

“The Peace of Christ”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA  
2<sup>nd</sup> Easter – April 11, 2010  
John 20:19-31

We always hear this passage from John’s gospel on the second Sunday of Easter. It’s known as Doubting Thomas Sunday. It’s interesting, though, that we focus so much on Thomas’ doubt. Why not call it Reappearing Jesus Sunday? Or the Wounds of Christ Sunday? Or Fearful Disciples Hiding in a Room Sunday? After all, though the text doesn’t tell us what Thomas is doing to prevent him from being with the other disciples, it seems likely that he is out and about on his business, not hidden away behind locked doors.

Our lesson says that the disciples were hiding for fear of the Jews. Of course they themselves were Jews; it was the Judean authorities they were afraid of. They had already heard Mary Magdalene’s story of seeing the risen Jesus, and some of them had seen the empty tomb, and yet they were hiding away in fear. Though the concern about what the authorities might do to them if they were found may have been very real, I wonder if they also had some fear about what it might mean to encounter Jesus again. Peter had denied him. As far as we can tell only the women and the beloved disciple had stayed by him at the foot of the cross. The others had abandoned him. As the disciples huddled there in that room behind the locked doors, I wonder if they were afraid of what Jesus might say or do when they saw him again. He had appeared to Mary, but he might not choose to appear to them. I know if I had been there I would probably have been feeling guilt and

worry over whether Jesus could forgive me for abandoning him, for doubting, for being afraid.

And then Jesus appeared. No recriminations. No angry words. No blaming, no judgment, not even an “I told you so,” to Peter. He simply said, “Peace be with you.” And as he showed them his wounds and they began to rejoice, it wasn’t just relief that flooded them. Not just the knowledge that they weren’t in trouble after all and they weren’t going to get a lecture from Jesus about being bad disciples. Instead, in that one moment, they were simultaneously reunited with their Lord, who was no longer dead, and also assured that he had come with forgiveness and peace. He wasn’t focused on what had come before; he was pointing toward what was coming next.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples on that first day of the week, he gave them new life. He breathed on them, breathing the Holy Spirit into them. He brought them peace, the peace which passes all understanding, the peace which blew through them, carrying away the guilt and doubt and fear and pain, the peace of forgiveness and joy. And then, as they received the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave them the authority to forgive or retain the sins of others. If that seemed a tall order, they had the Holy Spirit to help them.

But of course Thomas missed all this. He wasn’t locked away behind closed doors in fear, but he also didn’t get to see his risen Lord and know the same peace that his fellow disciples had experienced. It’s no wonder that he wanted to share in that experience. They must have been radiant. Filled with the Holy Spirit and the peace of Christ, joyful at having seen Jesus again, their faces must have beamed.

And Thomas was left out. He didn't get to see the wounds or feel the breath of Jesus. He didn't get to hear Jesus say "Peace" or be reunited with his friend and teacher. He didn't receive the commission of being sent out. He missed it all. And so he dug his feet in and refused to believe unless he could see what the others had seen.

Fortunately for him, Jesus appeared again the next week in the very same room, and Thomas was there! Again the words, "Peace be with you." This time, Thomas heard them. Before he could ask, Jesus invited him to touch his wounds and believe. We don't know from the text whether Thomas actually reached out his fingers to touch the scars on Jesus' hands or put his hand to the wound in Jesus' side. We do know that Thomas believed. He was the only one to identify Jesus with God. He felt the peace that Jesus brought, and he knew where it came from.

So why then the words of rebuke? After all of that peace and breathing and forgiveness, why does Jesus seem to be criticizing Thomas for his lack of belief? "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." I'm not convinced Jesus is criticizing Thomas. I think his words are for us. For all those who came after, who didn't see, who didn't stand in that room and hear Jesus say, "Peace," who didn't feel his breath and the rush of the Holy Spirit, who didn't touch his wounds. Those who did see were blessed by the seeing, by being in the presence of the risen Jesus, alive and in person. But those who believe without seeing are blessed too. They don't see with their eyes. They see with their hearts.

I sometimes think about what it would be like to meet Jesus in person – I mean the actual, living Jesus, not in a dream or my imagination. I have to confess that part of me is a little fearful. I think of all the things I have to apologize for: Jesus, I'm sorry that my prayer life hasn't been better and that I haven't done enough to help take care of the poor and that I've said things to hurt other people. I'm sorry that I watch too much tv and don't make enough time for God and that I don't love my neighbors the way I should, much less my enemies. I imagine expressing all this guilt over the ways I haven't lived out Jesus' teachings, and I imagine him judging me for that. It's enough to make me want to lock the doors and hide inside. If anyone else feels similarly, I'd be happy to have you huddle there with me.

But if we pay attention to this passage from scripture, then we know that's not what it'll be like. Jesus will come into our locked room as well. He won't be focused on our sins any more than he was focused on those of the disciples. He will come with love and forgiveness, saying, "Peace be with you." He will breathe on us, and we will know that it isn't our past mistakes that we need to focus on; it's what we're going to do next that matters. Once we know the peace of Christ, then we will want to share it with others. Some may not believe us, like Thomas, and they will just have to wait to experience it for themselves. But others will believe without seeing.

Whatever locked door we're hiding behind, whether it's the door of fear or doubt or guilt or anxiety, it's time to fling that door open and welcome Jesus in. He'll get in even if the door is locked, and when he does, he'll come with love and forgiveness and peace. So welcome him in, our Lord and our God. May the peace of Christ be with you always.