

John 20:19-31

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."

John 20:24 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."

John 20:26 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."

John 20:30 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.

## DOUBT AND FAITH

Are doubt and faith mutually exclusive? Is the faithful person one who has banished doubt from his or her life?

Some people define faith in that way. I have personally attended prayer meetings in which the group has chastised a person who shared his or her doubts.

They said in essence, "How can you doubt? Life's short. Pray hard. Just believe God's word. God said it. I believe it. That settles it."

But, when you actually read God's Word you begin to understand that the story of faith is complex. Yes, God said it. But, that doesn't settle it. God's Word gets things stirred up.

And most of the time we don't believe it, at least not exactly as He said it. And sometimes we even oppose what God is doing in the world.

In other words when you read the Bible, from beginning to end doubt plays a big role in the story. The people who knew the Bible the best, God's own chosen people were often bamboozled by what Jesus has to say.

Do you really think that we are going to be any different? Do you really think that we understand Jesus perfectly and follow his way completely?

Do you really think that we can reach a point in our life when we have absolutely no doubts? Do you think we can accept the word of Jesus without a doubt?

If we act like we have no doubt we are either asleep or kidding ourselves. We all have doubts when it comes to following Jesus. The real question is this: What do we do with our doubts?

The story of Thomas suggests that we honestly express our doubts, and yet be honest enough to put our doubts to the test. Thomas told the disciples, "Unless I see the wounds of Jesus for myself, I will not believe."

## REAL WOUNDS AND FAITH

In this passage we have a connection between belief in the risen Christ and the scars of Christ.

Resurrection did not eliminate his scars. He still had scars. The Christ of Easter still bears the scars made on Good Friday.

Apparently, seeing the scars was important to Thomas. The scars produced recognition and belief. Through his scars doubt was overcome. Through his scars forgiveness was offered.

Yet many act as if we should erase those scars. They promote a brand of Christianity that is all positive all the time. All obstacles are eliminated. Everyone who believes is seen as the epitome of success.

A woman who had recently converted to the Christian faith was told by her community, "If you are a Christian, a real Christian, you will always feel joy in your heart." But, she still felt a great sadness, even after becoming a Christian.

Was something wrong with her? Was her faith not yet firm?

No, this particular woman was abused as a child. And though her Christian faith had brought her much happiness, she still bore the scars of what happened to her as a child.

It occurs to me that many people have trouble believing in the risen Christ because they have been fed this line about Christians always being happy. I've been a Christian a long time. I've come to know Christians from every part of the world. And you know what?

Like our Savior, we all have scars.

Garrison Keillor said that we all have a backstage view of ourselves. That is, we know what we are really like. We might hide our doubts from others, but we know all about our weaknesses and our scars. We know all about how we have failed and disappointed the ones we love the most.

There is no use denying the truth. We all have scars, and so does our Savior. Thomas knew, and he needed to see the scars of his Savior before he could believe.

## DOUBT AND RESURRECTION

I think Thomas gets a bad rap with many people.

Thomas did not lack courage. Earlier in John's gospel we learn that Thomas was even willing to die with Jesus. (John 11:16) But, Thomas did find the way of Jesus to be confusing. (John 14:5) Thomas didn't know where Jesus was going and what Jesus planned to do.

And when Jesus was crucified Thomas thought that the journey was over. He thought the wounds of Christ were fatal.

In that regard Thomas is a lot like you and me. We want to follow Jesus. But, Jesus' way doesn't fit with our way. We have a hard time wrapping our minds around the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus.

We are reluctant to believe that the story continues.

Like Thomas we have our doubts. Doubts make the story realistic. Doubts help us understand that Jesus is talking to us as well as Thomas in this story.

When you look at the accounts of the resurrection (in all four gospels) you quickly realize that Thomas is not alone in his doubt. In fact, you might say that doubt is not the exception but the rule.

No one, even after all the predictions of a resurrection, says "welcome back" or "what took you so long?" Everyone is surprised when Jesus up. Everyone doubts. Everyone.

They weren't ready for a resurrection.

But, are we any more ready? Do we believe that the Spirit of the risen Christ breathes on us? Do we believe that a community based on forgiveness and love is possible in a world like ours?

We are supposed to be the Easter people. We are supposed to be the people who carry the Spirit of the risen Christ into the world. But, many of us church people have our own doubts. Truth be told, we just don't see the Spirit of Jesus at work in our communities of faith. And sometimes we just don't see the Spirit of Jesus at work in our own lives.

The first step in getting to know God is realizing that God is absent from your life. In that sense doubt can be the first step toward greater faith. Doubt can lead you to seek the risen Christ in your own life.

#### THOMAS THE AVATAR

Does that mean you'll see Jesus like Thomas? Probably not. Not many of us get a chance to put our hands in the nail-scarred hand like Thomas. Not many of us have a Damascus Road experience like the apostle Paul.

But, that is not to say that we are at a disadvantage. Jesus speaks directly to us in today's lesson. Did you hear it?

Jesus told Thomas to stop doubting and believe. Thomas responded by saying, "My Lord and my God." The risen Christ had made Thomas into a believer.

And then Jesus said this,  
"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That last statement was for us. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

Jesus is blessing all those from John's day down to our own who have managed to believe without the benefit of direct experience.

In the virtual world of online gaming, players can take on different identities. They can put themselves in almost any situation imaginable. In order to participate in these games people create alternate identities called avatars. These identities allow players to live in the virtual world.

Their avatars fight demons, build amusement parks, or run political campaigns. And sometimes these avatars teach real life lessons to the gamers. Perhaps that's why they're so popular.

I sometimes wonder if our lesson for today doesn't work in that fashion. Thomas is our avatar. We get to express our own doubts through his actions. And we get to experience his call to faith as well.

## FAITH IS A PROCESS

Notice that Jesus blesses those who have “come to believe”. Faith is a process. Jesus is blessing all those who have managed to come to a faith that is not the opposite of doubt but a faith that lives with doubts ... and yet finds a way to believe.

In the gospels we learn that almost everyone misunderstood Jesus and many people rejected Jesus.

But, those who had no doubts crucified him. Those who had no doubts, the religious leaders who had the Scripture memorized were the very ones who were not able to come to faith.

I get really nervous when people have absolutely no room for doubt. What if God is doing something different from what we expect? What if we have misinterpreted and misapplied the Scripture?

Can't we leave room for doubt? Our doubt might be the beginning of true faith.

I read an article this week that talked about the difference between Christmas and Easter. The author made the point that the world often makes a bigger deal out of Christmas than Easter.

But, he said that if we don't have Easter we don't have a church, we don't have a gospel. “If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, who cares whether he was born in a manger or a Seven-Eleven? If he didn't rise from the dead, Christmas is meaningless too.”

Easter to a large extent hasn't been commercialized like Christmas. And I think I know why.

The world doesn't know what to do about Easter. The world doesn't know what to do with a story of a resurrection. The world doesn't know what to do with a story filled with so much ambiguity, so much fear and doubt.

Do you ever go into a home and say, “Don't be afraid?” I don't think I've ever done that. But, Jesus did. That was the first thing out of his mouth.

Jesus didn't say “Merry Easter.” Jesus said, “Don't be afraid.”

Why does fear and doubt persist in the story of Easter?

Resurrection is a unique event. It would be normal to be afraid in such circumstances. The disciples ran away when Jesus needed them most. Perhaps, they thought Jesus had come to punish them for their cowardice.

## LOCKED DOORS

But, the biggest source of fear lay not in the appearance of the risen Christ. The biggest source of fear came from what the world might do to the disciples.

The Scripture tells us that the disciples were focusing upon what might happen to them as disciples of Jesus. If they crucified Jesus, might they experience the same fate?

When Jesus appeared to them the first time the doors were locked for fear of the Jews. And when Jesus appeared to them the second time, the doors were still locked.

(The NRSV translates the same word “shut” instead of “locked” in the second appearance of Jesus. But, I can see no reason to change the translation. The word certainly means locked and even implies imprisonment. The disciples, despite their joy over seeing Jesus were still imprisoned by their fear.)

So, despite seeing the risen Christ the disciples are still behind locked doors, and the message they receive from Jesus in that first appearance had given them even more reason to fear.

They now knew what following Jesus would mean for them. They knew what the kingdom of God was all about, and the work of the kingdom would not be done behind locked doors.

The commission was all too clear in that first meeting. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And then Jesus breathed on them and told them to spread that message of peace and forgiveness throughout the whole world.

But, the world was not ready to hear that message. The world did not want to hear a message of peace and forgiveness. In fact the world was down right hostile to a message of peace and forgiveness.

And I’m afraid the world hasn’t changed a bit in over 2,000 years. It is still a fearful thing to be filled with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ. It is still a fearful thing to be called to preach a word of forgiveness in a world that is still intent on crucifying God’s prophets. It’s still a fearful thing to confront religious zealots who think they have God’s truth and are willing to prove it with the sword of their own judgment.

The risen Christ is a joyous gift. The stone is rolled away. Death, the final enemy has been defeated.

But, the risen Christ also comes to give His disciples an assignment. Don’t think that this assignment was just for those disciples way back when. No, the blessing and the assignment are for all those who are coming to faith, all those who are struggling to overcome their doubts and believe.

## PRESENT TENSE EASTER

After Easter we are not permitted to give up on anyone. Even in the worst situations we are not permitted to despair. That is exciting and frightening at the same time. It means that Christians are not allowed to give in to cynicism. Instead, we are people of perpetual hope.

Easter is not all future tense. Easter is not just about that day when we are raised and go to live with God forever. (It is about that and that brings us great joy.)

But, Easter is also present tense. Easter is also about following Jesus. Easter is about getting out from behind our locked doors and daring to make the kingdom a reality here and now.

I wonder. Can the suspicious fearful church of 2012 still feel resurrection breath on her cheeks?

Jesus is still breathing on us. Our locked doors don't keep Jesus out. But, closed minds and hearts can still keep us in bondage.

We do indeed need divine intervention.

No wonder Pentecost follows Easter in the church year. We learn that even the appearance of the risen Christ was not enough to dispel all the doubts and fears of the disciples.

And so God did something spectacular. A holy wind blew that rivaled the wind of creation. Today's lesson gives us a preview of coming attractions.

There's a line from the hymn, *Amazing Grace* that seems to capture the role of doubt in the process of coming to true faith.

"'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace those fears relieved."

The wind of God's Spirit is sometimes a hurricane that blows down the idols in our life. It is a kind of grace that causes us to doubt and be afraid.

Let's pay attention to the doubt and fear in our lives. It might just be the breath of the risen Lord. It might just be God's way of calling us to go some place new.

AMEN.