

Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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Gospel Text: John 20:19-31
Amey Upton

Trust & Peace

Today's Gospel reminded me of a story. This little girl sat on the kitchen floor scribbling on a large piece of paper. Her tongue stuck out in concentration as she worked the colors onto the page. Crayons were all scattered about her. As she colored, the texture of the linoleum appeared like magic through her paper. Her Mom wandered by asked her "What are you drawing?" Her daughter quickly responded, "A picture of God!" The Mom was taken aback. She knelt down to deliver her disappointing news as gently as possible and said: "Nobody knows what God looks like..." but the girl answers without hesitation, "They will when I'm done".¹ Children have such a natural and confident connection with God whereas many of us adults, just like the disciples long ago, are not always so sure what we think.

This time of the year many of us seem inundated. Teachers and students are overwhelmed. And it's not just us students who are stressed, our culture and society seem to control us, gear us toward going 90 miles an hour, 24/7. We all get overwhelmed, and when we're overwhelmed we lose sight of the peace of Christ. God's gift of grace, the very essence of life, gets buried in bewilderment !

In the recent movie "DOUBT" the priest gives a sermon. He says doubts can either eat us up or can be used for the good. He tells his congregation to notice their doubts, to notice where their uncertainties take them, to notice what they do when they're unsure. Sometimes our *assurance* should be in doubt and he emphasizes that certainty as an emotion, not a fact. I don't want to give too much away, but the film leaves the viewer in doubt, doubt about pursuits intended for service to God.

A place of bewilderment or unbelieving is a place where peace and trust escape us; where we're over-functioning & filled with anxiety and division. In today's Gospel Jesus tells Thomas to "*be believing, not unbelieving*".² Believing is big with the writer of John. The verb "*to believe*" occurs over 100 times. Remember, 1st Century Jews were trying to comprehend & articulate exactly "Who Was Jesus?"

After the crucifixion, the disciples *came to believe* that Jesus was the Messiah who had come to save them. Just as God had saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, just as God had worked through Judges and Kings and Prophets, God was faithful and had saved their ancestors.

This Gospel, written over 60 years *after* Jesus had been crucified, bears witness to a deep *trust and belief* held by those early believers. When Jesus' ministry climaxed in

¹ From *Seven Whispers*, 3

² John 20: 27

resurrection, Jesus' mission was placed in his disciples' hands. *And did they face their share of bewilderment!*

They had conflict with the Romans, conflict with Jewish authorities, they faced increasing chance of civil war and destruction of their Temple. Early Jewish-Christians were continually marginalized for *believing* Jesus was the Messiah. If they confessed Jesus as Christ they'd be put out of the synagogue. Faith in Jesus was life threatening. And still they took time to struggle to articulate "Who was Jesus" when he no longer lived with them but felt so alive in their hearts.

They had appropriated such faith, a faith that sustained them. This tremendous trust made their faith *very real*, proved by the fact that our writer and his community became missionaries to the world. They articulated the meaning of faith for all of us who follow. *We're the recipients who can receive the peace of Christ by the Holy Spirit, through their words.* Those believing Jewish-Christians went on to commend others to love Christ, the Savior they did not see, and invite us to rejoice, though we do not behold him.³

What is God saying to us through these "resurrection appearances" stories? What do they say about God? For that matter, what do they say about us?

One thing appearance stories tell us is that faith is generated in variety of ways. Some believed immediately that Jesus was the Messiah. Some need proof. Some denied Christ over & over again before they come to believe. Thomas stories only appear in the Gospel of John and you might be surprised to learn Thomas is not all about doubt.

Several chapters before today's reading in Chapter 11⁴. He convinces his fellow disciples to go to the house of Lazarus risking their fear to travel with Jesus at unsafe times. It's Thomas who rallies the troops. It's Thomas who motivates others to be loyal to Jesus. That's no doubting Thomas. That's a portrait of someone trusting in something much greater than self. In this story Thomas' leadership shows tremendous trust and reliance, he shows a confidence contingent on hope. Few of us remember Thomas this way. Let's hope our ancestors remember us by our moments of great faith and not by our moments of total bewilderment and doubt.

Thomas shows up again on Maundy Thursday⁵ at the Last Supper. Jesus is preparing them for his death, telling the disciples "...that he will prepare a place for them" and "Where he is going, they may go also". During Jesus' farewell address Thomas *interrupts* Jesus' and *asks*: "How do we know where you are going?" Here we have Thomas the Inquirer. Thomas' very question prompts Jesus' well-known and telling response: "I am the way, the truth, the life".

³ 1 Peter 1:8

⁴ John 11:16

⁵ John 14:1-6

Two for two. Two appearances. Two faithful & trusting responses by Thomas. Thomas is *believing*---*not unbelieving*. This Thomas is loyal, leading, asking. Faith elicits Inquiry. Faith grows when we seek, inquire and examine ourselves. It's all tied together with trust. Perhaps this writer is telling us to *love the questions*; to trust God's answers. God is leading. We must trust, even though God remains a mystery.

As Paul puts it to the Romans, "If you really believe in the immeasurable, generous loving-kindness of God toward you in spite of your unworthiness, it lets you have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ".⁶ *Believing* grows with inquiry & trust, they go hand in hand, they're inseparable.

Turning to our Gospel passages read a few moments ago, It was "On the 1st day of the week, in a locked room that Jesus came & stood among them".⁷ Imagine how those disciples must have rejoiced when they recognized that it was actually Jesus, resurrected, standing before them!

Possibly the point of this story was to convince the hearers in the 1st Century that Jesus, complete with the very marks on his hands and wound on his side, wasn't a ghost, nor was he an alias. In their quest to articulate "Who Jesus was", they had to determine who Jesus wasn't. He wasn't a walking corpse. He hadn't simply been buried alive. He wasn't a great human spiritual leader or only a prophet. They came to know and wanted to *convince* the world that *Jesus* was the *Messiah*, risen from the dead.

Jesus dispenses peace three times in that locked room. This "Peace be with you" greeting was no longer a conventional greeting; by the time the Gospel was written, it was laden with significance. Jesus' extension of peace goes beyond custom and is emphatically conveying a divine peace, a peace placed in their hearts, a peace as part of their very consciences. This is the peace of Christ. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit, the very breath of creation, on them⁸.

Have you experienced the peace of Christ? It's a peace that passes understanding that comes by grace through faith. This peace strips away our over-functioning, strips away our bewilderment. This is God's peace, God's grace. This peace was given to the earliest believers who were broken and bewildered. Their teacher had been tortured & crucified. Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem as their Savior ended in total darkness; a darkness of alienation and forsakenness. Their Savior---crucified, dead and buried.

These earliest *believers* had quit their jobs & risked their lives. They found themselves locked in a room filled with intense fear, facing their own failures, denials, and doubts about "Who was Jesus?". All hope was gone. This must have mirrored how the writer of John's Gospel and his community must have felt sixty years later, for whom these words were written. In such crisis and urgency, revelation can occur, sometimes quite suddenly.

⁶ Romans 5:1

⁷ John 20:19-24

⁸ *ruach*, Gen. 3:6

Christ's offer of peace is pure gift from God. Jesus had promised this very peace as he walked the earth⁹. *It's a peace that enables us to perform God's work of forgiveness, by his spirit, given to all who believe in Jesus.* And as we journey by God's grace, here, as this church, we trust God is leading us, bewilderment and all, just as that 1st Century church did. God, not yet fully revealed, does guides us, does sustains us, and does provides us peace. Our job is to receive it and to find God's pulse in every moment.¹⁰

So where had Thomas been? He hadn't been with his disciples in that locked room. Perhaps Thomas' grief was so severe he'd withdrawn from his community. Depression can cause us to isolate ourselves. Suffering can unravel our confidence in God. Being overtaken by bewilderment is the opposite of faith. When we're bewildered we're consumed by questioning, by indecision, by fear. We lack confidence. Distrust. When trust is lost we're uncertain. Uncertainty interferes with our decision-making. When we live independently of peace and spirit we live will-fully as dishrags in a dirty sink. Maybe that's why Thomas wasn't in that locked room. We don't know all of the story.

But we do know in this narrative Thomas goes to that locked room one week later.¹¹ Thomas had been told by the disciples what they had seen the week before. Here we find Thomas, formerly courageous and faithful inquirer, turned skeptic. Many of the commentaries think what we see here is a caricature, a caricature in Thomas who demands to touch Jesus' wounds.

This perhaps is how many felt in the time of our writer who here appears to be dramatizing *unbelieving*. As people retraced and remembered the words of Jesus certain details get emphasized for a targeted audience. John's audience had many *non-believers* as well as *believers*. Thomas' active desire to want to touch the wounds of Christ speaks of a need for tangible proof. Many wanted such proof living in a time of great peril. Thomas' story here is about giving and receiving, it' about a mutuality that is exchanged between Thomas and Jesus in that locked room. God offers each of us that mutual exchange. God's spirit reorders things. It challenges our doubt & helps us to understand God's word. God's spirit prevents faith from becoming too intellectual **or** too mystical. God's spirit, breathed out, makes new disciples who offer new life to the world.

All *believers* are a mixture of faith & doubt. Slow, reluctant Thomas comes a week later and Jesus shows him his hands. Obstinate, like us, Thomas wanted proof. He wanted to be wise on his own accord. And Jesus allows him to touch to come to know he is the risen Lord. That's who Jesus is! On Easter last week we heard of the faith of the beloved disciple who believed entering the empty tomb based on all he had already seen. He was immediately receptive to God's gift of the spirit. We come to faith differently. God looks to each of us with confidence. He wants to send us to be his hands in this frightened and precarious world. God is a God of surprises and can't be contained.

⁹ John 14:27, 16:33

¹⁰ Peterson, Eugene. *Contemplative Pastor*, 61.

¹¹ John 20: 25-29

But with moments of clear grace come nights where we can't sleep; nights where our souls wait for the Lord.¹² Our natures are so steeped in sin that at times we are incapable of knowing ourselves to be sinful. We can admit to ourselves our place before God. That's faith. We can't reason our way to faith, but we can believe the Good News, we can appropriate the meaning of God's words to us. By trusting our faith is made more real.

Leo Tolstoy once said, "When I came to believe in Christ, my life suddenly became changed. I ceased desiring what I had wished before, and began to desire what I had not wished before. The direction of my life, my desires, suddenly became different: what was good and bad changed places"!

Perhaps Thomas' absence the first time Jesus came is warning to us to stay in community! We miss a lot when we aren't regularly participating in worship, in study, in prayer. Community is a place we can make ourselves vulnerable; where we can acknowledge differences and accept diversity. Community is what we bring one another, it's what we experienced last night at the auction. It's what the disciples brought Thomas when they shared their experience of the risen Christ.

But Thomas wanted proof. And most of us want visuals too. We want to be sure. Like Thomas we want to somehow touch, feel, and see God. I think Thomas' encounter with Jesus was written to help all future believers. We, who have not seen Christ, have doubts about faith and we let them roll around in our guts. Our insecurities and anxieties can mount but nothing is too tangled for God. The Kingdom is always at hand to be touched and received. Believe the peace of Christ can take you to places where you never expected to be. Turning toward that which we avoid, deny or fear can turn our doubt to delight! Negotiate the field of bewilderment. Don't choose doubt over change. Expect the startling return of Christ; Easter isn't a day----It's an attitude. Rejoice that Jesus rose and equally rejoice that because he rose we will be raised!¹³ Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹² Psalm 130

¹³ 1 Cor 15