

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."

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.

## FAITH IN A DOUBTING WORLD

The most important verse in our lesson for today and arguably one of the most important verses in the Bible is a verse you might not even have

noticed. I'm talking about verse 31. In that verse we read why the gospel of John (and I think the Bible itself) was written.

John wrote that his gospel was written in order that "you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name."

That's also a good summary of what I'm trying to do each Sunday. I'm not a disinterested bystander when it comes to the faith. I have an agenda. I want you to believe that God was in Christ. I want to put you on the road to faith.

I want to see lives changed by the grace and majesty of God. I want to see people born again by the power of the Spirit. I want people to become new creations.

To paraphrase Uncle Sam, "I want you ... to believe."

But, how can this happen?

Some of you might point out that I can't make anyone believe. It is impossible to argue someone into the kingdom of heaven, and more than that, we are swimming against the tide when it comes to faith.

We live in a society that is very skeptical about almost everything and especially faith. When people take those surveys and answer the question about religion, do you know what the fastest growing religion is in this country?

"None of the above."

Maybe we should rename our church. We could call ourselves "The Church of the Undecided. Maybe that could be a way to get new members.

But, I suspect "The Church of the Undecided" might not last very long. Doubt can lead to faith, but doubt can also lead to despair

The rise of the "none of the aboves" creates a problem for preachers who want others to believe.

On the one hand the risen Christ sends disciples into the world to proclaim the good news. But, on the other hand, the world is skeptical of that news. In many cases the world is even hostile to the good news.

No wonder we squirm in our pews when the preacher starts talking about the Great Commission. Many of us know in our hearts that we too have doubts. How can we possibly talk about the faith to others who are very reluctant to believe?

Today's lesson from John occurs every year on the Sunday after Easter. In my file cabinet I have lots of sermons on this passage.

And it seems to me that it's good that we preach on this passage a lot. This is a very good passage for those who are undecided.

Today's message is for those who are on the fence when it comes to faith. Doubt causes them to check "none of the above." And many people fit that category, both inside and outside the church.

Maybe you're one of those people. Maybe you have honest doubts about the message that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Today's sermon is for you.

## DOUBT IN THE BIBLE

First, let's acknowledge the fact that doubt and uncertainty have always been a part of the gospel message. Yes, in many of the gospels the disciples seem to drop everything and follow Jesus. But, that does not mean that the disciples are automatically filled with faith, far from it.

The miracles of Jesus often do not produce faith in the disciples but instead they produce uncertainty. For example, when Jesus stilled the storm the disciples said to each other, "Who is this who can even control the wind and the waves?"

The disciples were filled with fear and doubt when it came to Jesus. They didn't understand what he said, and they were often afraid to ask him any questions.

It shouldn't come as a shock to us that the disciples deserted Jesus when the going got rough. They followed Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, but they had not made it very far when it came to the road of faith. Jesus told them that the cross would not be the end that there would be a resurrection, and he would meet them in Galilee. But, they didn't understand, and they didn't believe.

But, even the resurrection did not bring faith at first. When the women brought news of the empty tomb some labeled it an "idle tale." When Jesus appeared to disciples after the resurrection at some did not recognize him (I think) because they were so overwhelmed with doubt and fear.

### LOCKED DOORS

And that's how our lesson for today begins, with disciples huddled together filled with doubt and fear. The Bible tells us that the doors to the home where the disciples met were locked. They were afraid. They were afraid that those who crucified Jesus might crucify them as well.

Craig Barnes tells of the time his family moved into an apartment in South Chicago. The door on the apartment had four locks! You have to wonder what kind of neighborhood you're moving into when the door has four locks.

He said that the benefit was mainly psychological. When they went to bed at night, they derived some comfort from shutting out the world and hearing the click, click, click as they turned the levers of the locks.

That's how many of us cope with our fears. We try to keep out all those things that make us afraid.

Those who struggle to believe often stay behind locked doors. Not only do we lock the doors to our homes we lock the doors to our heart as well.

A lack of faith prevents us from living the way God wants us to live. We shut ourselves off from God, and we shut ourselves off from each other.

Disciples behind locked doors are a powerful symbol. It is the position of those who think that the good news is too good to be true. Who can unlock those doors?

## JESUS COMES AND OFFERS PEACE

Only Jesus can unlock those doors. And he does.

Technically the Bible doesn't say that Jesus unlocked the doors. It just says that he came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Earlier in John's gospel Jesus told the disciples,

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

I think his "peace be with you" greeting is a reminder of that earlier promise.

Jesus was saying in effect, "Don't allow your life to be ruled by the fear of what might happen. Instead, come follow me. I am here with you. I have always been with you."

This earlier promise of peace was given in the context of another promise, the promise of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the risen Christ would be with the disciples. They would not be left alone. They would not be left like orphans.

But, the disciples did not understand that promise either.

So Jesus came among them to remind them. "Peace be with you" were the first words out of his mouth.

After that Jesus showed them his hands and his side, and the disciples knew that this was no ghost or figment of their imagination. This was the risen Lord. And they were filled with great joy.

## THE CHALLENGE

Then Jesus challenged his disciples to unlock their doors and go out into the world. He said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And he breathed upon them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

He made good on his earlier promise. They would be filled with the very Spirit of God. They would not be alone ever again and that Spirit would empower them to preach the message.

Notice that this is almost like a new creation story. Just as God breathed life into Adam and Eve so Jesus breathes life into discouraged and fearful disciples. He empowers them to go and preach the gospel in His name.

Jesus also told the disciples something else that I find troubling. He said, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” It almost sounds like Jesus is giving the disciples the authority to choose who can be forgiven and who cannot be forgiven.

On this point I’m going to resort to an old rule of biblical interpretation that we understand a passage that is a bit cloudy by referring to passages that are much clearer. In this case the Lord’s Prayer helps. Jesus told his disciples to pray, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

This prayer does not in the position of being a judge. This prayer puts us in the position of being judged by our own actions. If we are not gracious toward others, it separates us from the grace of God.

I would suggest that Jesus is emphasizing the responsibility the disciples now carry in this statement about forgiveness. They have been given the Spirit and sent into the world to proclaim the good news.

If they do not preach the message of forgiveness, the world will be lost. Sins will be retained. If they do preach the message, the world will be saved. Sins will be forgiven. The disciples knew all too well what it meant to have sins forgiven. They had failed Jesus miserably, but that did not keep the Lord from coming to them and lifting them up.

## DOUBTING THOMAS

But, the first person they preached that message to was not a successful convert, at least at first. Thomas (aka the twin) was not present when Jesus appeared to the disciples the first time.

And he did not believe what the disciples were telling him. Thomas said he would have to see it for himself. He needed to put his hands in the nail-scarred hands. He needed to touch Jesus' wounded side.

Thomas would not accept second hand evidence.

I like that about Thomas. He wanted to see the risen Christ for himself.

Thomas knew that Jesus had been crucified. He would not accept second hand testimony from anyone, even his fellow disciples.

The story of Thomas answers those critics who say that the stories of the resurrection were the product of wishful thinking by those who wanted Jesus back.

Thomas was not a wishful thinker. He was a hardheaded clear-eyed realist. If he had been an American he would have been from Missouri, the show me state.

Thomas' doubt serves to highlight the reality of the resurrection. Thomas would not accept a disembodied ghost as proof of a resurrection. Thomas needed to see and touch before he would believe.

I think the skepticism of Thomas highlights another important point.

Faith cannot be second hand. Growing up in a Christian home or being raised in the church does not make a person a Christian. Someone once put it this way, "Sleeping in a garage does not make you a car, and attending church does not make you a Christian."

The road to faith requires an encounter with the risen Christ.

## MY LORD AND MY GOD

Thomas got what he wanted and needed. The next week Jesus came to the disciples again, and this time Thomas was there. Jesus once again greeted them by saying, "Peace be with you."

And then Jesus offered Thomas the chance to be at peace, to stop doubting and believe. Jesus invited Thomas to put his hands in the nail-scarred hands and put his hand in his side.

But, Thomas didn't need to do it. Thomas now believed. He cried out, "My Lord and my God."

Once again the story of Thomas instructs us when it comes to faith. Jesus invites us to put him to the test. We may not be able to see Jesus in the flesh, but the same Spirit that empowered the disciples can come into our lives.

Jesus can breathe on us. Jesus can show us that he is with us and for us. Jesus invites us to trust in him, to stop doubting and believe.

We too can be blessed by an encounter with the risen Christ. We too can be changed forever by the power of God's grace.

We don't have to see to believe. We have to believe in order to see.

## FAITH IS A PROCESS

When Thomas accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord, Jesus gives a word of encouragement to those of us who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Jesus calls us blessed.

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 faith despite their doubt. And maybe God uses our doubt to bring us to a better and deeper understanding of what it means to be a faithful person.

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 doubts could put us on the road to true faith. Our doubts could lead us to an encounter with the risen Christ.

Jesus is still breathing on us. Our locked doors don't keep Jesus out. But, closed minds and hearts can blind us to his presence.

We 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. Sometimes the wind of God's grace causes us to doubt and be afraid, and then that same wind lifts us up on the wings of faith.

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 putting us on the road to faith. It might be Jesus inviting us to touch and see for ourselves.

And then we too will fall on our knees and say, "My Lord and my God."  
Amen.