

“Jesus: A Peaceful Presence”
John 20:19-31

Prayer: Ever-present God, sometimes we run away from you because of fear and insecurities. Let us feel your presence again, calling us to trust in your love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Overwhelmed! The disciples were overwhelmed three days after Jesus died. There they were, huddled together in a house, with locked doors, in their fear and confusion, not knowing where to turn or what to do next. They were grieving the death of Jesus -their leader and teacher – the one who had held them together. With Jesus dead, all their hopes, their visions, their sense of direction and purpose in life went into the tomb as well. They were left only with an overwhelming sense of failure, of loss, of fear and of shame. They knew they had deserted Jesus in his hour of need. And then, suddenly, according to our story, there he was, right there, in their midst, before their very eyes. Jesus appeared before them and the disciples experienced his peaceful presence.

How would you feel if you were one of those disciples in that room? Will you be scared? Will you run away? Will you panic or pass out? Now, don't you think that maybe, just for a moment, some of the disciples might have been afraid that Jesus might be angry with them for abandoning him – and in Peter's case, for even denying him three times? But John’s gospel told us what happened. There were no recriminations, no anger, no condemnation or judgment, not even an expression of disappointment and hurt. Instead, Jesus offered a gift: "Peace be with you." Jesus offered them a gift of peace. And then, breathes the Holy Spirit into them. It was the life-energy of one who tells them to go out and offer peace, offer forgiveness and love to others.

But wait – where was Thomas? He was not with the other disciples in that locked room when Jesus appeared. Where could Thomas be? The gospel writer John didn’t tell us. All we can do is to assume that he could have probably gone to his own little niche grieving the loss of Jesus; or he might have been checking if he was safe again; or maybe he was trying to find out the truth about why Jesus was killed; or a good guess would be that he was out and about getting on with his life, looking for food to sustain him and the other disciples for the long haul.

The name, Thomas, sounds very English, but it is in fact a transliteration from an Aramaic word “toma” which simply means “twin”. In Greek, he was called “Didymus”, which also means “twin”. So, in essence, we don’t really know Thomas’ real name at all. And we certainly have no idea who his twin was. In fact, we know very little about him. All we know for certain comes from John’s gospel and there Thomas makes his own voice heard only three times — all towards the very end of Jesus’ life on earth. It was him who said boldly at Lazarus’ death: “Let us go and die with Jesus.” What he’s saying is simply this: “If Jesus is going to die, I, for one, don’t want to go on living.” This was not a Gloomy Thomas, for me, he was a Loyal, Allegiant Thomas.

The next time we meet Thomas is at the Last Supper. Jesus told the disciples about his Father’s house with many rooms. Jesus says, “I’m going to get some ready for you, and then I’ll come and take you there. Don’t worry; you know where I’m going.” All the other disciples are nodding wisely. But Thomas gives Jesus a “what-are-you-trying to tell us look”. “No, I don’t get it,” Thomas says, “I haven’t the slightest idea where you are going. Please explain further.” And we might be tempted to think what an oddball Thomas was! For all it's worth, Thomas here is just expressing a very real concern that he honestly doesn’t have a clue what Jesus was talking about. He was not Oddball Thomas, he was an honest, Inquisitive Thomas.

And now, this morning, we met Thomas for the third and final time. The disciples told Thomas about the appearance of Jesus. And Thomas’ reaction makes him a realist, a practical and a concrete guy. "Except if I see the mark of the nails in his hand and touch his hand, I will not believe it." He is plainspoken and straight to the point. He is not embarrassed to ask questions, even for some, perhaps the questions are senseless. He wants plain answers so he can truly understand what’s going on and be able to take the next steps. So, while we do not know where he was that night – we know for sure he had left the house!

We learned from Sunday School that we should not emulate Thomas. We call him “the doubter” or the “bad seed”. Some would call him a “show-me disciple” because he needs to see proof before jumping to conclusions. But aren’t we all just like him? Think about this example when you’re buying a new car. How could you possibly buy that car if you could not touch it,

check it or scrutinize it? How do you know that what you're paying for is worth your money? How are you sure that that car is authentic without even touching it or verifying its make? You need to see it, feel it, check it. Basic human instincts!

Is doubting too bad that it made Thomas carry this label for over 2000 years of Christianity? I wonder if Thomas was more of a seeker rather than a doubter. I confess, I am a Thomas, too. And maybe you are as well. I think we are all his twin sisters and brothers! I wonder why we took part in dismissing Thomas so easily. Perhaps because we've often found ourselves in Christian communities where voicing one's doubts or even questioning the Bible or some of the doctrines in the church are a big no-no! We do not often talk about our uncertainties or failures because of fear that others might put us down or judge us as unbelievers or faithless people. And in churches that display mostly niceties, I've discovered all sorts of anxieties and resentments confronting people. I've talked and listened to a number struggling alone with deep questions because they were afraid of how others might react to their questions and skepticism. Doubting and raising questions sometimes frighten us. That's why we easily reject Thomas!

There was a time when, in the scientific world, the earth was considered flat and that the sun circled around it. The idea was accepted, but a few brave souls, Galileo in particular, bravely dared to doubt that theory. Deeper examination shows that every scientific advance started with doubt. Galileo was right when he called doubt the father of discovery. Rev. Dr. William Self, a Baptist preacher, ended one of his sermons with these words: "Doubt is like a front porch. All of us go through it before we get into the house of faith."

When Jesus again appeared to his disciples in the closed room, Thomas was there. And far from rebuking or criticizing Thomas, Jesus offers to meet his conditions. "OK Thomas –you get what you want-put your fingers in my hands and touch my side." It was through this personal encounter that Jesus was made real to Thomas. In fact, Thomas exclaimed: "My Lord and my God!" It is indeed through faithful doubt that holds out Thomas' experience of the welcoming presence of Jesus. Through Thomas, we were given the "thumbs up" to question, to doubt, to quest, to seek. From that moment in time, Thomas becomes the "real twin", the alternate identity of every human being who loves to inquire, to explore, to ask. According to historical

accounts, Thomas is regarded as the patron saint of the converted Christians in India. He is believed to have traveled outside the Roman Empire to preach the Gospel, traveling as far as the Malabar Coast, which is in modern-day Kerala State of India.

Jesus himself was like Thomas. Jesus questioned the status quo. And in his questioning, he showed his true self as a peaceful presence for others. He questioned whether violence was the best way to resolve conflicts, so he said, "Forgive one another." He doubted that long prayers and rigid dietary laws were requirements for receiving God's grace. Jesus preached about a compassionate and just faith. He probed as to why Samaritans and Syrophenicians and those deemed to be second-class citizens such as the poor, widows, women and children were treated as inferior. He tells parables about lifting the marginalized people who, according to him, constitute God's kin-dom. The capacity to question, to doubt, to probe is the prelude to faith.

How do you experience God's presence in your life? Do you feel God's presence in your ordinary, mundane events of your day-to-day life? What does our current context mean for questioning, doubting, probing people like us? It's true that Jesus asks for faith, but he does not ask for a blind faith that would entail jeopardizing our relationships and our well-being. I am convinced that Jesus wants us to have an open-minded, informed faith. The poet Rainier Rilke offers this wisdom, "Live the questions now...you will eventually live into the answers."

Live into the answers. That would be the promise for all of us today. Because sometimes the demand to see and touch, to question and to seek answers, are not indications of a nearsighted faith. They are marks of true faith. Thanks be to God! Amen.