

GOSPEL READING: JOHN 20:19-31

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

EPISTLE: 1 JOHN 1:1-2:2

1:1 We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. 5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

***“Walking into the Future”***

It was still Easter, but it was evening. The disciples were huddled behind locked doors in what was most likely the upper room, the same room where they’d had the last supper with Jesus three days earlier, the same one in which Jesus had washed their feet and told them that they would desert him, the same room in which they’d been hiding since Jesus’ crucifixion. The mood in the room had changed a bit, because some of their number had visited Jesus’ tomb early that morning and were reporting back that the tomb was empty and that angels there said that Jesus had risen from the dead. Could it really be true? What would it mean if it was? There WAS confusion in the room, but mostly, there was still a great deal of fear. They were very afraid. Their leader had been killed and they could quite possibly be next. The disciples were listening for every step on the staircase and for every knock at the door.

In this 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, we see then both “the church at its best”,<sup>1</sup> (Mary, running from the tomb in the early morning, exclaiming, “*I have seen the Lord*”), but also the church at its worst, paralyzed with fear and doubt, despite the message they’ve received. The disciples cannot merely be told of Jesus’ resurrection. They require an encounter the risen Lord to believe. And this, of course, happens. Jesus appears in their midst and greets them with, “*Peace be with you*”. Then he breathes on them. He breathes the breath of God...the source of life...that which was blown over the face of the deep when there was nothing but chaos, that which was breathed into the lungs of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, that which roared through the room as a mighty wind at Pentecost. Jesus breathes his Holy Spirit on the disciples, and THEN he says to them, “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” *Repeat. (pause)*

It seems to me that this is the whole point of Easter...that we are equipped now with enough of Jesus’ life and breath to be able to get up from our places of fear and doubt and get moving, moving toward our homes, families, communities, toward the world which is, “beautifully, suddenly, dramatically, and profoundly different”<sup>2</sup> now. There is no more reason to be held

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Henry. “*Sermon: Resurrection in the Plural*” <http://morningsidepc.com/archive/www.morningsidepc.org/dfc/newsdetail/2/1200070.html> (accessed 4-6-18).

<sup>2</sup> John Buchanan. Sermon: “*Sent*” <http://222.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/041507.html>. (accessed 4-5-18).

captive by fear. Easter shows us that love has prevailed over hate and the worst of all things, death, has been conquered. And we know that all the other promises of God are obviously true too. So we need get up, go out and change the world to be a better place. Quoting Jurgen Moltmann, *The Resurrection is the beginning of the future of the world.*<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, one of the company of disciples, who has missed out, Thomas. John tells us that when Thomas returns and the disciples excitedly tell him what has happened, he says, *“Unless I see it too, I’m not believing it. No way!”*. He needs exactly what they’ve had, an encounter with the Spirit of the Living God. And sure enough, later, Jesus comes again when Thomas is present, and says, *“Peace be with you,”* He tells Thomas to put his finger in his wounds and not doubt but believe. Thomas doesn’t do it. Thomas doesn’t touch the physical evidence that his doubts have seemed to demand. Instead, he offers one of the most beautiful confessions of faith in all of Scripture: *“My Lord and my God”!*

I think it important to digress a minute and note that Jesus does not belittle or smack Thomas down for his doubts. It’s not really fair to label Thomas disdainfully as “Doubting Thomas”, as often we do, because having a religious faith does not mean that we have no doubts. In fact, doubt is actually a normal, natural part of faith. Frederick Buchner says, *“Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”*<sup>4</sup> And in an interview with Bob Abernathy, Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor says the same thing. She says, *“Doubt often brings me to poke at what I believe. And when it topples, I realize it was an idol. Doubt has been a divine gift that has led me deeper into God.”*<sup>5</sup> She’s right. Faith was not for Thomas nor is it for us the absence of doubt, but the trusting of God in spite of it. *I remember as a kid learning from my neighborhood friends, that the future of our little Jewish friend, Ellene Abrahamson, was likely not heaven. She was not a Christian, after all. I remember going with her to her synagogue and feeling very uncomfortable, not just because I looked so different, but because I was feeling a little guilty to be there. But yet I recall also having great*

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<sup>3</sup>Jurgen Moltmann. *“Passion for God: A Theology in Two Voices”* (Louisville: WJKP; 2003), 84.

<sup>4</sup>Frederick Buechner. *“Doubt”* <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/26/doubt>. (accessed 4-6-18)

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor. Quoted in interview by Bob Abernathy in Religion & Ethics News Weekly. Mar 9, 2007.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2007/03/09/march-9-2007-barbara-brown-taylor/1792/> (accessed 4-6-18).

*distrust and doubt that the information I had been given about Ellene wasn't true. I asked my mother and she said "That is all up to God. We just need to focus on living our lives."* Friends, we need not be afraid to doubt, to ask questions, be skeptical. especially in the secular world. Doubt, like ants in the pants, get us up and moving, living our lives, walking out of the room.

That is what Jesus did that Easter evening to those who could not quite believe that death is now no longer the end....to Thomas and the others. That's what the resurrected Lord does for you and I. He breathes his Holy Spirit upon us and we encounter him not by being told about him, but by experiencing him. We feel his holy fire inside of us. We know he is alive, because we know. And we are changed, empowered to more boldly speak and courageously act....not wildly, mind you, without regard for the reality of evil, but boldly, not capitulating to it. I had a pastor once who said, *"We Christians do not deny evil, we defy it."*<sup>6</sup> With our new perspective we are pushed out of our hiding places, from states of worrying about what will become of us or our loved ones, or what our future financial situation will be, or how our health condition will shake out. We are pushed out of our places of fearing whether we can live up to what others want of us, or withstand their judgements when we don't, or whether we have the strength to stand up to what opposes or threatens us. Jesus pushes us out from our hiding places and into the bright of day, despite or possibly as a consequence of our doubts.

*When I was in India, I learned of what became of Thomas. The apostle, Thomas, is believed to have sailed far away, to the south-western side of India, to the state which is now called Kerala. There was a Jewish community there at the time. Thomas is credited with establishing Christianity in India, a religion of more than 28 million people. In fact, a woman who I came to know fairly well was a member of one of the remaining MarThoma churches.*

Yes, our doubts often bring us to an encounter with the resurrected Lord, or they draw us deeper into God, and we are then **empowered, encouraged, enlivened** to get moving, to bring that new life of faith, the resurrection experience to others in the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Communication with Thomas Allen.

*I will close with a favorite story. There is, evidently, a small Lutheran congregation in the South Bronx, one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the nation. It is a congregation made up of former prostitutes, drug addicts, undocumented immigrants, homeless poor, and the unemployed. The leaders of the congregation decided several years ago that they were going to “take it outside”. They decided to reenact the whole Easter story, have a Palm processional around the block, and then finish the drama inside the sanctuary. So, they borrowed a donkey, persuaded a young man to play the part of Jesus, and started marching out there, amid the burnt-out tenements and deserted store-fronts. They followed Jesus and the donkey shouting, “Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” To their total surprise, however, by the time their parade got back around to the front of the church, a street protest had coincidentally begun there. But the little congregation was not fazed. They continued their shouts of Hosanna as they’d planned. And amazingly, the cries of the protestors began to blend with theirs. And then the whole group, protestors and Protestants, poured into the church. The congregation proceeded with their planned script: Jesus was arrested, tried, convicted and executed unjustly...a not unfamiliar story in the South Bronx. An angel said, “He is risen!” and the women came back from the empty tomb with cries of joy and amazement. The disciples responded with “No, no it is an idle tale.” And then the script called for three members of the congregation to stand up and say, “I KNOW he is alive, he’s alive in me.” The first to speak was Angie, previously a victim of abuse, alcoholism and drugs, but now a student at Lutheran Seminary. She stood and said, “I Know he is alive, he’s alive in ME.” Another church member also stood, and then the third, “I Know he is alive, he’s alive in me”. Then that part of the script was over and they were to move on, but they couldn’t. The spirit of the living Christ had been set loose in the room. It had blown through and was answering doubt and filling bodies with faith everywhere. People, lots of people, began stepping forward and saying spontaneously, “I KNOW he is alive too, he’s alive in me.”<sup>7</sup> I KNOW he is alive and he’s alive in me! I KNOW he is alive and he’s alive in me! Wow.*

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Long. Sermon: "Pathways to Belief." May 5, 2011; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIVEU9oLJbg&feature=youtu.be>.

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John 20:19-31, 1 John 1:1 – 2:2  
April 8, 2018

So, what is the take away today? Well it is this: Jesus said to them, "*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" And Thomas and the others got up, headed toward the door, walked into the future and changed the world. Amen.