

“The Power of Doubt”

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:19-31

April 28, 2019

We have a powerful story this morning for the Second Sunday following Easter. We have walked through all the events of Holy Week, remembered the agonizing death by Crucifixion of our Savior on the Cross, and joyfully celebrated the life-affirming, redeeming Resurrection of our Lord Jesus. We are back to rejoicing, declaring Glory Alleluia, and Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Lest we go too fast, let's see what that first week was like for Thomas, after Mary and the other disciples had seen Jesus, but he had not. Listen now, and see where you might find yourself in this account: John 20:19-31

Scripture gives us an ideal framework today. Jesus says three times: “Peace be with you,” and that if we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, we may have life. What might that all mean?

The doors were shut, for fear of the Jews... Of course, they were afraid! Peter - the Rock, was laden with shame and guilt for not only denying he was a follower - but he said he didn't even know Jesus. These 10 disciples have good reason to be afraid, to be hunkered down behind locked doors, anxious and weary under a heavy blanket of dread for might now happen to them. They know too well that they have been seen with Jesus, and that the powers that be might be coming after them next. But Jesus enters and proclaims the first: “PEACE be with you.” I know you have reason to be frightened, but I am with you. Don't be afraid.

I often wonder if Thomas might be wrongly labeled. Here are the 10, anxious and frightened, yet he has gone out to the dreaded streets and is taking a risk at being caught. Maybe Thomas has gone to get them all some food, is listening to the chatter on the streets as to what the people might be thinking. Thomas may be the more courageous one.

The second time Jesus says: “Peace be WITH you,” the emphasis is on calming the group. They still have work to do, and Jesus needs them empowered instead of cowering in fear. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” These are sobering words. They see the nail holes in Jesus' hands and the chuck taken out of his side. Christ Victory over death **WILL** be theirs, and ours as well, but we might have to walk through the Valley first. Not the same as the Great Commission in Matthew - as they were up on a mountain top away from the city. We're going to need you to breathe a whole lot of that Holy Spirit energy onto us is you want us out on the streets of Jerusalem, Jesus.

Peace be with YOU, AMONG YOU, Strengthen you my disciples, as my whole collective church, the body of Christ. "Peace be with you," perhaps this time the peace of reconciliation--"peace be among you," the peace that follows when one forgives (a task given to the disciples at Jesus' previous appearance, verses. 22-23). This is the gospel that most emphasizes oneness and unity among the disciples (17:11-23), a oneness that shows the world that this message of life is true (17:21,23). So, this third peace, within the community, might be the most significant of all.

Jesus does not admonish Thomas and, in fact, invites him to satisfy his doubt by seeing for himself (verses 27). Even if he were to be considered a doubter (as the traditional interpretation understands him), he is welcomed into the peace of Christ before he can either apologize or defend himself. Congregations and communities of faith often do not do well with dissidents and direct challenges in their midst. Christ calls them and us to live into his peace as a way of reaching our own peace with each other. (See also Matthew. 28:16-17, where even those who doubted when Jesus appeared to them on the Galilean mountain were sent to fulfill the great commission.) Christ seems less concerned than we often are about adherence to one interpretation of his life and resurrection. He sends Thomas, doubters, and all of us to continue his work.

Of course, the "life" spoken of here is not actually "just plain" life, but is a distinctive kind of life, a distinction that is obscured in English but apparent in Greek. In John, and throughout the New Testament, the English word "life" translates three different Greek words: *psyche*, *bios*, and *zoe*. When John (and the rest of the New

Testament) speaks, on the one hand, of *psyche* or *bios*, these words refer to what one possesses simply by virtue of being a living creature. This is the life possessed from birth to death by animals and by humans, whether they be good or bad, righteous or wicked, founders of charities or perpetrators of genocide.

On the other hand, "life" as used at the end of this passage, is spoken of with the word *zoe*. This is eternal life (literally "life of the age"), life given to those who believe; life given to those who are born of God; life that, in John, transforms us from merely existing to living in the abundance and eternity of God. This life was present from the beginning and lies at the core of creation ("in him was life (*zoe*), and the life (*zoe*) was the light of all people" (1:4)). This life connects the deepest purposes of God with the ultimate purpose of John's gospel: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah ... and that believing you may have life (*zoe*) in his name." This *zoe* does not replace *psyche*; we are still the same creatures we were before. It does, however, bring us into the fullness of grace; so that we are, also, *not* still, the same creatures we were before--at least potentially not the same.

Christianity suggests that *the* pattern of transformation, *the* pattern that connects, *the* life that Reality offers us is not death avoided, but *death transformed*. In other words, the only trustworthy pattern of spiritual transformation is death *and* resurrection. Christians learn to submit to trials because Jesus told us that we must "carry the cross" with him.

Death and life are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other. Each time you surrender, each time you trust the dying, your faith is led to a deeper level and you discover a Larger Self underneath. You decide not to push yourself to the front of the line, and something much better happens in the back of the line. You let go of your narcissistic anger, and you find that you start feeling much happier. You surrender your need to control your partner, and finally the relationship blossoms or ends. Yet each time it is a choice—and each time it is a kind of dying. It seems we only know what life is when we know what death is.

If we are going to live like an Easter People, we might need to be a little more like Thomas. Not hunkering down behind closed doors, but venturing out to fish difficult, but rewarding challenges. We might need the reassurance that Jesus, with holes in his hands and a pierced side, is with us. We've traveled that road of uncertainty before, always to find Jesus at the end, calling us forward...

Jesus' post-resurrection encounters with his disciples in John 20:19-29 continue to set the pattern for Christian worship, even in our Secular Age. As we assemble on the Lord's Day, the Risen One stands in our midst. By the power of the Holy Spirit, his words of forgiveness are pronounced over us, and his blessing of peace is passed among us. In word and sacrament, Jesus confronts us with the gracious invitation: see, touch, taste, believe.

If, like Thomas, we respond in joyful self-surrender—"My Lord and my God!"—we discover that Jesus sends us, too, to be his witnesses in our homes, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods, and to the ends of the earth.

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