

Sermon Title: "Unlocked Doors"
Scriptures: John 20:19-31, 1 John 1:1-4
Location: Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
Date: Second Sunday of Easter April 8, 2018
Preacher: Grace Boyer

Because of this text that we have just read, the disciple Thomas is often called "doubting Thomas." Doubting Thomas. Which seems a bit unfair given what else we know about Thomas.

For example, in John 11, Jesus has just escaped an attempted arrest and stoning by an enraged mob in Jerusalem, and is planning to return to that area despite his disciples' concerns. It is Thomas who urges the other disciples to continue the journey with Jesus, even it means dying with him. That sounds more like a courageous, loyal Thomas to me.

And in John 14, Jesus tells his disciples that he goes to prepare a place for them, and Thomas, wanting to follow Jesus, plaintively asks, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" That sounds more like an earnest, honest Thomas.

And in accounts of Thomas' life after the gospels, we hear that he may have taken the gospel message to India in 52 AD. To this day there are communities of St. Thomas Christians there. When my husband and I were in Korea, my husband's graduate assistant at the university was a wonderful woman from India. She came from a Christian village in India that traces their Christianity back to the visit of Thomas. So calling him "doubting" Thomas does not seem to be an adequate descriptor of this courageous, loyal, earnest, honest, faith-sharing man.

And even in our passage today, Thomas didn't ask for anything more than what the other disciples had already experienced: to see and touch Jesus.

In John's gospel, after the resurrection Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene who tells the news to the disciples that she has "seen the Lord." But the disciples do not appear to trust her message, as they huddle behind locked closed doors on the evening of that first Easter Sunday. It is only after Jesus appears to them and greets them with Peace, and after he shows them his wounds in his hands and sides that the disciples rejoice and believe.

When the disciples tell Thomas that they have "seen the Lord"—the very same words that Mary Magdalene had used with them!—just as the disciples had not fully believed Mary Magdalene, Thomas does not fully believe the disciples and says that he needs to see and touch Jesus before he can believe. It was nothing more than what the rest of the disciples had experienced and needed.

If I sound a bit defensive or protective of Thomas, it is probably because I identify with him. I would have wanted to see for myself as well, not just take someone's word for it. Not about something that big, that life altering.

Each of the disciples, in their own way, needed to see and touch Christ to confirm it. They had gone through so much, and they were trying to comprehend and make sense of it all. They needed something concrete to hold on to in a quickly shifting world.

It shows us some of the challenges the early church faced as they learned to be Easter people, resurrection people. It was an ongoing process that the rest of the NT describes. In our passage we see Jesus overcoming their fears and giving them gifts to face the journey. But frankly it started in an unpromising way.

In the first verse we read in John, we hear that the doors shut and locked in fear on the night of that first Easter Sunday. And a week later, the doors were still shut and closed, even though the disciples had already seen and greeted Jesus the previous Sunday. They believed, but they still kept the doors shut tightly, in a society in which open doors was the norm. Trusting the resurrection was a process that they were learning in real time, and it didn't happen overnight. And even after this second visit of Jesus, this time to see Thomas, my guess is that the following week, the third Sunday, the disciples were still gathering behind shut doors. The disciples were struggling with their fear and faith.

Into this setting, Jesus brings the gift of Peace. Jesus appears to the disciples and says "Peace be with you," a traditional greeting of the time. Still today you will hear Salaam or Issalm Alaikum as you walk down the street in areas of the Middle East. Peace be with you. Even after the disciples have seen his hand and side, Jesus says it again, Peace be with you. Peace! A gift to their racing, troubled minds.

And, Jesus brings the gift of Forgiveness. Just by coming back and appearing to the disciples he is modeling forgiveness. Coming back to disciples who had abandoned him in the garden of Gethsemane and at the crucifixion. Coming to Peter who had denied him as he was being interrogated by the High Priest. And I think, had Judas Iscariot been there, Jesus would have come in forgiveness even to that one who had betrayed him. Jesus models forgiveness and urges them to forgive themselves and forgive each other, saying, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Let go of that guilt and burden, all is forgiven. A gift to the raw wounds of their hearts.

Then, Jesus breathes on them. It may sound strange, but it is linked to the words used in Genesis 2 when God fashioned humanity out of clay and breathed life into them. God's life giving breath and spirit. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples and creates new life, a second creation, a second chance, to begin again as Easter resurrection people. A gift to fragile spirits.

What we see is that Jesus' overall response to the disciples is one of grace. He comes to the disciples when they do not trust, and gives them what they need: to see and touch. Jesus then comes to Thomas to give him what he says he needs. And Thomas, just in seeing and hearing, gives a full confession of faith, crying out, "My Lord and my God." Like the parable of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to seek out the one that was lost, Jesus keeps coming back, week after week, graciously, patiently, lovingly giving the disciples what they need to come to faith. Seeking them out, meeting them where they are, coming even through shut doors.

Minds, hearts, spirits, bodies, Jesus gently cares for the disciples' whole selves, and in doing so reveals the gracious, generous character of God. So maybe the story is less about Thomas' doubt, and more about God's grace.

Fast forward 2000 years. Easter Sunday is over, and we are now in the six weeks following Easter called Eastertide that culminate with Pentecost Sunday. Eastertide is a time when we ponder how to live as Easter People, people of the resurrection. And frankly after 2000 years, we are still trying to figure how to do that. Not that different from the early disciples. Where are we in this story?

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That's us. That blessing is for us. We cannot go back 2000 years and be in that room with the disciples and watch as their lives are transformed, only read about it. We cannot see and touch the nail prints in Jesus' hands, or the scar on his side. But Jesus calls us blessed!

Jesus calls us blessed because we can see and touch the lives of the people around us, and through them touch Christ in our midst. We can see and care for the wounds of those who share a pew with us or share our lives, and let them care for us. We can see and care for those we meet through SVCM, Homeless shelter, Veteran's center, Room in the Inn and let them touch our lives. In doing so we become Christ to each other and the world, and we can watch lives transformed. It is in each other that Christ becomes real in our midst, someone tangible.

In those relationships we learn what Jesus was showing the disciples so many years ago. That Easter people are:

- People who honestly share doubts and fears.
- People of peace;
- People of forgiveness, releasing what we hold against ourselves and others so that we and they can truly live.
- People of grace, meeting ourselves and others wherever we or they are in the journey of faith.
- People that let God breathe through us, live through us, as we relate to one another.

So, in this season of Eastertide, wherever we are on this journey, some questions to ask ourselves:

- What needs to be resurrected and brought back to life in us by God? As individuals and as a church?
- And what doors still remain shut deep within, that need to be unlocked so that God's breath and spirit can flow freely and help us truly live?

Whatever the answers, remember that the God we worship is one that comes back over and over again to frightened and confused disciples to give them what they need, what we need. Pouring out grace upon grace, patiently seeking us out even behind closed doors. Coming so that we can continue to learn how to be Easter people, something the world may need now more than ever.