My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our Eastertide minds, hearts, Spirits and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

There’s lots to pay attention to here in this scene. Many times you’ll hear an exposition on the disciple Thomas and Jesus’ appearance. But I’d like to draw our attention to a different part of this scene, one where there’s a ritual of releasing sins. We might think forgiveness of sin is a Christian thing, something that comes as a result of Christ’s last supper and dying on the cross. Please don’t think that we have a corner on the market when it comes to forgiveness. Jews marked the forgiveness of sin long before Jesus arrived on the scene, with estimates being the first Yom Kippur being some 1400 years prior to Jesus’ birth. What is Yom Kippur? (take all answers). It’s the day of atonement.

Faithful Jews take stock of their life and relationships and will try and make amends to the damage done to the relationships in their lives. Here’s how it typically works:

1. If I’ve cheated or hurt you, I’d be responsible to approach you and ask for forgiveness, and what I intend to do to correct the damage I’ve done.
2. You are responsible for hearing the confession and consider it, and if you think you can forgive the sin, it’s forgiven, and we are both released.
3. But if you can’t forgive because the confession seems contrived or insincere, or maybe you’re not ready to do so (and you may never be ready if it were a truly horrible act) then the sin is not forgiven, and not released. I have to come back a second time, and maybe a third time in the same manner asking for release.
4. If after three tries, three confessions, three attempts to make amends, you cannot forgive me, only then can I approach God and ask forgiveness.

Now, I don’t know about you, but most folks I know wouldn’t do this. They’ve been raised to think that an apology is in their words, on their terms, and if it doesn’t work, then move on. After all, God forgives us, right?

 This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace”, with a God who does what we want, when we want it, so our lives can be easier and guilt-free. But faith requires actual mindful living, especially when it comes to relationships. So this framework of Jewish forgiveness where sin can be retained shocks us, because we want to get off the hook and get on with our lives.

Do we see the difference?

The Jewish faith—and Jesus is Jewish—takes victims’ rights seriously, and forgiveness is something that requires effort on both parties, not letting one or the other off without mindful contemplation and effort.

And yet our storyteller just might have meant that Jesus comes on the scene to give me the right to forgive someone who sins against you without ever having to consult you in the matter. I had the privilege when I was in seminary at Boston University to attend some of the Elie Wiesel lectures he gave. Elie Wiesel was a Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner. He famously visited the forgiveness frameworks when it came to world events, but he maintained that he didn’t have the authority to answer on behalf of the millions of the slaughtered Jews in the Holocaust. This was expressed in his question: “who am I to forgive on behalf of so many people?”

Do we see the difference?

The Jesus who comes to us post-resurrection in this scene was tortured to death just a few days before. We know this is the same Jesus because he still has the wounds in his hands and his side, these open wounds. Thomas insists that he must touch these torture marks. I don’t think he asks for this as a proof. He asks to do it so that he may remember. Like Elie Wiesel, that crucifixion event is seared into his memory, and Thomas remembers the damage done, the painful loss, the torture, violence, and will not dismiss it in all this talk of resurrection.

Do we see the difference?

When victims are given their agency, that is the starting point of repair and rebalancing their life.

A child who is sexually molested by a trusted adult or family member faces every subsequent relationship as one of fear, abandonment, and betrayal. Spouses who are physically or emotionally abused have bruises still present long after the events take place. Workers that worked hard for companies these days face courts which allow for voluntary bankruptcy of their pension plan, and there is suddenly no old age security or health plan for them when they are on the cusp of retirement. Persons who live in poverty see half the nation’s households hold just 1% of America’s wealth, and yet, expect to live nearly 8 years less on average as a result.

Jewish faith knows that people in any of these positions may not find it possible to forgive those who have taken advantage or abused them. Certainly not in a day or three days, or a week, or three weeks. Maybe not a year. Or three years. Or ever.

Jesus says, after all, “should you hold onto the sins of anyone, they are held”. Jews of any era would agree.

Do we see the difference?

This drives perpetrators totally crazy. Abusers often cry far and wide that they should be forgiven, invoking Jesus to forgive their sins right away, and insisting without proof or remorse that they can change. The church can be complicit in this, particularly if money is involved. Or especially if the church itself is the perpetrator, as in the Irish Laundries, the Native Schools, or the Catholic priest abuse cover-ups.

Abusers rarely meet with their victims unless its tied to some kind of legal or financial absolution. Maybe an agreement not to talk about it or admit harm or fault. This is a particular American phenomenon: the Harvey Weinsteins of the world continue to bully, unabated, for years, despite all stories, rumors, evidence, and actions to the contrary. A sound-byte we hear a lot these days is, “the system is rigged”, but it’s rigged against victims. Let’s remember that abusers are not victims when they carry their violence forward again and again. Powerful folks are not, by definition, victims in this way, are they?

Do we see the difference?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

“God forgives me, why can’t you?”, is the mantra of the moment, and the cheap grace demanded by many.

But Jesus sides with victims, the powerless, the brokenhearted, the outcasts. Jesus knows aggressive demands of forgiveness perpetuate the abuse for the powerful, and we all know that it can isolate the person just trying to survive their circumstances. When a person who is besieged is surrounded by the abuser, religious authority, civil courts and enforcers, and everyone is pointing a finger to know whey they can’t be forgiven if God can….do we see the difference?

For victims to say it never happened rather than face these headwinds is totally understandable. Victims are blamed for being there in the first place. Victims are ridiculed. Victims are tortured and beaten all over again. They might as well be sacrificed in the most cruel way possible. Remember that one from just last week?

That’s why Jesus is for the victims.

Forgiveness is hard. As any Jew knows, and agrees, both then and now. Let’s hope Christians will, too, for there’s a long way to go and a lot of work yet to be done.

Do we see the difference? Thanks be to God, Amen.