

Peace Be With You
John 20:19-29

It was evening. The sun was setting on what was, hands down, THE most ridiculous day the disciples had ever experienced. Sure, it was other things- strange, spectacular, confusing, certainly unbelievable- but altogether ridiculous. When Mary arrived on their doorstep earlier it was all some could do not to laugh at the stories of just another gullible woman. And then Simon Peter and the other disciple show up with just two breathless words, "He's gone"

I will wager that when they signed on for this, the disciples did not expect to find themselves alone so soon. Here they were holed up in a room, fearful and mentally consumed by a game of hide and go seek the crucified Messiah. Jesus, where are you? Jesus, where are you? Ok, I'll go this way, you go there. We're bound to find him, right?

I suspect many of them just wanted this day to be over. *We'll wait and figure out what to do tomorrow.*

This tact of putting off until tomorrow what could be done today- is the saving grace of life-altering,
world-upending events such as the disciples have experienced over the past few days.

Fortunately, **God** *continues* to act even in the midst of our hesitation. And God is not done here. This is the news we received on Easter morning, that we continue to glory in, the news we greet with shouts of praise and resounding *HALLELUIAHS!*

So it is, that in the moment of this darkest fear, while reeling in the ridiculous nature of it all- that the One who called the disciples friends,
who taught them,
who reassured them even as he washed their feet.

The One who *was dead* -now stands among them- just as he had done throughout his ministry. He stands here, despite the closed doors, and offers an alternative to fear and a renewed vision of tomorrow.

And they *SAW HIM- HALLELUIAH!*

In what is by far the shortest of his famously wordy diatribes in John's Gospel, Jesus offers few but powerful words
He bids them peace,
 he commissions them to continue the work of God,
 he gives them the authority that comes with forgiveness,
 and he breathes on them the breath of the Holy Spirit.

For the community of disciples gathered that evening, this is a new beginning. In John's Pentecost-action, Jesus imparts the gift of the Holy Spirit just as God breathes life into a new creation-
 filling all with wonder and praise,
 hope-filled rather than fear-laden.

But as easily as he appeared he is gone and the story pushes us forward and in walks Thomas— too little, too late.

My initial question always is, well, where was he? Did Thomas get sent to the market because the disciples were out of wine? Was he out wandering around, lost in thought, pondering the events of the past few days? Did he go out, hearing the news from the two encounters, in search of Jesus, in search of his own special encounter that he could then relay with wide eyes to the rest of the group?

From this, Thomas comes back and is let in on the good news of great joy-

He was here!

He is not dead!

We have seen the Lord! He is risen indeed!

And his response rings in our ears. It is the defining moment of the infamous doubting Thomas- the radical dissenter, and famed disbeliever. Thomas gets a bad wrap a lot of the time, but can you say that you would respond differently? I am not sure I can. We just have to look at the news of this week and the skepticism of some to be reminded that sometimes there just can't be enough proof. I wonder, is it really proof that he wants anyway? Or is it the peace of a final moment with the One to whom he's dedicated his life?

Immediately we are skipped ahead, shot effortlessly through a week so easily ignored, to the time when Jesus stands among them again. *A week later,*
 seven days of living in tension,

168 hours of living in disagreement over the very notion of whether
or not Jesus is indeed the resurrected Lord,
a week later Jesus reappears to them in the same space- and they are all there,
including Thomas.

What an unbelievable feat to achieve! One that is difficult for us to imagine-
especially in this day where religious and political fervor sell us a world
where,

24/7 blitzkrieg punditry is the most effective means of message,
and suicide bomb attacks are the quickest way to winning
an argument.

Where Judge Judy doles out justice for entertainment,
and those who are not for us are against us.

We have fashioned division out of disagreement, creating heavily fortified camps
populated by an ever-shrinking community of identically-minded combatants.

We set our boundaries as liberal or conservative,

as big oil or alternative energy,

as legal or illegal,

as server or served,

as non-Christian or Christian.

And I stand here before you as one who works hard to distinguish my own camps.

Yes I went to Belfast,

yes the church sent me,

yes I was a missionary,

but not *that kind* of missionary.

Yes I am a minister

yes I believe in God,

yes I am a Christian,

but not *that kind* of Christian.

With all of the labeling and litmus testing over who is right and who is wrong, we
build our walls higher, stronger, with more border agents, more ID checks, and
fewer points of entry. And entrenched, we are fearful to engage the other side.
Worried of conflict. Doubtful that the largess of the Spirit is quite big enough to
cover this one, or that one big issue.

So how did they do it? How is it that a community with such a fundamental
disagreement was able to remain together? They did not know when Jesus would

appear in their midst again to respond to Thomas' unbelief. They could not have been sure if he ever would return. I cannot imagine that it was a particularly large house, allowing Thomas to be cordoned off in one room while the rest whispered in exasperated tones about the *nerve* he had to ***question their account***. That *had to engage*. They *had to converse*.

How do we, as a community that have promised to nurture and support William and Gigi as they grow in faith and service, stay true to our commitment even in the midst of a world that honors violence and division? How do we continue to foster a preference for love and diversity and peace in the life and faith of these seniors we will soon recognize and send forth with our blessing and prayers, so that they will work to open doors rather than build walls?

How do we take the resounding ***HALLELUIAHS*** sung and spoken together in this place and translate those into open conversation and a willingness to hear the other-

even a week later-

much less into the everyday rhythm of life?

It is a difficult task, make no mistake. The issue under debate by the disciples was the identity of Jesus Christ as the resurrected One. The issues for debate today often speak just as boldly to the very heart of our identity as children created in the image of God. The task is not easy, and the task is not to concede, to smooth over difference, or to ignore difficult issues.

The psalmist sings, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity...for there the Lord has ordained her blessing, life forevermore".

Remember that first visit pre-Thomas? And what Jesus did there? In those brief moments he gives them what they will need- he breathes upon them the Holy Spirit; to be with them, to be peace among them. At Pentecost, the Spirit does not give all one unified voice, but gives all of many languages ears to hear one another. Unity does not, it should not, imply uniformity of thought, word and deed. Rather it asks for a willingness to struggle through *both* the hardship and blessing of life together- in an effort to see and embrace the One who stands among us and calls us to be together, to remain together.

The disciples present in the room during Jesus' first appearance could hold on to the fulfillment of what had been promised, the hope for what was to come. And I believe that Thomas still had hope, he had expectations for fulfillment- even in the midst of unbelief.

Together they abided in the strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit- *another promise* fulfilled by the One who drew them together, the One who was drawing them together, and the One who is drawing us together still.

The task we face is to abide with one another *especially* in the midst of disagreement, dissention, and fear. The task is to trust in the Spirit to give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to consider. It is to remember that Jesus appeared in the midst of the disciples not once but twice, despite closed doors and faltering faith.

And even when we are uncertain,

the task is to recognize among us the resurrecting one,

 breaking down the walls we have erected,

 opening up the doors we have slammed shut,

 standing among us even now,

 and offering us his peace that overthrows isolation and
 fear. Amen.