

John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." [20] After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. [21] Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." [22] When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

[24] But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. [25] So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

[26] A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." [27] Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." [28] Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" [29] Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

[30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. [31] But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

PEACE TO YOU

Today's anthem was about peace in its many forms. We sang about peace in our hearts, peace in lives, peace in our land, and peace in the world

Peace, according to our anthem is not just something that we seek personally, but a value that is given to us by the larger community. Many people have

taught us and shaped our lives. We continue to strive for peace as a response to their legacy.

And then we sang another song that really strikes a chord when it comes to peace and justice, "We Shall Overcome." One day peace and righteousness will not just be a dream but a reality.

The music elevates our hopes, but then comes a heavy dose of reality to dash those dreams. A new breed of radio host makes a thoughtless, sexist racist comment about the women on the Rutgers women's basketball team. No doubt many of you have been subjected to the media feeding frenzy on this.

We may think of this as much ado about nothing. But, I do see some good coming out of this. I hope that the furor over this thoughtless remark causes us to once again evaluate how we speak to each other.

Words have real power, power to hurt and power to heal. And thoughtless, sexist racist comments have become an integral part of popular culture. We seem to think that if enough people say something then it is okay. It's not okay.

It's my dream that we come to the point in this country where it is never okay for anyone to make this kind of comment. It doesn't make any difference if they are the host of a radio show, a hip-hop music artist, a religious leader or whoever.

We must overcome our fears and our thoughtless ways.

Peace is not only a peaceful feeling in our hearts. Peace is a struggle.

Peace requires the courage to stand over against the ways of the world. Peace requires that we carefully consider what we say in each and every situation.

THE PEACE OF CHRIST

And according to our lesson for today, peace is based upon a hope that surprises us. It comes from above us and beyond us. Peace is a belief that the power of God in Christ can unlock the doors of fear and prejudice.

Peace is based upon an assurance that there is a higher salvation and a higher way of life. This peace is not solely due to the striving of men and women to overcome some day. This peace is made possible today by the presence of the risen Christ.

Today is the second Sunday after Easter, the eighth day after the resurrection.

The church calendar wisely tells us in the season of Easter tide that the resurrection is too big an event to limit the story to just one Sunday. We need seven week's worth of Easters to talk about the implications of the resurrection.

You see the resurrection is not just about the resuscitation of a dead man long ago.

That might make for an interesting story, but it really wouldn't be of much significance in the grand scheme of things.

The resurrection is about much more than that.

The resurrection is about a new creation, a new world made possible by the presence of God in Christ. It is about a presence and a power that continues with us even to this day.

The resurrection is about what Paul called the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding."

This peace, like a sentry stands guard over our hearts and minds. It is Christ with us.

Christ replaces our fear with courage.
He replaces our anger with forgiveness and reconciliation.

He replaces our doubts with faith.

OUR STORY AND THEIR STORY

You see, today's story is not just about what happened long ago to those first disciples who saw the risen Christ. This story, according to John is written primarily for us.

The gospel was written so that we might believe. This story is written so that our lives might be changed, our sins might be forgiven, our doubts might be answered, and our fears might be assuaged. (John 20:31)

This story is written so that we might realize that the risen Christ stands among us even today, and that makes all the difference.

So, join me as I once again tell this ancient story, remembering that it is also our story. It's not just about what happened long ago; it's about what happens today to you and me.

Last week we left Mary telling the disciples what she had witnessed. She told them,
"I have seen the Lord."

And did they believe a word of what she had to say? I don't think so.

Luke said in his gospel that the reports of the resurrection by the women seemed like "an idle tale." (Luke 24:11) In those days the testimony of women wasn't trusted in court. Surely, no one would trust the tale that Mary told. She saw what she wanted to see, and that was the end of that story.

And so as it grew dark on that first day of the new creation, and the disciples were still in the dark as well. They had not seen the risen Christ; they did not really believe anyone else had seen him either. And they were afraid.

HUDDLED BEHIND LOCKED DOORS

They were afraid that the Jewish leaders might come to them and do to them what they had done to Jesus. A report of a resurrection was of no comfort in

the face of a potential crucifixion. Like frightened rabbits the disciples huddled together behind locked doors.

We too have heard reports of the resurrection. Last Sunday as the Easter crowd filled our sanctuary, we could almost imagine that Jesus was calling our name.

But, now we have had to say goodbye to many friends who have gone north for the summer. We are a much smaller crowd, huddled together to face our fears and the storms that surround us.

On the second Sunday of Easter, the report of a resurrection may seem premature for many of us as well.

JESUS COMES AND STANDS AMONG US

Long ago Jesus came and stood among his discouraged disciples. He was there all along. They just couldn't see him. Now he made himself known to them.

In a situation filled with uncertainty, he offered a word of peace. In fact those were the first words out of his mouth, "Peace to you." He repeated those words again.

And then he challenged those behind locked doors to go out in his name and boldly proclaim the good news.

As His heavenly Father had sent Him, now He was sending the disciples into the world with a message. They were to proclaim the good news that we have hope; hope not only for this life but also for the life to come.

And so He sends us out even today. He tells us that there is no need to let fear rule in our lives any more. There is no need to barricade ourselves behind locked doors because we are afraid of what "might" happen.

We no longer have to be obsessed with what someone "might" do to us. The old rules no longer apply in a world where resurrection has occurred. Doors

that were locked can be unlocked. We can dare to open up the church and open up our lives to a wider world.

BREATHED ON THE DISCIPLES

And in order to emphasize this, the Scripture tells us that Jesus breathed on his disciples. Now at first blush this seems like an unusual action.

But, think about how human beings came into existence according to the book of Genesis. God breathed into the man and woman he formed, and they became a living being. Just as the first man and woman were created by God, these disciples are a new creation. They are re-formed by the breath of God in Jesus Christ.

This was also a symbol of the disciples being given authority to proclaim the message.

Ezekiel prophesied to the dead bones of Israel, and by the breath of God they were raised up to be a mighty host of living beings. In the same way these disciples who were as good as dead because of their discouragement and fear are given new life.

The language of fear and hatred is replaced with the language of faith and salvation. These rejuvenated disciples now have the keys to the kingdom, and according to our passage for today, the keys to the kingdom are the keys of forgiveness.

They have the power to change things, and the power is not found in running away from their enemies. The power to change things is to bring those enemies a message of forgiveness.

Are you like the disciples? Are you as good as dead? Are you discouraged by personal failures and losses? Do you believe that the future holds no hope?

I believe that God in Christ can breathe new life into your dead bones. I believe that God in Christ can bring forgiveness and hope into situations where angry words and threats have kept us behind locked doors.

I believe that when we say “He is risen” we are not just talking about what happened long ago but also about what can happen here and now. He is here. He is among us, and His Spirit enables us to proclaim a message of grace to all people.

DOUBT

But, I know. Some of you are still not convinced. Some of you weren't there on that Sunday when Jesus appeared and breathed on everyone.

You have your doubts no matter how much we talk about joy and hope. You think that those of us who preach this message are engaging in wishful thinking.

Well, there was one disciple with whom you can surely identify. His name was Thomas.

Thomas was from Missouri, the show me state. The other disciples told him about what they had seen with their own eyes, but that wasn't enough for Thomas. Not only did he doubt their story ... he would also doubt his own story had he seen such a thing.

Seeing would not be enough for Thomas. Seeing would not be believing. He would have to touch as well as see. He would have to put his hand in the nail scarred hand and put his hand into the side that was wounded.

Once again we see that belief in the resurrection did not come easily to the disciples. They certainly would not believe what the women told them, and the story of Thomas shows us that there was at least one who wouldn't believe on the testimony of a whole room full of men.

A totally unique event like the resurrection would require further proof. It would require overwhelming evidence.

THE FRONT PORCH OF BELIEF

I have never been afraid of doubt, at least honest doubt. Honest doubt, according to one preacher is the “front porch” of belief. All of us go into the house of faith through the front porch of doubt.

We all enter into faith through this desire to see and touch the Lord for ourselves. A second hand faith is never good enough. We must make faith our own, and the only way to do that is to express our honest doubts.

I like the way Frederick Buechner puts it. He said that if we say that we have no doubts we are either “asleep or kidding ourselves. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

Some people keep their doubts to themselves. They are afraid that by expressing their doubts they will be condemned for their lack of faith.

But, it seems to me that the story of Thomas is included in John’s gospel precisely because those who have not seen for themselves need to express their doubt before they can truly believe. Remember the Bible tells us that John has written all of this so that we may come to believe in Jesus. (John 20:31)

I think that there’s a bit of Thomas in all of us. Doubt plays a big role in almost every life. We have doubts about our society. We have doubts about our leaders. We have doubts about family and friends. We have doubts about ourselves. And sometimes we even doubt that the Lord is with us.

Don’t think that Thomas lacked courage. He was willing to die with Jesus for the cause of the kingdom. (John 11:16) But, when Jesus died on the cross as far as Thomas was concerned, that ended it. Thomas was a realist.

Even when the facts weren’t pleasant, he was prepared to face them. There was no way out of this situation. Jesus had led them to a dead end. (cf. John 14:5)

Thomas was willing to die with Jesus, but he wasn’t about to believe something foolish ... like Jesus had risen from the dead. He would have to see and touch that for himself.

MY LORD AND MY GOD

And so he would. On the eighth day after the resurrection, Jesus came and stood among the disciples once again. Again, he said to the disciples, “Peace to you.”

And then Jesus turned his attention toward Thomas. He offered him the opportunity to put his hands in the nail scarred hands and put his hand into his wounded side.

But, Thomas did not need as much proof as he thought he would need. This honest doubter was transformed by the presence of Christ into a believer. Thomas cried out, “My Lord and my God.”

This is the high point of the gospel. In the first chapter of John we read that the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Now Thomas the doubter sees that it is true. When Thomas sees Jesus, Thomas is also seeing God as well.

WON'T YOU COME?

When I was young I used to attend revivals. Revivals are that peculiar form of evangelism that was popular during the first half of the twentieth century. They ceased to be effective, but that didn't stop us from having them in the hills of West Virginia!

Almost all revivals went the same way. The evangelist was a wild eyed man who waved a Bible in one hand and slicked back his hair with the other.

He shouted himself hoarse proclaiming the message, and then he would make his plea. “Won't you come? Won't you come? While the organist plays just one more verse of ‘Just as I Am,’ won't you come?”

In our passage for today I imagine John becoming the wild eyed evangelist of my youth. He leans over the pulpit and asks us,

“Won't you come? Won't you come? I could have written a lot more. I could have preached all night about Jesus.

But, my preaching is not the important thing. The important thing is that you come. The important thing is that you believe that Jesus is who he said he was. This was written not so you could just have the ‘facts’ but so that you might believe.

Won’t you come?”

A DOUBTER COMES

Dr. William Self, a Baptist minister tells of a troubled man who came to his office and asked to talk for a few minutes.

The pastor was glad to oblige, and the man began to talk about his doubts. He thought that he was losing his faith.

This spur of the moment visit was going to take more time than the pastor had, and yet he knew that it was important that he stay with this man through his time of struggle. So, he asked him to come with him on a hospital visit.

The man agreed, and their discussion continued on the way to the hospital.

The patient they were going to see was a young doctor in his late thirties. He was dying of cancer. Though he was in great pain the young man wanted to talk about life and death.

The pastor gave a few words of encouragement and read a few verses of Scripture. The visit only lasted about 15-20 minutes, but there were tears of gratitude in the eyes of the young patient as they left the room that day.

On the way to the car neither the pastor nor his doubting Thomas parishioner said a word. Finally, as they approached the church, the man struggling with doubt said,

“I see things differently now. Eternity has broken into my life, and I want to start over with Christ.”

This is doubting Thomas Sunday. This is the eighth day after the resurrection. And this is a good day for us to move from doubt to faith. This

is a good day for us to have eternity break into our lives. Today Jesus comes to us and says "Peace to you."

This is a good day for us to look toward Jesus and say with Thomas in awe and wonder,

"My Lord and my God."

Amen.