

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When 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." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵So 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."

²⁶A 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." ²⁷Then 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." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. It wasn't supposed to end like this.

If there was ever a sure thing, Jesus should have been it. This was the Messiah, the one that Israel had spent generations waiting for. He spent his precious moments healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead, feeding multitudes. He did some other things that didn't square with the expectations of the people, such as carousing with sinners and tax collectors, and standing up to the religious authorities, but he was incredible, he should have been king. But everything went wrong. Here the disciples were, cowering in a darkened room, afraid that they were on the hit list of the Romans or the minions of the temple.

This second Sunday of Easter the Gospel lesson is always the story of Thomas and his skepticism. But doubt is very much a part of the Easter picture from Maundy Thursday right through Easter Day. At the Last Supper, the disciples drew back from Jesus' foot washing — doubting his gesture, divining his meaning and shrinking from the changes for their own intentions, they were still intent on glory, or triumph over the Romans. Outside the trial, Peter shrank into

betrayals, unable to leave, unable to step forward, doubt and love struggling within him.

All the disciples were paralysed with grief, the intense doubt that overwhelmed Jesus' oft spoken assurances that he would rise, until it was Joseph of Arimathea who was able to handle the details of the burial.

We don't have any record of what was said by the disciples from Friday until Easter morning, but we know what it would be like among us: long silences punctuated by *if onlys, why didn't wes, how could theys*. We know from their Easter astonishment that no one was saying *Let's wait and see what happens*.

On Easter morning, doubt was there as some, certain that Jesus had died, set out for the tomb to prepare the body. In our Gospel for Easter this year, Mary Magdalene is the first to discover the open tomb. She runs back to Peter and John and tells them. They then race to the tomb and discover that the tomb is empty. Then they head back home, confident that Jesus has been raised. But Mary still has doubts, she needs more than empty cloths. She hangs out at the empty tomb long enough to actually see the risen lord and hear his voice call her name. He sends her as an apostle to the disciples to tell them that he will meet them in Galilee. The Gospel's greatest revelation is communicated only to Mary: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

But Thomas was not there in the upper room when the disciples returned from the tomb, and he wasn't there when Jesus appeared to them that evening. Remember that this is the same Thomas that when Jesus was going to Bethany because Lazarus was dead, and likely into the hands of the police, reluctantly said, sounding for all the world like Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh, "Let us go with him so that we can die together." All their telling him about what they had seen was not enough to dispel his skepticism. Unless I see the marks 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. But he didn't just say, "You guys are nuts," and just walk out, leaving their madness behind. He had enough faith to stay with them, even though the possibility of touching Jesus' wounds was not likely.

His faithfulness was rewarded a week later when Jesus appeared to them again and he was addressed directly by Jesus: Instructed to touch his wounds. Whether he actually did is not recorded, but his response to seeing Jesus risen was clear, "My Lord and my God".

We tend to be a people living in fear; when we listen to the news, every single day we are told to be afraid: from crime rates to unemployment, terrorism to isolation.

We're told to fear Isis, we are reminded that we are on the brink of nuclear war; we're told to be afraid of immigrants, we're afraid sickness, we're afraid of loss, we're told to be afraid of the wealthy, we're afraid of what we lack, we're afraid of our failures, we're afraid of our past, we're afraid of each other.

The nature of our politics speaks to the depth and influential nature of our national and international fear. We're a people afraid and doubt that there is any hope. That fear has trapped us. Like the disciples in those early days after Jesus' death, we've locked ourselves in an upper room, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

We all have our doubts from time to time. Unlike the disciples, we usually don't lock ourselves in a room, in a prison of our own making. The disciples have completely lost themselves and forgotten their mission. They are not living in their identity. Fear and doubt do this, they turn us inward, and if we succumb to this fear, the call to an outward life of Christ-likeness turns inward. We may sing "A mighty Fortress is our God," but when fear comes knocking and doubt sets in, the lyric becomes a mighty fortress is our church, and we build walls and fences to keep out discomfort and differences.

Our faith is no longer self-sacrificial, but self-preserving. It is into this self-preservation and self-imposed prison that Jesus steps, and into the darkness, into the fear, he proclaims his peace.

The Greek word that he speaks here, twice, is the Greek '*eirene*' the equivalent of the Hebrew 'Shalom', meaning peace, wholeness, fullness, harmony.

God created the world to be a fabric, a luminous web in which everything is woven together and interdependent. We work through our doubts by working with others. We come to believe in communion with others, not by ourselves. Thomas came to his belief only by working through his doubt, embracing his doubt: "My Lord and my God."

We were created to be together, living in community with one another, sharing life together, forgiving one another. Fear and doubt short-circuits this calling. We

stop seeking justice, we stop fighting for reconciliation and stop advancing the Kingdom of God.

Jesus breathes on them and tells them to receive the holy spirit, the word in Greek means both breath and spirit. He essentially tells us and them, “I understand you are afraid, but be at peace. For you aren’t helpless. You aren’t hopeless. You aren’t alone. Go and live in the power of the Holy Spirit. Go and live in faith and trust and hope, and not fear and doubt. Know that you are not going at this alone.”

We need to trust what Jesus tells us. We have no other path.