

John 20:19-31

¹⁹On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews. Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you! Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you.” ²²After saying this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³Whenever you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

²⁴But Thomas, one of the Twelve, the one called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples kept telling him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

²⁶After eight days, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and look at my hands. Take your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue to doubt, but believe.”

²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

³⁰Jesus, in the presence of his disciples, did many other miraculous signs that are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Peace

I.

Can you imagine life as one of the Twelve? For three years it would have been a rather enjoyable experience. To be sure, there had been a few moments of sheer terror. Twice they had been on boats in rough water. Once they had awakened Jesus from his sleep and he calmed the storm. The other time, he came walking out to them on the water; when he got into their boat the storm stopped.

I wonder if the disciples enjoyed a bit of celebrity, just because they were Jesus’ close companions. People flocked to see Jesus. They were always there with him. They got to participate in some of his miracles, like the times they handed out food to thousands.

Heady moment after heady moment was their Jesus experience. To be sure, there was often an undercurrent of hate and disdain from the religious establishment, but Jesus had always proven that he could deal with it.

Then, the Thursday night before our text, everything changed. Anxiety started to build. Jesus announced at the Passover table that one of the Twelve would betray him. Which would it be? What would that betrayal look like? Judas left alone and one of the questions was answered. The rest headed out to the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus. Soldiers came with swords and spears, with the betrayer in tow. After a brief moment of bravado, anxiety and fear took over, and all the disciples ran.

Fears grew on Friday. Some watched the trial, one making his public denials of Jesus. Many weren’t mentioned as watching at all. Perhaps their anxiety had grown so great they

were already in hiding.

Jesus was executed.

“It is finished,” he had announced just before he died. I doubt they understood what he meant. From the way they acted on Easter evening, perhaps they believed *their* lives were finished, too. Even though some of Jesus’ followers had reported they had seen him alive again on Sunday morning, there they were, gathered together, “behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews” (John 20:19, EHV).

What was it, exactly, that they feared? Were they afraid they would be executed like Jesus because of their close association with him? Were they afraid they would be ostracized from the religious community? Were they afraid of what people might think of them because they had followed Jesus once?

II.

Perhaps we can understand many of those fears; they can seem overwhelming. Every person sins, that is true, but we fear that some of our secret sins will be exposed—brought out into the open—and we will have to face the shame and embarrassment that goes along with them. Fear of losing your job or failing at it and having all the financial consequences that go along with that cause anxiety. Perhaps it’s fear of school because you didn’t get your project or assignment done in time for your deadline, or the bully that confronts you every day on the playground that seems paralyzing. Maybe it’s the fear of death. We all know we will die some day. Some of the people we love will die before we do. Death has to be faced, but most want to put off facing it as long as possible.

While those fears are all understandable, there are others that are more like the disciples faced as they met behind locked doors on Easter Sunday evening. Remember, their fears stemmed largely from their association with Jesus. Do you have fears because you are associated with Jesus, too? Because of fear, some Christians hedge what they believe and change what they confess to avoid conflict with the world.

LGBTQ+, or whatever the current set of letters includes, is not what God prescribes in his Word. God says that sexual activity is for one man and one woman united in marriage, and that all other sexual activity is sin. God says there are two genders, not 60, or whatever the new number of them is. God created humans male and female; you were born as one of those two, and that’s the way God wants you to live.

What about truth? At Jesus’ trial, Pontius Pilate asked: “What is truth?” (John 18:38, EHV). These days people talk about “my truth” and “your truth.” While people might have varying *opinions*, there is only one truth. Science used to be about seeking the truth and corroborating the truth, but these days science seems to have devolved into nothing but opinion, too.

Does it make you nervous to talk about truth this way? Does it seem even more volatile to talk about human sexuality the way the Bible does, when you know the world’s view on it is so different? Is this building the only place you feel safe to talk about things like this because of your fear of the world? Do you come here to gather in secret so that no one will find out who you are and what you believe?

III.

“Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, ‘Peace be with you!’” (John 20:19, EHV).

What is this about? Is this simply to dispel the fears the disciples had of the Jews, or of what other people might think about them? There was something more.

While the disciples claimed to gather behind locked doors in fear of the Jews, there were

guilty consciences there, too. Peter had denied Jesus three times. While the others might not have blatantly used words of denial as Peter had, their absence from the Good Friday trial speaks as loudly as their lack of words. All of them had deserted Jesus when the soldiers came. While we are about to hear from Thomas expressing his doubts about the resurrection verbally, all the rest showed their doubts behind these locked doors, as well.

“Peace be with you!” was a word of forgiveness. All of them needed forgiveness for their doubts and fears and cowardice. All of them needed a restored relationship with the Savior who had come to finish their salvation and had, in fact, done it. They needed to hear about it. They needed to experience it.

So do you. “Peace be with you!”

“But Thomas, one of the Twelve, the one called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples kept telling him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe’” (John 20:24-25, EHV).

Thomas should have been with the others, gathered together in their shared experience as Jesus’ disciples. He wasn’t. Perhaps he was too busy wallowing in his fears and anxieties.

Thomas did not accept the testimony of the others. He demanded that Jesus do things a certain way before he would believe.

Is this attitude familiar in our own hearts and lives, too? Making demands of God. Show me God; then, maybe, I’ll believe. This was more than doubt. This was unbelief. Unbelief wants to set its own terms and make its own demands of God.

“After eight days, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them. ‘Peace be with you,’ he said. ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and look at my hands. Take your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue to doubt, but believe’” (John 20:26-27, EHV).

In no way did Thomas have any right to set conditions. No way should Jesus have stooped so low as to meet those conditions. But he did.

Jesus’ love for the individual sinner is so great that he says: “Peace be with you!” in forgiveness when we deserve nothing but condemnation and punishment. “Peace be with you!” “I forgive you.”

IV.

“Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:28, EHV).

Did Thomas ever take his finger and his hand and put them into the wounds of Jesus? Scripture doesn’t say. What is important is this confession made by Thomas. It’s one of the clearest confessions that Jesus is, indeed, God, in the Bible. Doubt turns to strong faith.

His confession of faith shows Thomas rejoicing, along with the rejoicing of the rest of the group from the previous week. The disciples had their leader back. There was nothing to fear.

“Jesus said to him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’” (John 20:29, EHV).

We have our leader back, too. Despite the times we have doubted Jesus’ love, he is always there to announce peace to us. Despite the fact that we often cower in fear when confronted with animosity because of our Christian faith, Jesus brings his forgiveness to us. In spite of the fact that the daily fears of life overwhelm us, Jesus brings us the peace that comes from knowing our sins are forgiven and heaven is ours.

We have not seen, but yet we believe.

“Jesus, in the presence of his disciples, did many other miraculous signs that are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31, EHV).

It may sound strange to say it, but thank God the disciples met in fear; thank God that Thomas doubted. Their doubts and fears gave us this account so that we might see through their eyes and believe the great things our Savior God has done for us.

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you! Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you’” (John 20:21, EHV). Those things that were written down in the book of the Bible so “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing you may have life in his name,” are things that many, many others need to hear, too.

Jesus is sending you. Put away your doubts and fears.

One of those members of the Twelve who had gathered behind locked doors on Easter Sunday was Peter; the same Peter who denied Jesus three times. He was afraid, too. That denying, fearful Peter was the same one in today’s Second Reading, the one who boldly declared to the Sanhedrin and the high priest: “We must obey God rather than men... ³²We are witnesses of these things” (Acts 5:32, EHV).

Jesus has sent you and me as witnesses of these things, just as he sent Peter and the others long ago. We have seen with the eyes of faith. We have the peace Jesus declared for us—peace because he gave us the forgiveness he won for us on the cross.

When Jesus sends us out, he tells us: “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³Whenever you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:22-23, EHV). Jesus bought peace for everyone. Some people refuse to believe it. Some reject the peace. They need to know that forgiveness is not theirs because of their rejection. The fact remains that peace has been won for all. So many *have* heard it and *do* believe it, but they still go behind locked doors because of fear. What a privilege it is to announce that forgiveness of sins is theirs. What a privilege to echo the words of Jesus to the believing heart: “Peace be with you!” Amen.