

“Something Is Asked of Us”

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Sermon – April 11, 2021

John 20:19-31

Here now these words from John’s gospel, in the 20th chapter, verses 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.’ 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.’

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.

The word of God for all God's people. Thanks be to God!

My beloved Wisconsin siblings in Christ, Jesus, I rejoice to celebrate with you in this post-resurrection season – Christ lives! Christ is alive in each and every one of us. We are truly made one in Christ, one with Christ, and together we are the body of Christ for the world. Thanks be to God.

John's passage today often leads preachers to focus on the fact that the disciples were hiding, that they were afraid, that they were like lost sheep without their shepherd, that doubt somehow displaced faith with Jesus gone.

And poor Thomas, forever known as "doubting Thomas," when in fact he acted as I presume many of us would have acted in the same circumstances. He did not share in the empirical evidence and witness of his fellow disciples, so he adopted good scientific methodology – "unless I see it with my own eyes and touch him with my own hands, I simply will not believe." Thomas would fit in well today, skeptical, demanding "prove it."

And Jesus does just that, Jesus presents himself to Thomas and offers the proclamation that echoes through today, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." This is the essence, the true cornerstone of faith.

I want to make a few observations about today's passage, because I see some very hopeful signs in this story that so many use to focus on fear and doubt.

First, in the wake of the tragic loss of Jesus, the disciples – those whom Jesus called friends – stayed together in their grief. What a strong witness to the strength and value of community.

In good times and bad, life is easier to deal with in community. Over the time spent with Jesus, the twelve became more than a

ragtag band of diverse individuals, they became a family and a fellowship, bound together by common experience and learning.

And when Jesus appears, it is almost as if nothing has changed! He greets them with "peace," and he commissions them and blesses them with the Holy Spirit. All that Jesus did he now bestows on the disciples to spread wherever they go.

This is important for us to realize and remember: the twelve were called disciples for the time they were with Jesus, but after the passing of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost in the book of Acts) the twelve were no longer called disciples, but they were stewards of the manifold grace of God – apostles and prophets and teachers and leaders and evangelists – using their gifts to do what Jesus did. The followers of the twelve were called disciples, and discipleship has been our model throughout time.

Hear this, we never stop learning as disciples, but there is a transformation through the Holy Spirit. Students become teachers, followers become leaders, apprentices become masters of their craft, and sheep are miraculously remade as shepherds. In John's gospel, the disciples are transformed by the Holy Spirit of God from fearful worriers steeped in grief to be the living incarnation of the Christ for the world.

And poor Thomas missed it!

Imagine being the only person to miss witnessing the most incredible event in the world. Imagine being left out of receiving the greatest gift ever given! Imagine everyone else receiving their heart's desire, leaving you alone in grief and loss. I wonder if Thomas used doubt as a shield to protect himself from deep, painful disappointment?

But also note that when Jesus reappears, he immediately invites Thomas to touch him, to see him, to receive the proof his head and heart desired. Yes, he said it was better to believe without seeing, but he also embraced Thomas, even in his unbelief.

Jesus will not reject those who question, those who doubt, those who struggle to believe. Jesus is grace personified, and Jesus is patient and kind. Most of us experience seasons of doubt, or

spiritual dryness, or faith fatigue. That is okay. Jesus will wait, and Jesus will bless and renew us with the Holy Spirit.

From time to time I hear people today say how nice it would be if Jesus would just appear to us one time in bodily form – what a proof that would be to us and to the world that Jesus is real.

I want to say to you that Jesus does appear to us in bodily form every single day. When I greet you at Annual Conference, I see Jesus. When I am with you for the Laity Convocation, I see Jesus. Wherever I go in Wisconsin, around this country, and around the world, I see Jesus in the baptized believers I meet in our global community. I even see Jesus in each little box on Zoom whenever I connect with you. We are Jesus for each other, and it is in us – in what we say and what we do – that others see the reality of Jesus.

I have been inspired by Martin Buber, he claimed the transformed relationship with 'I and Thou' way:

"I become aware of him, aware that he is different, essentially different from myself, in the definite, unique way which is peculiar to him, and I accept whom I thus see, so that in full earnestness I can direct what I say to him as the person he is. Perhaps from time to time I must offer strict opposition to his view about the subject of our conversation. But I accept this person, the personal bearer of a conviction, in his definite being out of which his conviction has grown.... I affirm the person I struggle with; I struggle with him as his partner, I confirm him." (The Knowledge of Man)

I praise God that we have each other. In times of testing, in times of loss and anxiety, in times of fear and dread, in times of sorrow and grief, we have Jesus because we have one another. Through the pandemic, we have made so many sacrifices to keep each other safe and healthy, but we have still been community together – in our local congregations, in our districts and meetings, all across our Conference, and throughout our United Methodist connection.

Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we are one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.

Today I ask you to reclaim the title and position of Easter people. Every day, as the hymn goes, is resurrection day, the past is over and done. We are always looking forward, always leaning

into the vision of God, always striving to honor and glorify God in what we do.

And in our communities, we have ambitious James's and Johns, simple yet stable Peters, wondering and doubting Thomas's, calculating Matthews, and even a Judas here and there.

But by God's miraculous power, we together are always greater than the sum of our parts. Each of us individually is gifted, and we can do good things. Using our gifts in combination we can even do great things. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, the grace of God, and the example of Jesus the Christ, God can actually do miracles through us.

Easter is both an event and the passageway into a lifelong journey. Through the resurrection of Jesus, death has lost all power and sting, new life abounds, and we become a new creation in Christ. Passing through the threshold of Easter, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit from individual believers, following Jesus, into true beloved community, the body of Christ for the world.

The task that is before us is to share resurrection new life with our entire world. To stay focused on God's vision of beloved community, we must follow Paul's direction to "walk by faith, not by sight." Sight shows us racism, and sexism, and exclusion, and hate crimes, and condemnation, and punishment, and on and on, broken world, broken lives, broken bodies. This is not God's will.

Faith shows us acceptance, and respect, and inclusion, and acts of kindness, and reconciliation, and peace-making. Sight shows us what is; faith shows us what should be. Sight shows us what is wrong; faith shows us what is right and good and holy. Sight shows us suffering and violence and prejudice. Faith shows us healing and compassion and unconditional love.

Our world often seeks to put to death that which is good. There will always be forces seeking to crucify the children of God. But together we stand strong. Together we stand empowered. Together we know that no force on earth can defeat the incredible love and grace of God.

Blessings to my beautiful Wisconsin Easter people. Know that Jesus is with you; the Christ is with all of us. And by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we are a new creation, the very body of

Christ, alive and well and thriving, ready to walk by faith and heal a broken world. Thanks be to God.