

John 20:19-31
April 11, '10

"A WEEK LATER..."

THE MOVIE "PULP FICTION" IS ONE OF THOSE RARE MOVIES THAT BEGINS & ENDS IN THE SAME PLACE. IT STARTS IN A DINER-TYPE RESTAURANT & WITHIN THE RESTAURANT TAKES YOU TO A PARTICULARLY CRUCIAL POINT & THEN THE MOVIE TAKES OFF IN ANOTHER DIRECTION, INTRODUCING ALL SORTS OF CHARACTERS & SITUATIONS.

AT THE VERY END, IT COMES BACK TO THAT SAME DINER & THAT SAME SITUATION AS IT ALL UNFOLDS TO THE CONCLUSION.

IT'S A FASCINATING BIT OF STORY-TELLING.

NOW, FOR THOSE FAMILIAR WITH "PULP FICTION," I AM *NOT* COMPARING IT TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, AND YET – IN ESSENCE – I THINK THAT'S WHAT WE HAVE HERE.

YOU MAY HAVE NEVER GIVEN THIS MUCH THOUGHT, BUT JOHN REALLY ENDS WHERE IT STARTS.

WITH THE AWARDING OF OUR MEMORY TROPHIES TODAY, IT'S A GOOD DAY FOR US TO THINK ABOUT ONE OF THE IMPORTANT BIBLICAL PASSAGES THAT OUR CHILDREN LEARN – THE PROLOGUE TO JOHN'S GOSPEL.

"IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD & THE WORD WAS GOD.

LAST SUNDAY WAS A GLORIOUS DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH.

WE HAD A PACKED SANCTUARY, THE CHANCEL FILLED WITH LILIES, TRUMPETS BLARING, VOICES SINGING LOUDLY & BOISTEROUSLY OF THE TRIUMPH OF RESURRECTION.

AND NOW – HERE WE ARE – A WEEK LATER.

ON DAYS LIKE TODAY, I ALWAYS THINK OF A STAFF MEMBER IN A FORMER CHURCH I SERVED.

LINDA ALWAYS SAID THE SUNDAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS & EASTER WERE HER FAVORITE SUNDAYS BECAUSE ALL THE OUTSIDERS WEREN'T THERE ON THOSE DAYS.

AS SHE PUT IT, *"IT FEELS LIKE FAMILY AGAIN."*

I NEVER *COULD* SEEM TO CONVINCING LINDA THAT WE WERE *SUPPOSED* TO BE EXCITED ABOUT OUTSIDERS COMING TO CHURCH!

YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT SHE MEANT BY THAT, THOUGH, DON'T YOU?

THIS SUNDAY HAS A DIFFERENT FEEL TO IT, DOESN'T IT?

IT'S LIKE SOMETHING BIG HAPPENED & NOW IT'S OVER & NOW WE HAVE TO GET BACK TO OUR REGULAR ROUTINE OF DAY-TO-DAY LIVING.

WHEN YOU LOOK AT THIS PASSAGE WE'VE READ THIS MORNING, IT'S VERY ODD.

WHAT'S ODD ABOUT IT IS THE TIME PERIOD THAT IT COVERS.

IN JOHN'S GOSPEL, YOU HAVE TO GO ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE 12TH CHAPTER TO FIND PALM SUNDAY.

WHAT THAT MEANS IS THAT A SINGLE WEEK TAKES UP NEARLY HALF THE BOOK!

BUT HERE IN THE VERSES WE'VE READ THIS MORNING, THAT SAME PERIOD OF TIME IS COVERED IN A MATTER OF JUST 13 VERSES!

IT BEGINS ON EASTER NIGHT WITH THE DISCIPLES HUDDLED TOGETHER IN FEAR FOR THEIR LIVES.

SUDDENLY, JESUS STANDS IN THEIR MIDST & SAYS, *“PEACE BE WITH YOU.”*

IT BEGS THE QUESTION – WHICH WOULD BE MORE FRIGHTENING – TO THINK YOU MIGHT BE ACCOSTED BY ENEMIES OF YOUR LEADER WHO WANT TO EXECUTE YOU THE SAME WAY THEY DID HIM – OR TO FIND THAT DEAD LEADER MIRACULOUSLY & INEXPLICABLY STANDING IN FRONT OF YOU IN A LOCKED ROOM?!

I CAN’T HELP BUT WONDER IF THIS WASN’T EVEN MORE FRIGHTENING FOR THE DISCIPLES.

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THIS?

HE WAS DEAD.

THEY KNEW HE WAS DEAD.

OH, SURE, THEY’D BEEN TOLD THAT HE WAS ALIVE BUT THEY KNEW BETTER.

THEY KNEW THAT DEAD PEOPLE DON’T COME BACK TO LIFE.

THEIR MINDS WOULD SURELY HAVE BEEN FILLED WITH A THOUSAND QUESTIONS.

“IS IT REALLY HIM?”

“IS HE REALLY ALIVE OR ARE WE SEEING A GHOST?”

“HOW DID HE GET IN HERE WITH THE DOORS LOCKED & BOLTED?”

THESE WOULD HAVE BEEN LOGICAL QUESTIONS THAT FILLED THEIR MINDS.

BUT I CAN’T HELP BUT WONDER IF THERE WEREN’T OTHER QUESTIONS THEY HAD – QUESTIONS THAT FRIGHTENED THEM EVEN MORE.

“WHAT WILL HE SAY TO ME?”

“WHAT WILL HE THINK OF ME?”

IT WASN’T JUST PETER WHO HAD TO BE FRIGHTENED ABOUT THAT.

ALL OF THEM HAD DESERTED HIM.

ALL OF THEM HAD REFUSED TO BELIEVE OR UNDERSTAND HIM WHEN HE TOLD THEM OVER & OVER AGAIN WHAT HIS FATE WOULD BE.

ALL OF THEM HAD BEEN TOO HARD-HEADED & HARD-HEARTED TO BELIEVE HIM WHEN HE TOLD THEM HE WOULD RISE AGAIN.

“NOW THAT IT’S COME TRUE, WHAT WILL HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD ME BE?”

HE DISPELS THEIR FEARS WITH WORDS THAT HE REPEATS THREE TIMES IN THESE VERSES – *“PEACE BE WITH YOU.”*

HE’S THERE – NOT TO CHASTISE THEM – NOT TO SAY “I TOLD YOU SO” – NOT TO RIDICULE OR REBUKE THEM – BUT TO ENCOURAGE THEM & CHALLENGE THEM & GIVE THEM A MISSION IN LIFE!

THIS – WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT – IS JOHN’S PENTECOST STORY.

HE SENDS THEM OUT ON A MISSION & THEN THE PASSAGE SAYS, *“HE BREATHED ON THEM & SAID TO THEM, ‘RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT...’*

THIS IS THE PENTECOST EVENT RIGHT HERE IN A LOCKED ROOM ON THE DAY OF THE RESURRECTION!

YOU SEE, I THINK THERE MAY BE ANOTHER REASON THAT THE REALITY OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE IN THEIR MIDST FRIGHTENED THE DISCIPLES.

IT MEANT THEY COULDN'T GO BACK TO LIFE AS IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN BEFORE.

THERE HAD TO BE AT LEAST A PASSING THOUGHT WITHIN EACH ONE OF THEM THAT NOW LIFE COULD GET BACK TO NORMAL.

NOW THEY COULD GO BACK TO LIFE AS IT WAS BEFORE THEY'D MET HIM.

THEY COULD GO BACK TO THEIR FISHING BOATS & THEIR TAX BOOTHS & GET ON WITH THE LIFE THEY'D KNOWN BEFORE THEY EVER MET HIM.

HE WAS GONE NOW & THE WHOLE VENTURE WAS OVER.

IT IS, INDEED, FRIGHTENING TO THINK OF CHRIST STANDING IN *OUR* MIDST & SAYING, "*I'VE GOT A MISSION FOR YOU TO ACCOMPLISH.*"

HE DOESN'T ALLOW YOU TO GO BACK TO THINGS AS THEY USED TO BE.

BUT HE ALSO TELLS YOU YOU'RE NOT GOING TO HAVE TO DO IT ALONE.

HE BREAKS THROUGH THE LOCKED DOORS OF YOUR LIFE, DISPELS YOUR FEARS & BRINGS YOU THE PEACE THAT ONLY HE CAN BRING.

HE DOESN'T RIDICULE OR REBUKE YOU FOR ANYTHING YOU'VE DONE IN THE PAST.

HE TELLS YOU THAT EVEN IN THE HEART OF YOUR FEARS – YOUR FEAR OF A DREADED FUTURE OR A HAUNTING PAST – YOUR FEAR OF GRIEF & DEATH – YOUR FEAR OF DISAPPOINTMENT & DISEASE – IN THE HEART OF IT ALL, HE WILL BE THERE IN YOUR MIDST TO SEE YOU THROUGH.

HE CHALLENGES YOU WITH A BRAND-NEW FUTURE THAT STANDS BEFORE YOU.

THAT'S WHAT WE FIND IN THAT LOCKED ROOM ON THE NIGHT OF THE RESURRECTION.

BUT THAT JUST TAKES US THROUGH HALF OF THIS PASSAGE.

"A WEEK LATER" THE SAME ENCOUNTER TAKES PLACE.

BUT THIS TIME, OF COURSE, IT'S DIFFERENT.

IT'S DIFFERENT BECAUSE SOMEONE IS PRESENT THE NEXT TIME WHO WASN'T THERE THE PREVIOUS WEEK.

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHAT THOMAS WAS DOING THAT FIRST NIGHT?

WHY WAS HE THE ONLY ONE WHO MISSED OUT?

TO ME, THOMAS IS ONE OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL.

HE SHOWS UP ONLY THREE TIMES, AND YET ALL THREE TIMES ARE CRUCIAL TO THE GOSPEL.

WHEN JESUS DECIDES HE'S GOING TO BETHANY BECAUSE HIS FRIEND LAZARUS HAS DIED, ALL THE OTHER DISCIPLES WARN HIM NOT TO DO IT.

THEY'RE ALL AFRAID TO GO BECAUSE OF THE PLOT TO ARREST JESUS.

ONLY THOMAS STEPS FORWARD & BOLDLY SAYS, "*LET US ALSO GO, THAT WE MAY DIE WITH HIM.*"

AND IN THE UPPER ROOM, WHEN JESUS MAKES THAT CRYPTIC DECLARATION, *“YOU KNOW THE WAY THAT I AM GOING,”* ONLY THOMAS SPEAKS UP TO QUESTION HIM.

ALL THE OTHERS – AFRAID OF LOOKING FOOLISH – APPARENTLY JUST NOD THEIR HEADS AS IF TO SAY, *“OH, YEAH – WE KNOW THE WAY WHERE YOU’RE GOING.”*

ONLY THOMAS IS BOLD ENOUGH TO SAY, *“WAIT A MINUTE HERE, JESUS! HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WAY?”*

IT IS IN RESPONSE TO HIS QUESTION THAT JESUS GIVES ONE OF THE GREAT STATEMENTS OF THE BIBLE – ANOTHER PIECE OF OUR CHILDREN’S MEMORY WORK – *“I AM THE WAY & THE TRUTH & THE LIFE. NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER, BUT THROUGH ME.”*

WITHOUT THE BOLDNESS & HONESTY OF THOMAS, WE WOULDN’T HAVE THOSE WONDERFUL WORDS OF CHRIST.

AND NOW, THOMAS TAKES CENTER STAGE ONCE AGAIN IN JOHN’S GOSPEL.

HE WASN’T THERE THAT FIRST NIGHT & HE EXPRESSES LOGICAL & NATURAL SKEPTICISM.

THE QUESTION REMAINS, THOUGH – WHY WASN’T HE THERE?

THE OTHER DISCIPLES LOCKED THEMSELVES UP BECAUSE THEY WERE AFRAID.

DOES THIS IMPLY THAT THOMAS WASN’T?

WAS THOMAS, PERHAPS, THE ONLY ONE OUT THERE LOOKING FOR ANSWERS – RISKING HIS LIFE TO DISCOVER THE TRUTH ABOUT JESUS?

OR WAS IT PERHAPS SOMETHING A BIT MORE PEDESTRIAN?

HAD THOMAS KNOWN THEY’D BE HOLED UP IN FEAR FOR A LONG TIME & GONE OUT FOR BREAD, MILK & CHEESE WHEN JESUS SHOWED UP?

“NAW, YOU’RE KIDDIN’ ME?! AND I MISSED HIM?!”

WE JUST DON’T KNOW.

BUT A WEEK LATER, HE WAS THERE & HERE’S WHERE JOHN’S GOSPEL ENDS WHERE IT BEGAN.

BECAUSE, YOU SEE, EVEN THOUGH THERE’S ANOTHER CHAPTER IN OUR BIBLE, THE MOST LIKELY ORIGINAL ENDING OF JOHN IS WITH THE CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER 20.

SO, IN ESSENCE, THE WORDS WE’VE READ THIS MORNING ARE HOW JOHN ENDED HIS GOSPEL.

IT IS THOMAS WHO ENDS IT.

JOHN BEGINS HIS GOSPEL SAYING, *“IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD & THE WORD WAS WITH GOD & THE WORD WAS GOD.”*

FROM THOSE UNFORGETTABLE OPENING WORDS, JOHN TAKES US THROUGH THE STORY – INTRODUCING US TO ALL SORTS OF CHARACTERS & SITUATIONS.

AND NOW, HE COMES BACK TO THE VERY BEGINNING.

HE TOLD US, IN THOSE OPENING VERSES, THAT JESUS WAS GOD.

BUT WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

AND THEN OFF HE GOES TO TELL US – THROUGH GALILEE & SAMARIA & INTO JERUSALEM – MOMENTS OF GLORY & DAYS OF AGONY UNTIL THEY ALL COME TOGETHER AT THE CROSS.

AND NOW –

A WEEK LATER –

IT IS THOMAS –

THOMAS WHO DARED TO GO TO JERUSALEM TO DIE WITH HIM –

THOMAS WHO ASKS THE QUESTIONS OF JESUS WE'D ALL LIKE TO ASK –

IT'S THOMAS WHO IS THE FIRST ONE IN THE ENTIRE GOSPEL TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE TRUTH OF THOSE OPENING WORDS WHEN HE SAYS TO JESUS – “*MY LORD & MY GOD.*”

AND WE'RE RIGHT BACK IN “PULP FICTION'S” DINER – RIGHT BACK AT THE VERY BEGINNING.

JESUS COMES TO US – TODAY – A WEEK LATER & SAYS, “*I WAS HERE WITH YOU LAST WEEK & I'M HERE AGAIN TODAY – AND I'LL BE HERE NEXT WEEK & THE WEEK AFTER THAT AND THE WEEK AFTER THAT.*”

“*IN FACT,*” HE SAYS, “*I'LL BE WITH YOU ALWAYS – NOT JUST HERE BUT BEHIND ALL THE LOCKED DOORS IN THE ROOMS IN WHICH YOU CONFINE YOURSELF.*”

HE SAYS, “*I'LL BE THERE – WHEREVER YOU ARE TO BRING YOU PEACE. I'LL BE THERE TO DISPEL YOUR FEARS. I'LL BE THERE TO ANSWER YOUR DOUBTS.*”

WHEN HE STANDS IN YOUR MIDST, WILL YOU – LIKE THOMAS – RESPOND WITH THAT GREATEST OF ALL DECLARATIONS OF FAITH – “*MY LORD & MY GOD?*” AMEN.

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