

For fear of the Jews? (John 20:19-31; Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Second Sunday of Easter, Year A)

This Sunday is one where some re-education and re-framing might be helpful.

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April 17, 2020

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When you've been in church long enough to have heard thousands of sermons, and a particular opening from nearly a decade ago still lingers, it's probably worth sharing.

"Now the doors of the house where the disciples—all of whom were Jews!—had met were locked...for fear of...the Jews. The Jews were hiding, for fear of the Jews. Let us all ponder that statement for a moment." Silence.

It is so embarrassingly clear, such an obvious rhetorical absurdity when translated in this way, and yet no preacher had ever done this in my presence. Why not?

It can be tricky, to say the least, to navigate the historical breadth of anti-Semitism spawned by New Testament language and simultaneously address contemporary vestiges of anti-Jewish prejudices still present, festering, in our congregations. But this opening line on the Sunday after Easter was brilliant in its simplicity, its ability to say so much with so little: Let's rethink how we think about "the Jews" in John, shall we? (As an aside, I prefer David Bentley Hart's consistent translation of this

term in the Gospel of John as “the Judeans” for just this reason. It blunts some of the ugly but rhetorically tempting confluences in the listeners’ subconscious.)

This Sunday is one where such re-education and re-framing might be helpful to tackle head on, because the “fear of the Jews” line is compounded by that dangerous zinger in Acts 2: “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth...handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.”

And yet, as in John’s Gospel, the potential for unthreading the seemingly pointed accusation is right there in the text, waiting to be exposed: Let me just remind you, says Peter, *as an Israelite*, that we know our ancestor David both died and was buried. You whom I seek to convict—I’m one of you. (And let’s not forget that I turned my back on him too, though I may not talk about that too much in public—we all know it.)

It’s a painfully imperfect overlay, but the opening is there in the text for a kind of historical illumination that might begin to unbind generations worth of ignorance about the nuanced Jewish context of early Christianity. Maybe the doubting Thomas sermons are all worn out, and everyone you know is concerned about the recent rise of anti-Semitism around the world, as you are. Your church might be hungry for renewed understanding of how to proclaim Jesus as Lord, like Thomas does, without reinforcing legacies of hate that they truly want no part of.