

Sermon for May 1st 2011 John 20 (Thomas)

John's gospel lesson on this second Sunday of Easter describes what is continuing to happen on that first day of the week, the third day after the crucifixion. As we heard in our gospel lesson last Sunday it was on this morning that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary had gone to the tomb and found it empty and an angel there telling them that Christ had been raised and then Jesus appeared to the women and told them to go tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they too would see Jesus. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were the first eyewitnesses of the risen Christ and they followed Jesus' instructions and went and told the disciples what they had witnessed.

But it appears from our gospel lesson today, that the disciples had a hard time believing them – for it is now evening on the third day and this little band of threatened and badly frightened men, were huddled together feeling far from secure. Shut the doors and keep them shut and bolted for we are afraid.

But what these disciples did not realize was that they were behind a bolted door that would not keep the risen Jesus out and suddenly there he was standing among them speaking the words, “peace be with you”.

Not long before Jesus was put to death on the cross he said to his disciples:

“I have said these things while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who the father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give

to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. And now I have told you this before it occurs so that when it does occur, you may believe."

And now, on this third day, this day we celebrate as Easter, Jesus is standing among his disciples in that upper room with a proclamation that the peace promised for them in the days of his ministry prior to his death has been fulfilled.

These words Jesus utters "peace be with you" was the customary greeting of that time and place, but when Jesus said those very words to his disciples that night he had more in mind by far than simply a cordial greeting. What he meant was peace in their own hearts and souls – true peace no matter what they would have to endure. And indeed they had crucial need of that peace. They knew they had failed Christ, sadly and inexcusably. And their guilt must have been overwhelming their self-respect wounded and raw.

That night in that upper room the Lord broke in upon those disciples in their darkness of disillusionment and despair and said to them, I want you to know that whatever you have done and whatever you have been, I forgive you and give you my blessing and want you to walk in God's grace with a peace that passes all understanding. And Jesus does not stop there. This story of doubting Thomas is a familiar one. All of us can relate to Thomas in some way or another. Thomas does not believe his disciples – he has to see the mark of

his hands and touch the wound in his side. Thomas is given exactly what he requests – a chance to see and touch Jesus for himself.

Yet notice the gospel writer does not say that Thomas did indeed touch him – we don't know whether he did or not – what we do know is that Jesus offered himself to him just like he offered himself to the women at the tomb, he offered himself to the disciples and he offers himself over and over again to people who long to know him.

Blessed are those who do not see yet have come to believe – It is even a greater blessing to believe without physically seeing. Our Epistle lesson from 1st Peter this morning reiterates this: the writer of the letter says this to readers “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

It is not physical proof that matters to us – it is instead the peace that comes with knowing that Jesus is right here in our midst walking with us through life's joys and struggles each and every day, and knowing that even if we doubt or fear or go astray Jesus will come into our own deadlocked places again and again with a renewed gift of peace and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The peace Jesus announces is not one that can allow the disciples to remain behind locked doors. For as soon as the disciples have rejoined in the presence of the lord, Jesus tells them that they have a new status and a new

role. A role that changes them from disciples – students to Apostles-ambassadors - sent into the world, just as God sent Jesus himself. “Peace be with you. As the father sent me so I send you.”

Clearly this peace with the accompanying changed status and role, pushes the Christian community then and now from behind it’s closed and locked doors. It pushes us to become apostles, sent into mission that involves bearing that very same Holy Spirit that Jesus breathed into his disciples made apostles that night.

It is this peace and the power of the holy spirit that empowers us to reach out to those who are suffering today due to the deadly storms in the southeast that have caused so much devastation over the last week. It is this gift of peace and the power of the Holy Spirit that inspires a team of people from this congregation to come together over the next 7 days to work in the Timbridge Hill neighborhood to rebuild a home and more importantly to make new friends and learn from them. There are numerous examples of how the people of St. John’s have been empowered by the spirit and have made a difference in this world.

God is calling each and every one of us to let go of our own fear and doubt and to move beyond our deadlocked places and in some way shape or form- by the power of the Holy Spirit bring to this world the forgiving transforming love that Christ continually brings to us.

Ordinary people, once Christ's spirit has touched and inspired and quickened them, can live and do live, can serve God and do serve God, as they could not do before. Look at these very disciples – how they failed, and yet once this spirit entered into them, how valiant, courageous, and unbreakable they became.

We know at times we will fall back to hiding behind locked doors. There will be times that we simply can not go out into that frightening place of pain and suffering. We don't want to open the door to a world of hurt so we go once again to those upper rooms of darkness and lock the door tight. But take heed – Jesus comes again and again to these scared and confused disciples. The disciples have not warranted a second visit by Jesus, but they get one, and a renewed gift of his peace.. And we can be assured that Jesus will come in to our own deadlocked places again and again with a renewed gift of peace.

The Easter story is real, not simply in the trumpet celebrations of last week but as it unfolds in the lives and stories of ordinary people who are regularly tempted by fear and despair. We are an Easter people, called to leave our tightly locked rooms and go into the world knowing that with Christ and the holy spirit as our companions a peace which passes any understanding will be with us. May we all unlock those doors and go out into the world as Easter people proclaiming the glorious news of our Christ who is risen, who is risen indeed.