

In Chaotic Times of Uncertainty:

“Peace be with you.”

The Story of ‘Doubting Thomas’

John 20:19-31
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Chances are you are at least somewhat familiar with this story, commonly known as ‘Doubting Thomas’. For some unexplained reason, Thomas wasn’t with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them during the evening of Easter Sunday. Therefore, Thomas refused to take the other disciples’ word for it, that Jesus had risen, and wanted to see and touch Jesus for himself. (Let’s not forget, however, that the other disciples didn’t believe Mary’s word for it at first either when she first told them about the empty tomb.)

In order to be convinced, Thomas set forth conditions for his belief – that he must see and touch Jesus for himself. So a week later, when the disciples (this time including Thomas) were together again, Jesus appears once more and meets Thomas’ conditions. Jesus invites Thomas to touch and see for himself. WE don’t know if he actually did so, he simply proclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” It’s important to note that there was no criticism or reprimand in Jesus’ words to Thomas. Instead, Jesus responds with the words, “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.”

In this post-resurrection story, the author of the Gospel of John is basically telling the Christian community of faith in his day, some 60 years or so after Jesus’ death, and to us today: Even though we can no longer see or touch Jesus in person, that’s okay. Our faith is no less important or less strong than those that did see and touch Jesus.

Every time I have ever preached on this biblical passage, my focus has been on what can best be described as a searching faith, one like Thomas’. That’s a faith that isn’t absolutely certain about everything. It’s a faith more concerned about the spiritual journey, a quest if you will, than on a perceived destination. It’s a faith that has room for doubt. It’s a faith that’s not afraid to question. I’ve then gone on to expound upon how **a community of faith like College Hill allows for a generous amount of room for doubt and, in fact, welcomes (even encourages) those with a questioning faith.**

While I wanted to remind everyone of that today, the context of the times in which we are currently living has led me to a very different focus on this biblical passage. Instead of focusing on Thomas and the issue of faith at the ending of this story, let’s go back to the very beginning. Do you remember how it starts? **On the evening of Easter, the disciples were fearfully gathered, isolating themselves in a locked room for their own safety. Does that ring any bells? Here we are, as the human race, fearfully isolated and gathered behind our own locked doors for our own safety.** Never has this story held such a connection for our own ability to relate.

What follows next, then, is a message of profound importance for everyone at this time, a chaotic time of uncertainty for us all. We’re told, “Jesus came and stood

among them." **Behind locked doors, behind our doors of isolation, Jesus, the Risen Christ, the Presence of God, appears in their presence, appears in your and my presence.** And of a million different things Jesus could have said, what was his message? **"Peace be with you."** Hear these words, all the way to the depth of your being, as if spoken directly to you this day and during these difficult times, "Peace be with you." **Jill Duffield**, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, frames it in today's context this way:

In the middle of a pandemic and all the upheaval this public health crisis has wrought this story of people afraid and sequestered resonates loudly. When we, out of a need to protect ourselves and others, must isolate and separate, Jesus finding a way to breach our enforced barriers, enter into our anxiety-ridden spaces, come to us in all the internal and external chaos, and bring his peace resonates loudly. Wrestling with very present questions of pain and suffering, death and finitude, and then declaring faith in Jesus, the Messiah, proclaiming the promise and power of resurrection, does not come without a tangible, personal experience of our Risen Lord.

This year, this story of hope in the face of fear, peace in the middle of chaos and belief in resurrection despite deadly circumstances resonates loudly and Thomas becomes more relatable than ever.

And let us not forget that after his blessing of peace, Jesus showed them his hands and his side. These are the wounds, the scars of his crucifixion, his execution. Jesus came to his disciples, and comes to us, bearing his woundedness. What can this mean? **Jesus walked through the locked doors of the disciples' pain, the locked doors of the pain and wounded places in our own lives, to speak peace, to reassure, and to reinvigorate the Spirit and Sacred Presence of God within us.** Duffield continues:

We, too, need to see and believe, touch and feel, hear and know that Jesus, while still wounded, lives and breathes. Our fear is utterly understandable. The death toll of this virus mounts. The extent of the economic fallout is yet to be determined, but we know it is, and will continue to be, huge. The grief of dashed dreams, hopes and expectations reverberates throughout our collective consciousness. We've seen the suffering, the wounds inflicted, the crucifixion completed. No wonder we shelter in place in anxiety, with no sense of when the world will take a turn for the better. John's Gospel allows us, invites us, compels us to name aloud our lament and our trauma, without shame or embarrassment. We are the [disciples] and we are Thomas.

Jesus knows exactly where we are, we cannot hide from the Risen Christ [the Sacred Presence of God with and within us]. He does not condemn our struggles to believe in God's power and God's goodness when all we'd imagined or planned gets upended. He makes his way to us, wherever we are, to reassure us of the trustworthiness of God's creative, living Word." The Word made flesh.

But what happens next in this remarkably relevant story? "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. **As God has sent me, so I send you.**' **When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'**" (John 20:21-22). **Jesus gives those who follow him a mission and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.** And in

this story, that mission is specifically one of forgiving others. **Jesus is entrusting us with his own ministry of forgiveness.** This is what he sends us out to do. And while we still need to shelter in place, it's a ministry that can start at home, and when allowed, out into the world.

Duffield concludes: "Jesus gives us the gifts he promised that he would: Peace. The Spirit. A mission and purpose. As we huddle anxiously in secluded places, how have we seen and heard, touched and felt, experienced without question the [Presence of Christ]? If we have known the peace that passes understanding in a season when so much defies explanation, we are called not only to tell about it, but to offer it, embody it." We are to embody forgiveness.

So, what is the good news for this time and place? **Hope in the face of fear. Peace in the midst of chaos. Belief in life no matter how deadly the circumstances.**

I want to close with a brief meditation from Steve Garnaas-Holmes, from his website, www.unfoldinglight.net. He starts with a biblical passage.

*Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you."
He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.
As God has sent me, so I send you." —John 20.21-22*

Meditate on this. Go slowly. Give it time.

He comes to you, present with you now,
in [your] very room as you [hear] this,
in all your anxieties and hurts.
He says, "Peace be with you."
You are all right, safe and whole and beloved.
Allow that deep peace to surround you,
embrace you, protect you.

...

He breathes his Spirit into you:
his love, his healing will, his joy,
his profound trust in God.
You breathe it in.
It fills you, every cell,
every aspect of your mindfulness.
With all your imperfections and weaknesses
you are a perfect vessel for his spirit.
Breathe deeply. You receive it. It becomes you.

...

He sends you, just as he was sent:
into this day, into your life,
to bear that love into this world,
with humble authority, with courage,
with grace, with mysterious power,
with joy and delight.
Go.

Indeed, Peace be with YOU!

Amen.