

Sermon April 15th and 16th

Text: John 20:19-31

Jesus stands among the trembling disciples and says, Peace be with you. Shalom.

A few weeks ago, we were talking about the story of Lazarus and his death. Mary and Martha both pleaded with Jesus to come and spare their brother. When Jesus heard of Lazarus' death, he wasn't concerned. He told them Lazarus would be well. He waited two more days. They were all there to witness the raising up of Lazarus. Mary, Martha, the disciples, Thomas! Thomas the doubting one. They all witnessed a man raised from the dead. Wow!

We are all doubters. We have all had doubts. All of the characters in the Gospel for today and previous weeks, had doubts. Mary went to the tomb. She saw that it was empty. She did not understand what she saw. She was in mourning, distraught. Then she met a man that she assumed was the gardener and asked him, What have you done with him? She had been told of the prophecy, just as the disciples had been told.

She knew the story, she had been told that Jesus would rise after 3 days. But I'm thinking she didn't fully comprehend it. Didn't fully understand it. Until Jesus calls her name. Then she understands. Mary tells her story to the disciples. They, too, knew of the prophecy of his resurrection. Yet they found it hard to believe. In both Luke and Mark's account of this story, there was disbelief from the disciples after Mary told them he was gone. The body was no longer there. Surely someone must have taken him.

And they are afraid. They have locked themselves behind closed doors. We know that Thomas is not there. They are terrified. John tells us that they are afraid of the Jews. They were afraid of the leaders who were behind the plot to kill Jesus. They are fearful of being the next to be

prosecuted, persecuted. Jesus appears among them in the room. The room with locked doors. Are they fearful of Jesus? They kind of deserted him. Peter denied him, the others hid. Except the disciple whom Jesus loved most. He was at the cross. That must have added to the fear factor. When Jesus entered, he used the greeting "Peace be with you." Shalom. I am sure that it was uttered quickly to relieve the fear of the disciples. "Calm down, it's just me." The word used in Greek is eirene, peace, but the meaning of the Jewish word Shalom—means more. It means more than the absence of conflict, it implies a wholeness that is a gift of God. After they see the wounds with their own eyes Jesus offers them another "Peace be with you." Shalom. He commissions them "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And he breathes on them as they receive the Holy Spirit. He further declares "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Elisabeth Johnson an ELCA Pastor and missionary writes "Jesus is not giving his disciples some special power to decide whose sins will be forgiven and whose will not. Rather, he is further specifying what it means to be sent, to make known the love of God that Jesus himself has made known. As people come to know and abide in Jesus, they will be released from their sins. If, however, those sent by Jesus fail to bear witness, people will remain stuck in their unbelief; their sins will be retained or held onto." We have received similar powers in our Baptism. We have been called to make disciples of all nations.

The disciples might have been thrilled, death has not won! He is standing in front of them and blessing them with gifts of the Holy Spirit with his breath. That first "peace be with you" must have certainly given them some sense of peace and awe. And the second a better understanding of what was coming up for them.

The next time Jesus encounters the disciples, a week later, he greets them again, with “Peace be with you”. This time Thomas is there. Thomas told his friends he didn’t or couldn’t believe that Christ had risen until he saw it for himself. He only wants to experience what they experienced. Christ doesn’t admonish Thomas for doubting. He invites him to touch the wounds on his hands and on his sides. What a gift to Thomas. It does not say if Thomas touched the wounds. It simply says he was invited to touch them. Thomas answers in the most honorable way he can. He exclaims “My Lord and my God!”

I believe that in order to claim your own testimony, you need to have your own experiences. I love James Bond movies and I have a friend who loves them too. She and I went to the last one and I was blown away by the ending!! Well, the whole movie. I went home and my husband Jim and oldest son Joey were there. I went on and on about the movie. They had to see it. I hadn’t invited them because, as I told them, You don’t love James Bond movies. While they admitted that was true, they both enjoyed James Bond movies. So I took them. Seeing was believing! Yes, they thoroughly enjoyed the movie. And I was able to see it a second time!

I have often held back in ministry too. Not fully believing in my own gifts. Because of doubts in my call. Concerned that others didn’t buy into what I was offering. However, when I was invited to share specific things, God things, some of the doubt was removed. As Jesus invited Thomas to touch his wounds, I was invited to share the gifts of the Holy Spirit that I have been blessed with. One year I was able to build a prayer experience for the Synod assembly. Another year I was able to share some prayer books that I had kids making and using along with photos. But I was also able to share my dad’s “life picture”. It’s in my office if you want to see it, along with two more life pictures. Another time I was asked to do a workshop at the Youth Network Extravaganza. I know that anxiety and doubt in ourselves keeps many of us from fully

participating in our calls. Doubt infects us all. Our reality is that we are all confronted by questions of faith and doubt in the gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of John shows us that there are different kinds of faith, and that faith comes in different ways to different people. Mary needs to hear her name, the disciple whom Jesus loves needs to see the empty tomb, the other disciples need to see the risen Lord and Thomas needs to touch the wounds of Jesus. People have different needs and come to active, personal faith in different ways.

We share our faith in different ways also. Some wash the feet of Jesus while some are in the kitchen cooking. Some folks use a shovel or a drill. Others use music, or art. Have you ever sat in silence with someone who is grieving? That is sharing your faith. That is bearing witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. I have worked in retail, in a financial institution, and at a school as well as a church. Ministry is done in all of those places. Ministry is done at the grocery store. Faith in Jesus is shared by loving others, loving those who are sometimes difficult to love.

The good news is that we are locked in that room with the disciples. Jesus is inviting you to see him, to touch the wounds in his hands and in his side. He has given you the gifts of the Holy Spirit and commissioned you to go out into the world. In our Baptisms we were breathed upon just as the disciples were and we are called to go and serve and love others in the name of Jesus Christ.

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