

Scripture: 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." 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

Proclamation of the Word

The church school teacher had spent several sessions teaching the story of Jonah and the whale. They'd read, talked about, and role-played how Jonah tried to run away from God, was swallowed by a big fish, vomited up on the beach and finally went to preach to Nineveh after all.

"What can we learn from this story?" the teacher asked.

From the back row a small voice. "That you can't keep a good man down."

Last Sunday we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, son of God, and the same could be said of the resurrection... "you can't keep a good man down." It is the Sunday after Easter, but every Sunday is the Sunday after Easter because it was over 2000 years ago. Yes, the delightful bell choir, lilies, and Easter hats may be gone, but we still live in a post-resurrection world. And Thomas and those who come after him, are still asking questions and seeking to understand the meaning of the Resurrection.

Just take a minute to return to the paintings on the cover of your bulletin. Whether 16th Century disciples in the Caravaggio painting or modern day disciples in the top painting, all are looking closer,

seeking to understand. Maybe you are here today as one of faith, but also one seeking understanding. Do you see yourself in those paintings?

Thomas has been called the Doubter, which I find truly unfortunate. Even the Caravaggio painting is entitled, "The Incredulity of Thomas" which denotes doubt, disbelief, and skepticism. But if you know anything about Thomas, he is just really practical.

I have a confession to make. I am Laura, and I am practical, too. I am married to a science teacher named Chuck, and he is practical, too. The first step is to admit it. Be honest. When I shop for anything, my first question is "How practical is this, really?" In the clothing department it has to match black shoes or black pants to fit in my work wardrobe. Maybe that is because I was raised by a book-keeper and an engineer, very practical people. Idealists ask, "What is possible?" Practical people ask, "What works?" "What makes sense?" God created practical people, so I am guessing that God loves us, too. I know Jesus loved Thomas.

I would call Thomas a realist, and he most certainly is a great follower of Jesus, a man of faith. Even people of faith can have crisis of faith or struggle. In my experience, most emerge on the other side with a more solid gift of faith. Thomas is never called a Doubter, he is simply called the Twin. He is identified by his family connection. Earlier in the gospel of John, where Thomas makes his only cameos, we remember that when

...Jesus has declared his intention to return to Judea -- and the other disciples try to dissuade him because they know it will mean his death -- it is Thomas to urges the others to follow Jesus "so that we may die with him" (11:16). Thomas is not so much a doubter as he is a realist, and a few days earlier he'd encountered reality like never before as he saw his friend and lord nailed to the cross and die. Now, when his friends tell him that they've seen the Lord, he reacts with a realist's skepticism, kind of like a terminally ill patient who has accepted his fate might react to news of a new "miracle cure."ⁱ

My guess is that most of us "get" Thomas who was just keeping it real.

Maybe he was keeping it real out of self-protection. Some of us do that. Expect the worst and then you will be surprised by the outcome if it is really positive.

Maybe Thomas was being realistic simply because he was hurt, wounded and grieving. This was his friend, his mentor, the one who brought joy and meaning to his life. I don't know about you, but my mother has been dead for 10 years, and I still catch myself thinking, "I should call mom and tell her this." and for a split second, I have forgotten she is not available by phone. Grief can be confusing and on-going. Jesus had only hung on a cross the week before. Thomas is due to be confused.

And the Scripture lends us another clue, they are locked inside a room for fear of the authorities. When a person is locked in with fear and anxiety, it is hard to be open to impossible possibilities. Just consider what just happened to Jesus, and we can understand the terror those who loved Jesus must be experiencing. Thomas is locked in that room in fear with the other disciples.

The closest thing that I can relate to it, would be the days after 911. Every loud noise made me wonder if someone had attacked the local nuclear power plant. Or I would find myself getting anxious when I was separated from my children wondering if they were safe. A few weeks after 911, I was to fly to New York. Normally, I think nothing of flying, but it was an act of pure will to get onto that plane when none of us were feeling safe flying especially to New York of all places. My knees were wobbly. Deep breaths and lots of prayers got me through.

Thomas, a committed disciple, is not doing anything that most of us realists would not do. In fact, we know that Mary Magdalene believed because she saw and heard Jesus. The other disciples had already met up with the risen Jesus and that is why they believe. So Thomas is just the last one to see for himself. Jesus knows that his followers struggle with belief, but instead of judgment he simply offers them Peace and his touch. Best of all, he gives them his presence. He breathed on them the breath of life and the Holy Spirit, as he promised. When God created us, God breathed into us his spirit and gave us life. Jesus reminds them that his resurrection begins new life, a new creation. And he also commissions them to go forth and forgive sins. In John's gospel the word sin is mostly to do with the ability to believe and trust in Jesus. And when that happens we have been empowered to forgive either ourselves or others in his name.

Thomas helps us remember that there are those among us who struggle with grief or a crisis of faith. We live in a time of wars and many rumors of wars. We live in a time where disease has not been eradicated, and when many lack the resources or ability to receive healthcare. We live in a time when in the state of Georgia, people can be walking the streets, going to the Library, or to church armed with firearms. Or where a 16 year old might get stabbed for rejecting a prom invitation. We live in a time of anxiety and fear as have most peoples. This locked room reminds us that there are still those sitting in terror and fear whether among us as one facing illness or challenges or someone faced with danger and harm. Thomas helps us keep it real because even on this side of the Resurrection, there are many who sit in locked rooms of fear. They may need touch, or new life breathed into them.

In the resurrection of Christ, God says all is well. We proclaim life, not with an easy optimism, but with realism that to get there, a Cross was involved with all its horror and all its glory. We confess even as those who have felt loss or separation from God because we trust that in the end, it is God's will and not ours that shall be done. As Buechner writes,

"Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream. Christ our Lord has risen."ⁱⁱ

And in a post Easter world, Jesus offers us his peace and his life spirit, so that we will know that it is God who is truly with us. We can all be like Thomas, ones who wish to be shown God's presence, allowed to touch and see that God is indeed there with us.

Today elders and deacons will be available for a healing and wholeness blessing. You may come forward to claim that blessing on your behalf

or for those concerns and joys you carry in your heart today for others.

Healing comes from the same root word in the Bible for salvation (Gr. sozo). And today we can celebrate that even in the midst of the locked rooms of fear, Jesus keeps showing up.

He shows up today in those who bounce babies on their knees in our nursery or who support the Clemson Child Development center so that working parents have safe affordable childcare.

Jesus shows up as folks collect items for Family Promise where we will help host and house families who are in transition and homeless. Noticed that on the Christian Action bulletin board, there is a t-shirt, "My Pastor likes when I sleep in church." Hopefully in the fall we will be able to share the love and peace of Christ as we open our doors to some folks who need shelter.

Jesus shows up to the lonely and scared freshman who arrives on campus and finds a place to belong and grow in faith through of University Ministry.

Those are just a few ways that this church seeks to do the will of God and to be present to God's world.

Finally, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus pronounces a blessing on many us, sitting here today. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." And he offers us life, breath, and his peace.

In fact, we are commissioned by Jesus to go out and show up for his sake and for one another to offer peace, forgiveness, and even to touch wounds so that we can indeed all experience the healing mercy of God.

*Blessed are you, O God of our Lord Jesus Christ,
in whom we receive the legacy of a living hope,
born again not only from his death but also from his resurrection.
May we who have received forgiveness of sins through the Holy Spirit live to set others free. Lord, we
believe, help our unbelief. Amen.*

ⁱ David Lose, see article "Faithful Doubt" on workingpreacher.org from April 24, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Beuchner, from *The Magnificent Defeat*, quoted on the Beuchner Facebook Page on April 24, 2014.