we can remember we aren’t alone, God is with us, in the Holy Spirit, in the sacrament of Holy Communion, so that together we can, as the author of John’s Gospel said at the end of today’s Gospel, have life in the name of the Risen Jesus.