

John 20:19-31

## **Peace be with you**

During these last weeks as we have watched the war in Ukraine through the screens of our devices and televisions, the scenes that stick with me are those of people huddled together hoping that they are in a place of relative safety. The fear is palatable. Whether it was under bridges in underground transportation hubs, or in factories, people were there, are there, out of fear. Their homes, their cities are not safe places. The fear of attack and death is very real. There is a reason millions of people have fled the country. Fear is in the air; you can taste it. Their president is doing everything at his disposal to protect and save the people, their homes, their country, but the devastation is real.

We feel kinship to those who are living in the Ukraine, but this scene has played itself out for decades in countries around the world. Fear of war, hunger, poverty, abuse, and neglect, are not new. It was not new in Jesus' time either. Scripture says, on that first day when Jesus had risen, "the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews." (v19) Fear was present. We are not told why they are afraid of the Jews, but let me suggest that it was not all Jews they were afraid of, only those who had the authority to do to them as was done to Jesus. And now they have no leader, no direction, no hope. They are in fear of the future and in fear of their lives.

Into this scene, into this place of fear, where the house is locked, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" (v19) By this point of the day Mary Magdalene has been to the tomb as well as others to discover that Jesus is not there. It is not until a little later after the men are gone that Mary has her encounter with Jesus. She then goes and shares that she has seen Jesus. In fact, "Jesus said to her...go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary goes and announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" and she told them that Jesus had said these things to her, but here we are, later in the evening, and the disciples have not believed what they have either seen with their own eyes – the empty tomb – nor Mary's account.

They have not trusted or remembered all that Jesus had spoken to them before his death. He shared with them on multiple occasions that he would die and in three days rise again. Yet Jesus words, his teaching on that, his promise, has not yet come to mind.

But now, in this locked up house, Jesus is present with them. He shows them the evidence that it really is him, not some aberration of him. "He showed them his hands and his side" once again saying "Peace be with you" but with a little more information or rather instruction, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And then the promised

gift, a promise made prior to his death...Jesus “breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

We also know that one disciple was not with them when all of this was happening and he has been given the dubious title of “doubting Thomas”. Yet, Thomas was no more doubting of the stories that the rest of the disciples told, then all of them were of Mary Magdalene when she gave her account of Jesus’ appearance to her in the garden. Everyone of us would want what the others had...to actually see Jesus. And that is not such a stretch. Who of us would believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead, even if we had been one of the disciples ourselves? Just as we understand dead to be dead, the end, the disciples did as well.

Now a week later after all the stories of resurrection encounters, as the men spoke and shared what had been seen and heard, Thomas insists that he will not believe unless he sees the mark of the nails in Jesus’ hands and puts his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in Jesus’ side, he will not believe. We all want that kind of empirical, measurable proof of something that is so beyond our comprehension that we don’t even trust others, others we have walked with in life, trusted and lived with, known deeply as friends and family. Sometimes we just don’t trust.

As I write I think of all the deep distrust that has been experienced in these last couple of years, distrust of media, of scientists and medical professions, distrust of colleagues among each other, distrust in our government and even in our families. It is not hard to imagine and feel the distrust that the disciples had of Mary’s story and the distrust that Thomas had of those who he had spent the last three years with. Yet in all of this, Jesus met each one of these people where they needed him, where they were at.

Jesus met Mary at the tomb in her distress, he met the disciples as they hunkered down in a locked house, as they lived in fear and with fear. Then he came to Thomas and invites Thomas to do exactly as he had wanted. Once again, Jesus standing there in a place where the doors were shut, saying, “Peace be with you. Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.’” (v22). Jesus meets Thomas’ need. Thing is, we are never told whether or not Thomas actually goes that far. What we are told, is that Thomas recognized Jesus and in praise answered Jesus with, “My Lord and my God!”

And the writer of John’s gospel gets that the rest of us will never have that opportunity to see Jesus in the flesh as those first disciples and many others did in the days following the resurrection. Still, we are asked to trust those who did, who lived their lives changed because of those encounters, because of the promises fulfilled in Jesus and in the gift of the Holy Spirit breathed on all believers.

In our lives and in our communities of faith, in our families and friendships, when we know longer trust what another has experienced or is experiencing, we close off opportunities for wonder, for being curious, for learning, for relationship. We may not agree, we may ask more questions, but ultimately the question remains, do we trust

those who we love and who have walked with us in the world, with in our homes, in our work, in our worship?

When we take the time to listen for understanding, even if we don't get it or disagree, we are able to meet each other where we are at, and in love and trust find a way forward. As Christians we are called to nothing less. We also can trust that Jesus continues to meet us where we are at, whether it is in locked houses afraid of a virus, locked churches that are trying to serve God and community, or locked hearts, broken and bruised by those who said they loved us. Jesus is present, he steps in among us and with us and says, "Peace be with you."

As I write I find an ending to the message is not emerging, but maybe that is just it. Each of us has our own story, our own encounters with the risen Lord, our own lived experience of faith, trust, love, and betrayal. I can't write this ending for you. All that may be necessary is to say, Jesus is present, Christ has risen, Christ is among us in the power of the Holy Spirit, and Christ will meet you where you are.

Be attentive to the Spirit at work in, through, around, and with you. Trust those who have lived the faith since the beginning, written in the words of scripture and lived out even now by the people around you, and hear Jesus speak these words of assurance and promise, "Peace be with you."