

Acts 5:27-32
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31
Psalm 118:14-29

The Second Sunday of Easter
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
April 24, 2022
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Signs

We hear most all of our Sunday gospel readings once every three years. But not this one. This is a story we hear every year on the second Sunday of Easter. And sometimes when we hear the same story year after year, we think we know it. That can be true for preachers too... but for us the challenge is to hear the story afresh, to listen to the ways it speaks into our community today, which is a different day from any other.

Most often, this story brings up questions of faith and doubt. We hear it as the story of 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 _____. Yep. Doubting Thomas. Was Thomas a doubter? It sure seems like it. But was he the only doubter? Listen. *"When it was evening on that day..."* do you know what *"that day"* was? It was Sunday. 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 do we find the disciples that very same day? *"When it was evening on that day...the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the religious authorities..."*

Ten of the eleven remaining disciples had gathered together, but it wasn't to pray and praise and to 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. Wherever Thomas was, 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. Because Thomas wasn't there that night, he didn't get to have that peace-filled experience of the living, risen Christ. 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."*

And so the very next week - that would be today, the Sunday following Easter Sunday, when all of them were together, Jesus drifted through the locked doors again, and again offered God's peace. And as soon as he offered that peace, he called Thomas to him. He didn't call Thomas out, didn't criticize or berate him, he called Thomas to him. Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, offered Thomas exactly what he longed for, so that Thomas too could share in God's peace. And when he did that, when he offered his wounds for Thomas to see and to touch, Thomas experienced the reality of Jesus with him. As it turns out, Thomas didn't actually need the

certainty of touching the nail holes or the hole 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. Thomas' story is an important one. Quite frankly, it is a great relief to me to have a "doubter" as a disciple. But Thomas' story isn't the only story here. Today, I don't even see it as the main story. Today, it's what Jesus is doing rather than what Thomas is doing, that calls to me.

Peace be with you, peace be with you, peace be with you. Those were the first words Jesus spoke to the disciples and then he said it twice more. I don't think it's because those words are Jesus' chosen salutation. I think it's because God's peace was the first thing those terrified disciples needed. They needed God's peace to be able to take in the wounds of his crucifixion. They needed God's peace not just to calm themselves, but so they could take in what Jesus was offering and what he was asking of them. *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* The disciples needed God's peace in order to go out into the world.

I know that feeling. I have spent a fair amount of time trembling in anger and fear as war ravages Ukraine, as climate change escalates while our collective response is the equivalent of "meh," as kind people I know spew hateful words about anti-vaxers, as racism and misogyny are not just tolerated, but encouraged by political leaders, as our country is more divided than it has been since the Civil War. It's not a world I want to be sent into. But as the Father sent Jesus, he sends us, and our job is to get out there, hold hope for the world, and to act on that hope so that God's hope, God's dream of the beloved community comes to fruition.

This is not an easy task. Jesus knew that too. He had been mocked and beaten and crucified. He knew well the hostility, pain and suffering the disciples would encounter, just as he knows our own. Do you remember what he said to them? As soon as he told the disciples he was sending them, he breathed on them and said, *"Receive the Holy Spirit..."*

The peace of the risen Christ abides in the Holy Spirit which has been blown into each one of us. God's Holy Spirit finds a welcome home and takes root in each one of us if we're willing to create and nurture quiet spaces in our lives - spaces where we can hear the still, small voice of God, the voice that offers peace that passes all understanding. And while having that peace is a profound gift, the gift of God's peace is given not just for us, but for the life of the world.

When Jesus gave his peace through the gift of God's Holy Spirit, he didn't just do that so the disciples could let loose of their fear and trembling behind locked doors. I'm sure he wanted to assuage their fears and fill them with resurrection hope, but that's not what he said. As soon as he offered them his peace, and filled them with God's Holy Spirit, he said, *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* While you might

just skip right over that and move along to Thomas's rant about his doubts, I think Jesus is making a very important point – something we ought not to miss.

The disciples had been together for a very long time, living together, working together, preaching and teaching and learning together. Jesus had been preparing them for the reality that he would suffer and die and rise again, preparing them for the time when bringing God's kingdom to bear and building the beloved community would no longer be his work, but theirs. And in order to do that good work, there would have to be forgiveness for all the fears and foibles that would come. Jesus knew what would happen if they held grudges, placed blame, focused on what was wrong in other people. Forgiveness means we don't hold on to the wrongs people have done, even if they've done them to us. After all, if you hold on to those wrongs, what are you going to do with them? There can be no peace, that peace Jesus keeps insisting on, when we hold on to other people's wrongs, or even our own. It seems forgiveness was the first thing those disciples needed to think about. Maybe it's the first thing we need to think about too.

Just a few days earlier, Jesus had given them the new commandment, the only commandment that would ever again matter - that they live out their lives loving God and each other in the same way he had loved them. The only thing that mattered was love, and love goes hand in hand with forgiveness.

In Jesus short time on earth, he gave us the pattern for our lives, and showed us what it is to live our lives in God. The miracle of his life as well as the miracles he performed were signs of God's reign, signs given so that God would be glorified, and people would believe. There were many other signs that didn't get written down, but we have the ones we have so that we can believe, and in believing, live the lives God intends for us.

Since Jesus died, the signs have changed. Oh, we occasionally hear of a miracle healing or some unimaginable saving grace. But mostly the signs have changed. They come now as forgiveness. They come now as compassion. They come now in caring for each other and caring for people we don't even know. They come now in the human form of people like you and me, the living, breathing, life-giving and loving presence of God in the world. My dears, WE are the signs now, given so the world might believe. Amen