

John 20:19-31 ¹⁹When 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.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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.' ²⁶A 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.' ²⁷Then 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.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.

Revelation 1:4-8 and John 20:19-31
04/23/2023 – Saginaw First U.M.C.
"Peace Be With You"
Rev. Amy Terhune

"A first grade teacher was reading the story of the Three Little Pigs. She came to the part of the story where the first pig was trying to acquire building materials for his home. She said, "And so the pig went up to the man with a wheelbarrow full of straw and said, 'Pardon me sir, but might I have some of that straw to build my house?'" Then the teacher asked the class, "And what do you think that man said?" A little boy raised his hand and said, "I know! I know! He said 'Holy smokes! A talking pig!'"

"What would you think if you encountered a talking pig? Would it shake you up? Would it challenge your understanding of the nature of the universe? [2 ¶s adapted slightly from "It's A Miracle!" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] What if you encountered the risen Lord? Would that shake you up? I hope so. Would it transform your universe? Would it transform you into someone who loves enemies, prays for persecutors, sacrifices for the good of others, and looks expectantly for the coming of the Kingdom?"

Only you can answer that for yourself. But I'll tell you this much: it sure shook up those disciples! What a week they've had! Jesus was lauded as the Messiah on Sunday, betrayed and crucified by Friday, and now it's Sunday again. A bunch of women bring a strange tale. No body, just grave clothes. No stone, just emptiness. No answers, just angels...and questions. The rumors fly. Speculation runs rampant. The authorities think the disciples have stolen the body to perpetuate a hoax. The disciples are afraid for their lives, bewildered by events, plagued with guilt and insecurity.

Says the scripture, "the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews." But allow me to make this observation: it says 'for fear of the Jews', but the reality is that no one else can force us to be afraid. External forces may exacerbate our fear, but fear comes from within. However, it has been said that fear acknowledged is freedom. If we allow ourselves to examine our fear, deal with our fear, be honest about our fear and bring it out into the open, we are almost certain to defeat it. On the other hand, when we deny, belittle, ignore, or bottle up our fear, it imprisons us. And so I find it profoundly symbolic that John would tell us "the doors of the house where the disciples had

met were locked for fear.” They have imprisoned themselves in fear—fear of the past, fear of the future, fear of the present.

One of the disciples locked in that upper room is Peter. He’s not mentioned by name in this morning’s lesson, but he’s most certainly up there, and he is plagued by fear of the past, also known as guilt. Remember, now, that Peter has denied in public that he even knew Jesus or that he was one of his disciples, and then he fled the scene. He’s also tends to be brash and impetuous. We can imagine how he felt, what he thinks of himself, how his pain and grief are compounded by the horror of what he’s done. And so even though Peter’s eyes took in an empty tomb, his heart and mind were locked for fear, and so he couldn’t take in the meaning in what he saw. His mistake is in assuming that what he has done defines who he is and forever must be.

So Peter is up there with the others, locked in fear and self-loathing. But one isn’t there. Thomas is not with the others. Is he less afraid? I doubt it. Who can say why he’s not there. Maybe they had drawn straws to see who would have to venture out for food and Thomas had gotten the short one. Maybe he was one of those types who needed to be on his own, to grieve on his own for a while—you know, the introverted type. They all had families, we believe, so maybe he had some kind of family commitment. Maybe he’s trying to slip back into his old life, from before he knew Jesus. We’ll never know! All we know is that Thomas wasn’t there.

What strikes me as a far more interesting puzzle is that Thomas WAS there a week later. Something had taken him away from the community, and something had brought him back. And if we assume that what took him away the first week was something deeper than just drawing the short straw, then we can assume something deeper is going on in him now – that despite his protests, Thomas is desperate to see and believe. Thomas never says he doesn’t want to believe. On the contrary, he wants very much to believe, but he, too, is locked up in fear. The difference is that where Peter feared his past, Thomas fears his future. His hope has been torn to shreds and nailed on a cross. God’s prophets may die, but not God’s Messiah. It doesn’t work that way. God’s Messiah is victorious, not crucified. He’s a leader, not a lamb led to slaughter. He throws off oppression, he doesn’t acquiesce to it! Thomas just doesn’t see what good comes of this, and he doesn’t see God’s hand in any of it.

“The story is told about Albert Einstein, the brilliant physicist of Princeton University in the early 20th century. Einstein was traveling on a train from Princeton to a speaking engagement some distance away. When the conductor came down the aisle to punch the passengers’ tickets, Einstein couldn’t find his. He looked in his vest pocket, he looked in his pants pocket, he looked in his briefcase, but there was no ticket. The conductor was gracious; “Not to worry, Dr. Einstein, I know who you are, we all know who you are, and I’m sure you bought a ticket.”

“As the conductor moved down the aisle, he looked back and noticed Einstein on his hands and knees, searching under the seat for his ticket. The conductor returned to Einstein; “Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don’t worry. I know who you are. You don’t need a ticket, I’m sure you bought one.” Einstein arose and said “Young man, I too know who I am; what I don’t know is where I am going.” [2 ¶s from Steven Molin, *Elated....Deflated*; in illustrations on John 20:19-31, www.Sermons.com.]

That’s a pretty good analysis of where Thomas is at. He can’t see his way forward. That’s a terrifying place to be. History has dubbed him doubting Thomas, but I don’t think it’s fair to say that this is because he refuses to accept the testimony of the others who experience the risen Christ. After all, he’s not the only one. None of them initially accept the testimony of the women who first see the risen Christ. No, if anything, I think Thomas is having serious doubts about himself. Unlike Einstein, I suspect that not only does Thomas NOT know where he’s going, but he’s not all that sure of who he is, either. He doubts his own choices. He has to be asking himself if the last three years have been for nothing. Where do we go from here? Is there any meaning, any purpose, any objective to all this suffering? He’s locked up in fear alright, and even when the others share an incredible word of resurrection with him, the doors of his heart and mind stay locked up tight. He will not risk the pain of

hope dashed again. Thomas fears the future. He fears futility and uselessness. He fears that time will show him that it's all for naught.

For both Peter, locked in fear of the past, and Thomas, locked in fear of the future, the end result is that they're locked up in fear of the present as well. They can't make choices, can't take action, can't move in any direction. They're stuck in agony and turmoil. But God has a response to that. Jesus penetrates locked doors and brings a word with him: the word is 'Peace'. Peace be with you. That's the very first thing he says every time he penetrates their locked up world. Peace.

Centuries ago, Thomas Watson wrote these words: "God's Son is called the Prince of Peace. He came into the world with a song of peace: Glory to God in the highest Heaven, and on earth, peace... He went out of the world with a legacy of peace: Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you... Christ's earnest prayer was for peace; He prayed that his people might be one... And He died not only to make peace between God and man, but between man and man. Christ suffered on the cross, that he might cement Christians together with his blood. As he prayed for peace, so he paid for peace." [from Thomas Watson, *Gleanings From Thomas Watson* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995) pg. 86; as appearing in Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Compete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000) pg. 606.] And when they found him alive on Sunday, he charged us to continue a mission of peace: As God has sent me, so I send you."

But understand something: Jesus never promises peace from problems or difficulties or pain. That's not real peace—that is merely the momentary absence of trouble. Rather, He promises peace in the midst of such things. He brings peace on purpose and in purpose. The peace of God transforms failures into stepping-stones to the future. The peace of God converts doubt into direction.

We have said that freedom is fear acknowledged, which is precisely what Jesus does. Here, Thomas—touch me, look at me, examine the wounds. Let's get it out in the open, let's tell it like it is, let's look the pain and disillusionment square in the face. And when Thomas reframes his thinking and lays his fears to rest, light comes bursting in upon the darkness. He falls to his knees to utter the most unequivocal statement of faith recorded anywhere in the gospels: "My Lord and my God!"

"In his seminars, Jim Rohn, a speaker and success philosopher, asks the question, "How big will a tree grow?" The answer is that a tree will grow to be as big as it can. It will put down as many roots as it can; it will grow as many branches as it can; it will put out as many leaves as it can; and it will produce as much fruit as it possibly can. In fact, everything in nature grows to its maximum potential. That is, everything except for people. Why? Because only people have the ability to choose. Sadly, they can choose to be less than they have the ability to be. However, there is great news in this powerful truth: if people have the ability to choose to be less than we can be, then we also have the ability to choose to be all that we can be. [from Larry H. Winget, *The Ya Gotta's For Success*, 1992, p. 13.; as used in "Found Of God" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

In the end, all of the disciples suffered unspeakable torment and cruelty for their faith. But they never lost the deep peace of the Holy Spirit. It was that peace that unlocked doors and eradicated fear. It was that peace that freed Peter to preach boldly. It was that peace that enabled Thomas to fall to his knees and proclaim "my Lord and my God!" It was that peace that took those disciples from inaction to mission. And it is still that peace which heals, forgives, unites, encourages, frees, emboldens and enlightens. Maybe we share the disciples' fear today. Maybe we can't see our way out of a swamp full of alligators. Maybe we can't see a way forward. But there is one who can. Blessed are those who just can't see it...and yet, believe. Amen.