

*A Statement of Fact*

Lesson: I Peter 2:19-25, John 14:1-14

Have you ever been in a place where someone said something and everyone in the room thought the person said something else? Have you ever had a time when a friend or spouse told you something and you could swear they said something different? Have you ever wondered if you were hearing or mis-hearing? I don't mean that party game where everyone sits in a circle and someone whispers into the ear of the person next to them, ...then can't recognize the message when it finally gets around to them again. What I really mean is the way that we hear something - or mis-hear something - because we are listening with active minds that quickly connect the words to our ways of thinking that affect our ways of listening.

Let's take an example: I was reading on a website this week that "the longhorns are in decline." Now, some of you won't be interested in why the longhorns are in decline, ...if you are a vegetarian. If you raised angus cattle, you would know the decline is very old news. But if you are an alumnus of a university with some fierce loyalty and you have a lot of clothes in that strange shade of orange, you will meet this news with intense defensiveness. On the hand, if your favorite color is a particular shade of maroon, you will greet this news with some glee. And if you live in Uganda, you may ask "What's a longhorn?"

One of the biggest problems in communicating with people is trying to anticipate how listeners will hear what we are trying to tell them. And sometimes, no matter how hard we try, what the listener hears - or expects to hear, or wants to hear - gets in the way of what we are saying. How many of us at one time or another have said, "But I thought you said..."

One of the major themes in the gospels is Jesus was mis-heard and mis-understood. People were listening to Jesus but did miss the message; people heard the words but misunderstood the meaning. What they wanted to hear got in the way. Remember the followers on the Emmaus Road? "But we thought he was the one who would redeem Israel." They were looking for the Messiah to free them from the Romans. Others like the religious or political rulers mis-heard, and were threatened so much that they wanted to get rid of Jesus. What some heard challenged their definition of "keeping the law faithfully" and forced them either to change their lives or go away "sorrowful" - like the one who was rich and young and a ruler and was "good," but had too much money.

Listening to what Jesus was really saying was harder than a lot of people heard, and usually it was a lot harder once they really heard what he was really saying. Listening to Jesus isn't much different today, especially with one verse in the account we have heard between Jesus and Thomas in that meeting the second Sunday with the gathered followers.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me."

What do we hear? There are dwelling places in heaven and Jesus is the only one who can get us there. He died for our sins, and God raised him from the dead to prove he was the only Savior.

Thomas has to believe in Jesus - we might say “accept him as his personal savior” - Jesus is the only way to the mansion.

...at least, that is the way that a lot of people have heard what Jesus said that night to Thomas.

This scripture has been used at different times in history - including the present - as proof that Jews will go to hell, or Muslims will not see paradise, or Presbyterians who have not “given their heart to Jesus” are not really Christians. It has been used by some Presbyterians in the last few decades to say that other Presbyterians are heretics and have lost their way, don’t know the truth, and are responsible for the death of the church.

To be honest, I have never understood how what Jesus said to Thomas could be so mis-understood, how it could be so mis-used. Well, I can understand it when I think about the ways that all of us hear what we want to hear in what Jesus says. We also try to ignore what we don’t want to hear. Some things Jesus says are so clear that we have to mis-hear them, have to “interpret them”, have to explain them away - because they clearly call us to change the way we live. We may not be rich or young or a ruler like the rich, young ruler was. But most of us like our lives the way they are enough that we need to ignore something Jesus says that might force us to change something we like. We find it easier to understand what Jesus says that applies to other people than what he says that applies to ourselves. So, before we try to hear what Jesus was saying to Thomas, we really ought to admit that a lot of people would rather hear about Jesus sending someone else to hell than listen to Jesus tell them a truth about the way they - we - need to change our lives. We all tend to ignore the way, don’t listen to the truth, and turn from the life, ...while we say or sing that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

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The gospel of John is different from Matthew, Mark, or Luke. John does not give a history of the big events in Jesus’ ministry, or have long collections of Jesus’ teachings. The gospel of John is creative writing, an attempt to tell who Jesus is by pictures and images and symbols that are bigger than the facts. Jesus is a mystery they did not understand because they had all those false expectations. So John tries to help them clear their minds of what they already thought about Jesus, and John tells us we can see him differently if we look at him differently. John was not so interested in where Jesus went or what he did. He gives portraits to show who Jesus is. So John gives us a series of images, portraits, of Jesus. Each of them is an “I am...” picture and statement, and none of them are literal.

Last week, we saw two images. “I am the gate.” “I am the good shepherd.” I am the “bread,” the “water,” the “light,” the door, the “resurrection,” the “road,” ... “the way, the truth, the life.” John is trying to point us toward the reality of the person that is deeper than the surface. He is telling us a fact that is greater than the facts.

That is always the way we get to know each other, isn’t it? We see images of people until they add up to “knowing” the person. I showed up here less than a year ago. Some of you know me better than others today. Some of you basically only know the picture of me in worship, in a

robe, etc. Others know me better, because you have seen me during the week, or on a visit, or at a meeting, or we have “bumped into each other” in a store or restaurant. But none of you really knows who “I am” in all the different places and parts that I am. You’ve never seen me on a mountain hiking trail, and that is one of the “I am” portraits that points to a deeper part of who I am. Saying you “know” me means you feel like you know the deeper fact of who I am even if you don’t know all the little facts. We all “get to know” people that way, don’t we?

That is what John is trying to do - help us get to know Jesus. All of the “I am” statements about Jesus are imaginative. They help us imagine the reality of Jesus that is bigger than our ideas of who Jesus is. They tell us that the way we see him is incomplete, and we have to ask more questions. We cannot think we know everything about him, and we cannot decide we know enough about him. There is always another image that will point to more, another portrait that will help us know him better.

The followers had seen Jesus in a number of different ways because they had been with him in different settings and had seen him through different images. But nothing could have prepared them for the resurrected Jesus who appeared to them and said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” And even though they would never completely understand who he really was, he came to them to show them another image so they would know him more deeply. Thomas gets to the deeper fact: “My Lord and my God.” Jesus would go away again and come back again in a different image of spirit. The promise he gave was that he would be with them always, and they would always have him with them, now that they knew the FACT.

The good news is not about what Jesus will do *if* we do something - like believe, or make a profession of our faith, or accept Jesus as our Savior, or give our hearts to Jesus. Jesus is Lord and God. He is savior. It is a statement of fact that shapes all the other facts. The good news is that he is with us always - that wherever we are, he is with us, and wherever he is, we are with him. The resurrected Jesus gives this assurance to followers over and over. It is a statement of fact. He does not say, ...maybe some day I might show up again. He does not say, ...if you do all the right things or say the magic words, I might come to you. He does not tell them that they are on their own unless they go to the right church or believe the right things or live a certain way.

We mis-hear the passage because we are thinking about a place in heaven and how to get there. John is *not* interested in mansions and how we get into heaven. All of the people who focus on the places or the mansions - on the being in or out, on the “no one gets in except through me” - have missed the point. Thomas asked the way, and Jesus say “I am.” Jesus does not point us to a place. He points us to himself, so John points us to Jesus.

And Jesus is telling Thomas who he is. “I am.” He does not say, “I can be...” or “I might be...” or “I will be for some and not for others...” He says “I am...” It is *the* statement of fact. No if’s, and’s, or but’s about it.

Let me give you a picture of how the fact works, so that you will hear the good news differently. All my ministry, I have heard people ask, “How do people make it through these terrible problems without faith?” The answer is obvious. They make it the same way we all make it. They make it by grace. They make it by the fact that Jesus is their savior. We make it easier

when we know him and trust him, but everyone makes it through the way, by the truth, because of the one life. The way we all get there is because of who he is, and Jesus the destination, too. When we are in him and he is in us, we are “there.” We have the same “oneness” with Jesus that Jesus has with “the Father.” Heaven is not some place full of images from our imagining. Heaven is oneness with God - now and forever.

There are no “ifs” in the good news. Who Jesus is is who Jesus is. It’s a statement of fact. We do not have a choice about whether or not we want to live with Jesus. He is with us in a way we can never fully comprehend, and he is true beyond our knowing. The good news is not that Jesus might become your savior. The good news is that Jesus “is” - not might be, or can be, or may be. “I am the life.” He is our life.

Jesus wants Thomas to trust, to believe. It will be easier for Thomas if he does. Jesus can do more with Thomas if Thomas listens until he hears more, learns until he understands more. But Jesus is who he is for Thomas, and is not going to stop being who he is for Thomas, no matter what Thomas does. He tells Thomas that he will have to go away for what seems like a little while, so that he can come back in a way that will be with him and all of us always. Because he has come back in another image as Spirit, he can do more with us when we listen until we hear more, when we learn until we understand more. Jesus, Spirit, is “God with us” and God for us.

The Good News of the gospel is that Jesus is telling us who he is, and will keep telling us so that we can know more and trust more and believe more and live more who he is. Nothing we do will change who he is. Nothing we fail to do will change who he is. We cannot change who he is, and life goes better when we change who we are to be more like he is. When we will follow his way, we will know more about who he is. When we live true to him, we will know more truth. When we just live what we know about him, we will live more like him until we are more like him. And we live good news worth celebrating with everyone we know.