

Sermon for Easter 2, Year A
St. Anne Episcopal Church, Washougal
Acts 2:14a, 22-32; I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31; Psalm 16

Guiding God, send your Holy Spirit upon the reading of your Word that it may serve to show us the path of life and lead us into your presence where there is fullness of joy.
Amen¹

Please be seated.

Today's Gospel is often referred to as the Story of Doubting Thomas. It's so well-known that even people who aren't familiar with the scriptures have heard of a "Doubting Thomas." It appears in literature, in film, in everyday speech. And the interaction with Thomas does play a critical role in the second half of the Gospel text.

However, as I read and meditated and prayed in preparation for this sermon, I found myself drawn over and over again to another aspect of the text, to another group of people, one that I must admit I have often completely overlooked in my previous studies of this passage. This time, though, my thoughts were drawn, not Thomas, but rather the rest of the disciples, the ones locked in the house, behind closed doors, afraid.

Our text begins, "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..."²

The disciples were inside; the doors were locked; and there was fear. There was fear. Understandable fear. Rational fear. After all, this group had just seen their teacher, their rabbi, their leader and guide and friend, they had just seen him taken away by armed individuals acting in the name of the authorities of the time. Jesus was arrested, not while committing a crime, not even while demonstrating in public, no, Jesus was arrested in the quite darkness of a garden, while he was praying. Praying.

And after his arrest, he was taken away from his friends and supporters, held in a place inaccessible to them. He was abused. He was rushed through a pseudo-judicial process, a form of a trial that did not even meet the minimal standards of the day, one that in no way could be described as fair or just. At the end of this mockery, he was sentenced to death, taken out and executed.

So, his disciples, his followers, his friends, they were understandably, justifiably afraid. They stayed locked away, out of sight. Not going out to work. Not going out to the market for food. Not even going to the temple for worship. After all, if the authorities could arrest, try, convict and execute Jesus while praying, nowhere was safe. They stayed inside, locked away, afraid. They had lost their trust in, their faith in, their hope for the kingdom Jesus spoke of, a kingdom built on justice, mercy and love.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Liturgies for Year A, Vol. I. p. 140

² John 20:19

This cycle, this phenomenon, of people rising up against others, of communities settling their differences through force, has repeated over and over and over again throughout history. The disciples were not the first, nor the last, to hide away, to lock themselves in a room, to be afraid.

Many of us here had to read “The Diary of Anne Frank” in school. It contains a first-hand account of a Jewish family during the Holocaust, hiding away, afraid. And there are other books from that time period—In My Father’s House by Corrie Ten Boom, Mila 18 by Leon Uris, and so many more—vivid accounts of communities, families, individuals living in fear, hiding away.

Perhaps this part of the Gospel resonates so much because of where we are today, because many of us know—or may even be part of—groups who are living in fear, who are hiding, who have lost their trust, lost their faith, lost their hope. Many who, like the disciples, are unable at this moment to see, or believe in, or even hope for, a system built on justice, and mercy, and love.

But the Gospel doesn’t end there. Into that space of fear walks Jesus. Jesus who had passed through death into life, demonstrating an authority that not even the rulers of the day held. Jesus, who had conquered that great power, death. Jesus, who returned to and for those who believe.

And what were Jesus’ first words to his disciples, to his followers, to those fearful people hiding away behind locked doors?

Did he get frustrated with them for their lack of faith? No.

Did he scold them for their lack of action? No.

Did he criticize and complain and rail against the injustice he had suffered? No.

Jesus’ first words were, “Peace be with you.” Peace be with you. Peace.

Jesus saw his followers, really saw them. He recognized their fear, their anxiety, their despair. He understood that some were probably angry and frustrated. Other, depressed, overcome with a sense of hopelessness and loss. Jesus saw these human beings, with all their limitations, overcome by, paralyzed with, fear. And he reached out to them, generously, graciously, lovingly, sharing with them his calm, his assurance that justice, that mercy, that love, were still possible. That there could, in fact, be peace.

And one of the things I’ve come to appreciate, to truly love, about this telling of the Gospel, is that, even after all this. Even after Jesus came to them, showed them his hands and side, even after Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Even after Jesus told them, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.” They did not get it right away.

How do we know this? Because just a week later, they were back in the room once again, with the doors locked. Only this time Thomas was with them as well.

Once again, Jesus entered the locked room. Once again, he held out his hands. Once again, he invited his follower, Thomas, to touch his side. And once again, Jesus spoke those words, "Peace be with you."

Jesus didn't rebuke them for their lack of faith.

Jesus didn't criticize them for staying in the room instead of getting out there into the world, even though he had explicitly sent them out just the week before.

No, Jesus recognized that they needed time and reassurance. Time to come to terms with the changes in their world, time to overcome their anxiety and anger and fear. Time to live into this new way of life. And, also, assurance, assurance that God was with them, that God loved them, and that a world of justice, of mercy, of peace, assurance that this world could exist.

Now, today, we are also living in a world filled with anxiety, with anger, and with fear. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have Jesus walk through those doors, hold out his hands for us to touch, to show us his side?

We don't live in those times, but we are not forgotten. No, indeed. In fact, Jesus spoke to us as well, left us with words passed down through our Scriptures, words of hope and encouragement in the face of fear. To us, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Blessed are those who, even without seeing and touching and experiencing in the flesh, blessed are those who believe. We, here today, we are blessed.

And, as we go out into our messy world, as we deal with situations that make us angry or anxious or afraid, remember that we are blessed. Hold tight to the knowledge that God loves us, that God understands our fears, that God will provide us with what we need, and, with that certainty, despite the chaos around us, we can be at peace. Amen.