

“John 20:19-29”

By the Rev. Emily Chapdelaine, 4/12/26

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

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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.”

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.” 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.” Holy Wisdom Holy Word

Welcome, to the second Sunday in Easter, where we talk about doubting Thomas every single year. We make jokes about this story, and many ministers groan about always having to preach on it. But as a member of bible study reminded me, Thomas’ story is undeniably human. It is perhaps one of the most human stories in the bible. The disciples in this story are a mirror for us, a mirror that isn’t always flattering, but it is grace filled and encouraging. When we read this story with a heavily critical eye on Thomas, we bypass grappling with our own doubt, our own questions, and we miss out on all the gifts Jesus has for us. Throughout the gospels, Jesus’ resurrection appearances feel like training wheels. He shows up when the disciples need him, when they are getting wobbly, but only to gently stabilize everyone and give them a little push toward the path he has laid before them. This story is no different, it is the very beginning of the disciples bike riding journey, and their need for training wheels is great.

Having broken up the story in this way, it’s so easy for us to miss that this is still a part of the Easter story. In fact, the first part of our scripture takes place on the evening of Easter Sunday. When we pick up this reading, it has only been a few hours since Mary Magdalene encountered Jesus in the garden and rushed to tell the disciples that she had seen him, that he is risen. We know that the disciples did not believe her, and honestly who among us would have believed her either? I know personally, I would have assumed that Mary’s grief was so great that she saw who she most wanted to see. I would have tried to comfort her, but I would not have believed her, just as the disciples did not believe her. The disciples are noticeably foreign, their accents give them away as followers of the recently executed King of the Jews. They are hiding in fear, behind doors that are closed and locked, desperate to escape the fate of their leader, unsure how to move forward without him. Their continued discipleship is uncertain. After all, who can follow a dead God? Who can believe in a liberator that died so brutally at the hands of the very empire he was supposed to liberate them from. In this moment, the disciples are afraid and they are beginning to revert back to who they were before Jesus called them. They don’t know how to keep going without Jesus, and they aren’t certain they were right to be following him in the first place. And yet, Jesus appears to them, despite their locked doors, fully embodied, with exactly the care they need.

“Peace be with you” he says to them as he shows his hands and his side. What the disciples felt or thought when they saw Jesus is beyond my imagination. Peace is the first offering the resurrected Jesus gives to his disciples. They see the holes in his hands made by Roman nails on the Roman cross, and yet he is alive. They see that the empire could not destroy the life of Jesus, and therefore it cannot destroy their lives. It cannot destroy life, even where it tries to, so very hard. When we think of peace we often think of contentment, or worse, complacency, and yet this is not what Jesus means when he says “Peace be with you.”

Jesus’ peace is not meant to make the disciples comfortable in their locked room, instead it compels them to leave because their fear has been assuaged, and they have work to do. The resurrected Jesus also gives his disciples a mission, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” They are to go out and continue the work Jesus began. The mission to share and model God’s grace and forgiveness in the context of community life. Although the disciples are the first to receive this commissioning, it is passed on to us as well. And it was just as difficult for the disciples as it was for us. Which is why Jesus offers the disciples, and ultimately us, a method for accessing the Spirit of God, so that when our sinfulness threatens to overtake us, we have some back up. “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The Greek word meaning ‘breathed’ here is the only time in the entire New Testament this particular word is used, but if we look to the Greek translation of the Old Testament we see it in a few more places. Most notably, Genesis 2:7 “then the Lord God formed a human from the dust of the ground, and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.” The gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of life, life that can reside within us for eternity, life that cannot be overtaken or outmatched by any amount of sin or shame that we carry. These are the three gifts the resurrected Jesus gives to his disciples in their hour of despair and uncertainty. Jesus brings peace to comfort and steady them. Jesus gives them a purpose, a direction, to share his love with the world. And finally, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit onto them to sustain and guide them once he had ascended to heaven.

The disciples report their experience of the resurrected Christ to the disciple Thomas, who was not present for this appearance of Jesus, and Thomas does not believe them. We like to give Thomas a bad rap, nicknaming him doubting Thomas, as if doubtful is the worst thing a person could be. As if all the other disciples were not doubters too when Mary Magdalene first came to them. But I think Thomas’ doubt is more complicated and nuanced than we understand it. It’s not just the impossibility of Jesus dying and rising from the dead, which quite frankly is strange enough, but Thomas’ focus on the physicality of Jesus’ death makes me think he had a bigger question. He asks what we all need to know. That our God, the one who created the stars in the heavens and the grass in the fields, knows what it is to walk the earth and to live inside the pain and hardships of human existence. Thomas not only wants to see that Jesus is risen, but he needs to know that the

Jesus who suffered and died is the same as the Jesus who is resurrected. That Jesus' experience of pain and suffering, Jesus' experience of humanity was not washed away when Jesus returns.

So Jesus appears again, and we like to think he made a special trip, just for Thomas. But it is not just for Thomas. "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them." One week after these disciples receive the peace of Christ, a purpose and mission, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, they are back in the house. They are back where they were when Christ first appeared. Just one week after this unbelievable resurrection experience, one week after they are instructed to go out, they are behind closed doors again. This is what I meant earlier about training wheels. Jesus shows up again right as the disciples are wobbling. And he will continue to do that, the next chapter of John is where Jesus shows up to the disciples as they are fishing. The Easter miracle is that Jesus shows up for the disciples whenever they have need of him. Much like the disciples, it does not take long for the peace of Christ to be crowded out of our hearts by the injustices of this world. None of the disciples are unusual in their fear or their neediness. The gospel story turns the world upside down, but the disciples are still living in right side up realities, and so are we. These post-resurrection Jesus appearances are offerings of grace. Jesus provides all that the disciples need as many times as they need it and he does not disparage them or find their forgetfulness annoying. Perhaps this is why we worship once a week, because we all need to be regularly reminded of these gifts from God. We all need to be renewed for the journey ahead of us.

After Jesus shows Thomas his hands and his side, the text does not tell us if Thomas touches them or not, because that is not the point. Thomas exclaiming "My Lord and my God!" is the point. This is the only time in all of the gospel narratives that anyone calls Jesus God. This is the point that the gospel writer John has been working toward from the very beginning, starting his narrative by saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Jesus who was God in the beginning, becomes human, bears the scars of human life, and then is resurrected in victory. The gospel of John is the most explicit in calling Jesus God, showing that he is creator, not creature. And yet it is also the most explicit in showing Jesus' humanity. John is the only gospel to mention nails in Jesus' hands. It is the only gospel to mention that Jesus was pierced in the side. Much of what we believe about who Jesus is, that he is both fully human and fully divine, hangs on Thomas' question and his response to the risen Christ.

Jesus' response to Thomas is not an admonition, it is a gift to all of us who come after. "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." We are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. But I want to pause here and challenge our understanding of belief. Two thousand years, a lot of education, the protestant reformation, the enlightenment, and modern technology later, our understanding of belief has changed a lot. In Jesus' time, belief was not something that happened in your brain or your heart, it did not happen separate from your body, it did not happen separate from the rest of your life. The disciples could not have conceived of a time where followers of Jesus could accept him into their metaphorical hearts and not change the way they were physically living. They did not separate mind and body at all, let alone elevate the mind and diminish the body as we have since the age of enlightenment. So when Jesus talks about believing, he is not asking a yes or no question about the hearts and minds of his disciples. He is calling them to action. Jesus is reminding the disciples that they have seen him rise from the dead, and they should live like it. They should live like they too have been raised from the dead, because they have. They should live into practices that bring God's life, love, grace, and peace to all people, despite the ramifications. Just as we have inherited gifts from the disciples in this story, so we also inherit this mandate.

This is the part where I know all our brains are lighting up with ideas and to-do lists, or worse with self-flagellation about things we should be doing but aren't. We have somewhat unfortunately inherited 'the protestant work ethic' mentality. A mentality from the protestant reformation where hard work, discipline, and even suffering in service of work were signs of salvation and were inherently morally good. Whether we know it or not, this history is ingrained within all of us. So when we hear a mandate from Jesus, we immediately jump into our brains and strategize, how can I be better? How can I do more? Now I am not saying these aren't good questions, but this pattern of thinking we have inherited over the years tends to make us think of our lives like an obstacle course. This mentality tends to create in us a sense of urgency and scarcity. It tends to make us view other people as competition rather than companions. I don't know about you, but the news right now is enough to make running an obstacle course for God seem like a waste of time. On the one hand, things are so bad, how can my doing all the right things make any bit of difference at all? And then on the other hand, I may not be doing too well on my obstacle course, but wow at least I'm not a part of that. But I am here to say, Jesus is not laying down a gauntlet for us! Jesus is not setting up an obstacle course, Jesus did not purposely show up when Thomas was absent to trap him into being an example for the rest of us.

Through the power of the resurrection, Jesus is setting up a playground. We've got a lot of similar components to an obstacle course in a playground right? But it's a different set up, with a different goal. On playgrounds you play with other people, and sometimes a little competition breaks out, but it's all in good fun, and it may help you grow. On playgrounds you don't have to do things in a particular order, or for a particular amount of time. On playgrounds you get to practice. On playgrounds you get rejuvenated, you get to burn off some energy. You get to stretch and move and be in touch with your body. Jesus does have a mandate for us, and it is hard. It is heavy and difficult and often seems hopeless. But just as Jesus appeared to the disciples exactly when they needed his direction, so he has set up for us all sorts of things that can sustain us through hard work. We really need the playground. Even from our place of privilege, seemingly far from violence, seemingly far from hunger or thirst, we are not far from despair for what is happening in the world. We need the sustenance, we need the joy and the fun and the laughter. We need to put down our phones and our TV remotes. We need to remember that believing in the resurrected Christ is not just something we say or think, but something we do with our bodies and our lives. Something we are enabled to do through the playground that Jesus has set up for us, on earth as it is in heaven.