

Acts 4:32-35
1 John 1:1-2:2
John 20:19-31
Psalm 133

The Second Sunday of Easter
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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God's Peace

I am a person who by the grace of God has been blessed with the gift of a deep and abiding faith. I say "by grace" because I didn't do anything to deserve such faith. I didn't get it because I was terribly holy or even very good. It's a gift, pure and simple. And it's a gift I try to share, a gift I try to offer when people who have other gifts are feeling like they can't find their faith. "I will hold faith for you until it comes back for you," I tell them. "You can share mine until you find yours again." I know too, that it is only by God's grace that I've never had a real, true, crisis of faith. This doesn't mean that I've not had my doubts, not drifted away from God or the church, I have. I spent many years gardening or going to the lake, or baking bread, or cooking for hours on Sunday mornings. It wasn't really that I didn't believe in God anymore, I just sort of forgot about God. I got into the habit of thinking of Sunday morning as the only time I could sleep in. And anyway, I was fine on my own. Or I thought I was.

That time away from God and the church was exceedingly important in my faith journey, because when I decided I wanted, needed to come back to church, I found myself welcomed with open hearts and open arms, not just by God's people, but by God's own self. I had gone away, but God never left. God was as present as ever, more present really. As I stood to sing the opening hymn on that first Sunday back in church, as I remembered what it felt like to really know I was in God's presence, as I saw and heard and felt all those other souls around me, each one of them full of their own heartaches and their own joys... my eyes filled with tears and I could not sing the words they were singing. The only words that would form in my heart and on my lips were "thank you. Thank you." I think we'll probably feel like that when we come back to church together too.

My deep and abiding faith is just that - deep and abiding. Yet it is not without doubt. Doubt, wonder, wrestling, all these, for me, are a part of being in relationship with God. Some of you have heard me say that when my mother died, I had a conversation with God that didn't feel at all like prayer, though surely it was. And while it was a one-sided conversation, and I was the one-on-the-one-side, my doubt-riddled demand may have been the most honest prayer of my life. It went like this: "Ok God. All this business about resurrection? It had better be true. This is my mother we're talking about!"

You see, when something really, really matters, we think we want certainty, some sort of proof. And our tendency to want certainty, to want to know for sure, sometimes looks like doubt. Maybe it is doubt. But whatever we call it, it is surely human nature. Which brings us to the very human Thomas. The one who wanted to know for sure, the one who couldn't take other people's word for it, the one who wouldn't believe until he saw things with his own eyes... the one we call Doubting Thomas. Was Thomas a doubter? Maybe. But I don't think it was proof he

wanted. I think what he wanted was the experience of Jesus 'presence – the same experience the disciples who were in that locked room when Jesus came among them offering God's peace. But even those disciples seemed to be having their doubts. Listen.

"When it was evening on that day..." that day was Easter Sunday to be exact, the very day Mary Magdalene ran from the empty tomb to tell the disciples that she had seen the risen Lord, hallelujah! And where are the disciples that very day? Listen. *"When it was evening on that day...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the authorities..."*

Ten of the eleven remaining disciples had gathered together, but it wasn't to give testimony about the empty tomb, it wasn't to pray and praise and proclaim *Alleluia, Christ is Risen!* They were huddled together behind closed and locked doors, terrified that the authorities who had crucified Jesus were coming for them next. And it's interesting to notice that Thomas was actually the only one who wasn't huddled in terror behind locked doors. We don't know where he was, and it doesn't matter. What matters is that the ten terrified disciples who were there had a very real experience of the risen Christ when Jesus came among them and gave them God's peace. But Thomas wasn't there that night, so he didn't get to have that experience. And when the disciples told him about Jesus coming to them and offering God's peace, Thomas was, shall we say, skeptical. "Unless I see the mark of the nails... and put my hand in his side, I WILL NOT BELIEVE."

Just a week later, when all of them, including Thomas were together, Jesus came among them again, and again he gave them God's peace. And as soon as he offered that peace, he called Thomas to him. Notice that he didn't call Thomas out, he called Thomas to him. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, offered Thomas everything he had demanded, even invited Thomas to put his hand into the wound in his side. Can you imagine anything more intimate? And in the intimacy of that moment, the need for proof disappeared. Thomas didn't need to touch Jesus, he only needed his loving presence. Thomas didn't actually need the certainty of seeing, or touching the nail holes or the wound in Jesus' side in order to believe. He only needed the experience of the risen Christ. It gave him peace. And it was the peace of Christ that allowed him to believe. It's what allows us to believe too. You see, searching for proof that God exists is at best a distraction. It's like arguing about the virgin birth. "Prove it!" isn't an invitation to a thought-provoking conversation, quite the opposite. It shuts down conversation and shuts down our hearts.

How can you prove that you love your daughter or your grandson or your spouse or your sister? You can't. You may love them with your whole heart, and they may all have deep and rich experiences of your love, but that's experience, not proof. And that is just what we long for, isn't it? We don't really need or even want proof of God's existence. We want the experience of the God whose name is love, the God of peace, to permeate our lives.

Thomas reminds us that relationship with God, not knowing about God, but experiencing the wondrous love and peace of God, is our heart's desire. God's peace, the peace Jesus brought to

the disciples, the peace he brings to us, is what allows us to become the blessed ones who believe without seeing, who believe because of the profound experience of Jesus present with us and in us, saying to us what he said to those frightened and doubting disciples on that night so long ago: *'Peace be with you. As the Father sends me, I send you.'*

It is our peace-filled hearts that bring the resurrected Christ from 2,000 years ago into being right here, right now. There are only a handful of resurrection stories from 2,000 years ago, but we make new resurrection stories with our lives every day. Today's resurrection stories are our own stories of Christ's living presence in us. We're the ones Jesus sends out into the world to bring God's peace. That is a very important job these days.

It really is up to us, you know. We're the ones to tell the resurrection stories, both the resurrection story from 2,000 years ago and the resurrection stories all around us. We're the ones Jesus sends into the world to tell the Good News of God in our lives, to point to the many places where God is making things new and bringing God's loving, life-giving peace to the world. It's a big job, a huge job, a job that's never been more important. And to me, that sounds very daunting. I have my doubts. And then I hear Jesus saying: *'Peace be with you.'* *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'*

All we need to do, is breathe it in.

The peace of the risen Christ abides in the Holy Spirit within us, the Spirit who will find a welcome home in each one of us as we create and nurture quiet spaces in our lives so we can hear the still, small voice of God offering the peace that passes all understanding. These peaceful places already exist for us, we simply need to notice and nurture them. As we realize the presence of the Holy Spirit in and around us, we will come to know that while God's mission is monumental, we have everything we need to do our part. Having received God's Holy Spirit, having noticed and nurtured the peace of Christ that has been given to us, we become the peacemakers. In the acts of noticing and nurturing, we create more peace. No matter our doubts, our questions or even our fears, the Holy Spirit that has been breathed into each and every one of us holds all the peace the world will ever need. It's a promise God made to us, and a promise we can stake everything on.

I know sometimes it's hard to find it inside ourselves, but I promise you, it's there. It's why Jesus says to us, *"Do not doubt but believe."* We can't know. But we can believe...it's that faith thing, and sometimes the only thing to do is to leap. Amen.