

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.

Now Jesus did many other signs that are not written...but these are written, these signs are recorded.... Written to a beleaguered Jewish Christian community, at odds with the Jewish friends and neighbors, the stories from the gospel of John were collected and shared to point to the messianic witness of Jesus. In an effort to support those martyred Christians, who were threatening to leave both the church and the synagogue, John wrote about the signs to which Jesus gives witness, as proof that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Hebrew Scripture prophesies. Unlike the other gospels, the gospel of John is all about signs and wonders that the light, the logos (the word) has already come into the world.

Furthermore, these signs and wonders stand alone, as invitation for us to come to belief. These signs and wonder are an invitation into a life of faith. "But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah...." These signs, these stories of wonder are recorded that you may come to have life, life as he had life. Has life! The Christ community is entrusted with being the living word.

In his book, *The Good Book*; reading the bible with mind and heart, Peter Gomes, has attempted to answer the question – why do we read the bible anyway? He begins by suggesting that all Christians are apologists. That is to say, Christians are called continually to justify why they pursue a belief system and a religious tradition that seems to be so consistently out of step with the culture in which we live. This was true in biblical times, it's especially true now. As apologists, followers of Jesus continually find themselves asking "why am I doing this?" The sad part is that we often keep our identity as followers of Jesus under wraps precisely because we continually face this question. Not only from those around us, but even more potently, from deep within ourselves. We are not a lot different than that missing disciple, Thomas – the twin, who needed to see the nail scars for himself.

Why do I follow Jesus? Why do I read the bible? Why do I live a life that seems to run completely counter to the culture in which I live? Unless I see the nail scars... We're critical of Thomas, but at least he is honest AND public about his skepticism.

We will encounter Gomes attempt to answer some of these questions throughout this season of Scripture in these days leading to Pentecost Sunday. And we'll encounter his writing by engaging the readings for each of the Sundays in the next few weeks. According to Gomes, we read the bible because of what it is...and he describes in three ways. It is a public book. It is a living text. And it is an inclusive word. As a public record the bible is meant to be shared and understood in a public way. It calls faithful people to stand with it, in matters of public policy and witness, even when it gets uncomfortable- especially when it gets uncomfortable. What do I mean?

So let's consider this morning's text. It would have been shocking for 2nd century Jewish Christians in conflict with their neighbors and friends in the synagogue, to hear that forgiveness is actually in the hands of those entrusted with it. The story this morning reads "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." Those words would have been incredulous to John's audience.

Up to this point, the forgiveness of sins was the sole business of God. And here, according to the story recorded by John, for Christian Jews of the late first century, the business of forgiveness becomes theirs. And this is no less true for us today. And I bet it's equally uncomfortable for us to hear. "If we forgive the sins of many, they are forgiven. If we retain the sins of any, they are retained."

How often do we keep people in the sinful boxes we have created around them, keeping them in bondage simply because we will not forgive? Forgiveness is not for those we think have sinned against us. Forgiveness does not help them. Forgiveness is our key to freedom. By forgiving, we set ourselves free. And can you see as Gomes writes so beautiful, we are called to give public witness to the gift of the bible even when it's uncomfortable to do so.

According to Gomes, the second reason we read the bible is because it is a living text. The stories of transformation found in its pages call us into our own transformation. Again, let's consider this morning's text. When it was evening of that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples met were locked, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them. Here, embedded in the stories of something that happened so long ago and so far away, we find a profound invitation that has the power to transform our lives here and now.

These disciples holed up. Locked away. At night. Because they were afraid. They'd been witnesses to the crucifixion and they'd heard testimony about an empty tomb. These were troubling signs of things they didn't understand and more than anything, I hunch they were most afraid that following Jesus would land them in the same situation. Into the house of fear, the transformational Jesus appears.

So think of those moments in your life when you have been most afraid? Think of those moments right now. Perhaps they're situations that still make your heart beat faster. Perhaps they're situations even today that stimulate your body's instinctual flight or fight response. You know what feeling afraid feels like in your body. Now, what if into that very moment, you invoked, you called on, the living, transformational Jesus, you breathed deeply, calmly, received a healing breath of fresh air and heard the words "Peace be with you." Calling upon the peace that surpasses all understanding has the power to transform even the most fearful experiences of our lives. Do you see the point Gomes is trying to make? The bible not full of old dead stories, it is full of living and lively words.

Finally, Gomes writes that the bible is an inclusive word. He remarked that it has been incredulous for outsiders to watch as black American slaves adopted the religion of their white oppressors. Even black American slaves were apologists. We ask, why on earth would you adopt the religion of those who stripped you of your freedom, and held you in bondage for centuries, in the name of that religion? The answer was because black American slaves found themselves in the stories of bondage recorded in the stories. They identified with the slaves held captive and the ancient Israelites oppressed at the hands of Egypt.

If we pay attention closely, we will find all our stories embedded in the ancient stories. Our stories are played out in the ancient scripture stories and inevitably, the transformation played out in the scriptures, is the transformation played out in our own lives. The key...pay attention.

We don't have to go too much further than Thomas the twin to recognize ourselves in the stories. I started today by suggesting that we are a lot like Thomas, needing to see for ourselves the blood, the nail scars, the hole in his side, before we will ever believe that the transformational Jesus, the living one of faith, is alive.

Jesus said to Thomas the following week, when Thomas finally got to see the real thing. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Friends, we may never see the nail scars or the hole in his side, but in the discipline of scripture, we will encounter a public story, a living word and an inclusive text, in which, if we're paying attention, we will find life in his name. Amen.