

Easter 2c - John 20.19.31

VA Synod ELCA

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Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Happy Easter y'all.

We have a great joy over these next several weeks of hearing narratives of the holy presence of the Risen Christ with the disciples and with us.

Today we hear the story in John's Gospel of Jesus coming to his disciples and breathing upon them holy peace. Of Jesus speaking to them these words: *Peace be with you*. Of Jesus breathing upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So, I invite us to take a moment, just pause, and live in that gift of the holy spirit for just a moment. Because God's holy presence with us is as close to us as the breath we breathe. So I invite us all to just pause, breathe in and breathe out, to be still and know that God is God, to know that God is here, that God is with you. Peace be with you. Breathe in, breathe out. Peace be with you.

Jesus speaks these words of peace to the disciples who are gathered on the night of Resurrection. He repeats them again a week later as the disciples are gathered. This time all of the remaining 11 disciples are gathered, including one named Thomas.

Thomas: have you heard of him before? I'm wondering: How is Thomas often referred to?  
Doubting Thomas. Yes, poor doubting Thomas.

You've likely heard him referred to as doubting Thomas before even if you're not as familiar with the Bible. There are pop culture references to people who are Doubting Thomases right?

Which is really unfortunate for lots of reasons. First, I don't know if you noticed this, but Thomas is never referred to as Doubting in the entire narrative. Did you notice that? The only time he's given a nickname, he's called the Twin. He's never called doubting Thomas.

So I have to wonder why has Thomas been disparaged as the doubting disciple?

I think part of the reason is because we have this misguided notion that somehow the opposite of faith is doubt. That somehow if we have doubts, questions, wonderings. If we're unsure or unclear about something. If we want to know more about something. If we want to challenge the scripture. If we want to challenge God. Somehow we are doubting and doubting is a bad thing.

There's this idea that we should believe wholeheartedly and never ask questions.

Y'all I can't understand how we got to that sort of understanding. Because questions and doubts and ponderings and wonderings have been central to the entire story of Jesus and his disciples since Jesus called his very first disciples.

There were disciples who weren't sure who Jesus was. They wanted to know: *OK, tell me more about this Jesus guy.*

Even in the Gospel reading for the resurrection which we heard just last week in Luke's version the women went to the tomb not expecting Jesus to be alive even though he told them he was going to be Resurrected. The women likely went to the tomb with doubts and questions. And then the women leave the tomb amazed at all they have found and seen and heard. Then the women go and tell the men disciples of this amazing thing that has happened and the disciples doubt them. The men think these women are telling an idle tale, that they're speaking utter nonsense.

Overwhelmingly we get stories of the disciples questioning Jesus and pushing back against Jesus and asking about what Jesus means and trying to understand what Jesus is talking about.

All of which also makes sense because many of the disciples - men and women - were Jewish. And in Judaism, arguing with God, with the narrative, with interpretation, with each other is an essential act of faith. So, it makes sense that many of those who followed Jesus would question and challenge and doubt.

So, how did we get to the point today that doubt is the opposite of faith?

When we have the great gift of a disciple like Thomas, just yet another disciple: who would like a little more information. Who has some questions. Who is wondering what is happening? *What are you talking about? Jesus is alive: What do you mean, how can this be?*

Why is it that we so often consider doubt to be the opposite of faith? Rather than an integral part of faith?

Let's just ponder that question for now, as we consider this encounter between Jesus and the disciples

When Jesus first appears to the disciples, the group doesn't include Thomas. The second time Jesus appears, Thomas is present.

I think there's so much that we can learn from these encounters about God's immeasurable love for us, about the way we treat one another, about how we can live in our doubt and questions and still live in our faith.

Our story a Gospel reading starts on the very first Easter Day in the evening, so we get to transport ourselves back to last week on Easter Sunday with this seemingly idle tale that the women have told and 10 of the original Twelve men disciples locked in a room because they're afraid .

Jesus miraculously appears to them, shares with them peace and shows them his hands and his side and they rejoice and are so excited about this.

They're so excited in fact that they tell their friend Thomas who hadn't been present with them that they've seen Jesus again.

I think Thomas reacts in a totally expected and human way: *whoa hold on. what?! No he died. Remember, we saw him on the cross on Friday?! Unless I see what you yourselves have already seen... Yeah, no.*

Let's keep in mind that Thomas reacts the same way all of the men had reacted when the women had told them that they also had seen Jesus alive! They're all human. They all have questions!

The narrative continues the next week: Jesus appears again a week after the resurrection. And this time Thomas is there with the other disciples.

Jesus comes and says the same thing that he had said the week before: *Peace be with you.* As he had done with the other disciples the week before, Jesus shows Thomas his hands and side: *Here, Thomas, see my my side and my hands. Put your finger there. Reach out, don't doubt but believe.* And Thomas answers: *my Lord and my God.*

Y'all this is a magnificent beautiful glorious story and beautiful glorious encounter between Jesus and some of the disciples, right?

In these encounters between Jesus and the disciples, we learn from Jesus how to treat one another with peace and Grace and love, and mercy and hope and forgiveness.

Jesus never chastises Thomas, never calls him out, never belittles him for his questions and doubt. I'd caution us against giving Jesus an angry tone of voice when he speaks to Thomas. The text never says that Jesus is angry. Jesus acts as Jesus so often acts: with compassion and peace.

Jesus doesn't seem surprised by our questions and our doubts. OK, sometimes he seems a bit frustrated when we ask the SAME questions over and over. But repeatedly Jesus responds to our doubts and questions: Peace, love, grace, compassion, and invitation.

I think we can learn a lot from Jesus about responding to doubts and questions with peace, love, grace, compassion, and invitation.

So often we call one another out for our doubts, for our questions, for a disagreements.

It feels like especially right now in our culture, we tend to live in a calling *out* culture. Where someone says something or disagrees with something or challenges something and immediately we call them out. We chastise. We judge. We belittle. We disengage.

I think about what would happen today if Jesus appeared to the disciples, who told their friend, Thomas: *we've seen the Lord*. And Thomas is like: *Until I see the marks from myself, I'm not going to believe that*. I wonder if the reaction today would be a little more calling out: *Why don't you believe me? Do you think I'm lying? You think we just made this up? Well, do you want some facts? OK, let's Google that. Let me see what I can find to help prove to you that I'm right*.

But y'all the great gift of Jesus is that Jesus presents us with another way. Instead of calling us *out* when we ask questions. Instead of trying to prove that we're right

Instead, Jesus invites Thomas into relationship. Jesus calls Thomas *in*: *Come here, Thomas, here's my hands and my side. Come to me, Thomas. Peace be with you*. Jesus doesn't chastise Thomas or call Thomas out.

Jesus leans into the relationship. Jesus loves Thomas. Jesus invites Thomas's curiosity.

I wonder perhaps if we're going to give Thomas a pop culture nickname we should call him Curious Thomas rather than Doubting Thomas.

I wonder if part of what this narrative shows us is a way for us to mend relationships. A way for us to tend to some of the brokenness in our society, the broken relationships, the anger, the angst, the ways that we have closed ourselves off from one another, the ways that sometimes we don't even know how to talk to each other, the ways that we tend to be reactive rather than responsive, The ways that we tend to be punitive rather than restorative.

I wonder if we can learn from Jesus's example. Jesus, who invites Thomas into the relationship. Who focuses first on the relationship with Thomas, with all of the disciples, with all of the men and women who have been following Jesus and learning with him and eating with him throughout the gospel narratives. The way that Jesus invites us into relationship.

Jesus invites Thomas's curiosity here: *Thomas, come here. See my hands and my side, put your hand there. Peace be with you*.

Jesus invites Thomas' curiosity. Which I found super helpful, because it makes sense to me that Thomas has some questions! Because y'all seriously, if somebody came up to me today and said: *Jesus has returned. I saw him yesterday*. I think my reaction would be much more like Thomas: *Really?! Really? I don't know, I think I'm going to need to see that for myself*.

And I would hope, I would expect that Jesus would welcome that curiosity in me as well. Because Jesus is all about relationship with us. Jesus is all about abiding with us. Being holy present with us.

Jesus is all about breathing on us peace and hope, mercy and love, grace, forgiveness, joy, peace.

That is part of the Abundant Life that Jesus promises to all of us and to each of us. Forgiveness, Mercy, Grace, peace, hope, love. Peace that invites us to be curious. Peace that invites us to ask questions. Peace that invites us to lean into relationships with one another, to call one another into conversation. Peace that invites us to invite one another into reconciliation and restoration. Into repentance and reparation.

Jesus is our peace. Jesus is our hope. Jesus is life and love. Jesus is our restoration, Jesus is our reconciliation. Jesus is our peace.

Peace which is as close to as our own breath.

Jesus is with us right now inviting us, calling us to be in relationship with him, to be in relationship with each other, to learn from his example and to reach out to one another with curiosity, with peace, with love and Hope.

Peace be with you!  
(And also with you!)  
Alleluia! Amen.