April 19, 2020 • 2nd Sunday in Easter • Online Worship

“See What Love Can Do”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Psalm 16:5-11
The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

John 20:1-31
Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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.”

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.” 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.

One of the newsletters for preachers I received this past week featured an article entitled: “Christ is Risen! Now what?!”

Speaks to where we find ourselves these days, doesn’t it? There’s that moment when you first wake up in the morning and for a moment it feels like any new day. Then you remember that we’re living in strange times, indeed. Now what?

I can’t help but think that the first disciples must have felt something similar though for different reasons, of course. They’d wake up in the morning and in their minds get ready for another day with Jesus, teaching and preaching and healing. And then they’d remember. He’d had been arrested and killed and buried. And now there were stories going around that some of them had seen him resurrected. Still with them. The same but different. What in the world could all this mean? Now what? What were they to make of all this? How were they to keep going? What were they supposed to do now?

They needed some time to take it all in and sort it all out. And they needed one another. And they so very much needed the peace and power he continued to provide.

The early church, in its wisdom, knew that for us, too, in our time, one day alone would not be enough to take in all the power and new life of the Resurrection. Thanks be to God for this joyful season of Eastertide, as it is called in the church. We get 50 days, from the Resurrection of Christ on Easter to the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. 50 days to stay
with the story of the Resurrected Christ, the story that is central to our faith, and ask ourselves: what does it mean? What kind of difference does it make in my life?

Especially in these days of COVID-19, we need these 50 days to abide in the promise of life made new that comes to us in our Lord and Savior. We all need more than one Easter Day this year! We need all that love and exuberance and joy and promise to lift us up again and again, raising us from our own moments of stress and anxiety into the Light and Life of the Resurrected Christ.

Just like Doubting Thomas. This morning, this disciple asks the question we all ask at times: what can we really believe about all this? I love that the Bible is SO honest and realistic and matter-of-fact about all the kinds of things we experience and feel. Joy, yes! But also—fear, anxiety, uncertainty, doubt. As I’ve said many times, our faith is a faith for real people in real lives in the real world. And in the midst of this pandemic, it’s natural to ask questions, doubt ourselves, doubt each other, doubt our own strength and faith, and even doubt God.

Let’s go back to that scene and reconstruct a bit where we start out. The verses we hear this morning from John’s Gospel follow immediately on the passage of Easter Day; but because we hear them a week apart from each other, we might not see the immediate connection. After the women have found the stone rolled away from the tomb and discovered that the body is not there; after Peter finds the tomb empty; then, later that same evening, the disciples have gathered in a house and locked the doors from fear. It’s like they’ve locked themselves back into their own tomb.

Jesus stands among them. The very one who was raised up is called back now to another tomb, to the tomb they’ve created for themselves, to witness to his own resurrection. He says: “Peace be with you” and then shows them his hands and his side. They rejoice to see him and Jesus says again: “Peace be with you.”

The Risen Lord is there among them. For no tomb, whether it was one sealed with a huge stone, or another now sealed with locked doors, no tomb can stop him. He’s there. He speaks. In fact, he says exactly what they need to hear—“Peace be with you.” He shows them his wounded hands and side. And their hearts and their minds begin to remember all that he had said to them.

But still, there’s Thomas, not easily convinced, not easily won over. On the very first day here’s this disciple who takes the words right out of our mouths: I can’t believe this is really true. Sometimes we’re too embarrassed to say it, or maybe even ashamed that we have these same doubts. We all need Thomas to say what may be hard for us to say.

We all move along a continuum of certainty and doubt at differing times in our lives, and in these challenging and frightful days, differing times each day. It’s the way God made us to be as humans with minds and hearts. We vacillate daily, sometimes many times each day, between faith and doubt, between fear and the peace of God.

My prayer this day for us is that we will be able to hear the first words Jesus says on that first day of Easter: “Peace be with you.” Words that, quite frankly, seem pretty crazy on the face of it, if we’re honest. Words of a faith that doesn’t make sense, and yet, is true, on a deeper level than our minds can sometimes grasp.

It’s why we all need Thomas to be Thomas for us.

Remember just a couple days prior, when Jesus was talking with his disciples on that last night? Jesus was talking about no longer being with them, about dying. And he said to them that night: “Do not let your hearts be troubled….in my Father’s house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Everyone was listening intently. Only one of the twelve dares speak. Who? Thomas. He calls Jesus on it. “Lord, we don’t have a clue where you are going. How can we possibly know the way?” Jesus responds with those beautiful words: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life…” Knowing Thomas, I bet he was rolling his eyes and thinking something like “Yeah. Right. Whatever…”.

When Jesus comes back again a week later, Thomas gets what he needs to move towards faith. Jesus lets him see him and hear him and touch him and even old Doubting Thomas couldn’t hold out against evidence like that. Jesus does not cast him out. Jesus comes back to show him the marks of love. And Jesus does not dismiss us when we doubt. He always comes to meet us where we are.

You see, doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt is the honesty of faith, the integrity of faith. Doubt propels truth. About everything. Everything in our hearts. Everything in this world. Come, says Jesus. See where your questions lead you. See
how your doubts open the door to deeper wisdom. From me, he says, learn how to fear courageously. In me, he says, see what love can do.

Thanks to Thomas, we can believe in a God who wants us to be honest and tell the truth about everything in our hearts. We can believe in a God who, through the witness of Jesus Christ, is honestly present in this world. We can believe in a God who embraces uncertainty and empowers us to live with resilience and courage. We can believe in a God who breaks all the powers of darkness by going there first and then promises to be with us always. A God who shows us how to go forward fearing courageously.

This year, this Eastertide, the Resurrected Christ is present to open our eyes to the power of God's love at work in us and in our world. Let's inspire one another to look and see what love can do. For, if we keep looking, I'm confident that we'll see all kinds of evidence of how Easter love is happening in our families, neighborhoods and community, in ways large and small. A house I see each morning on my walk has a teddy bear in the window with a hand-colored sign that says “Smile!” Acts of generosity and kindness abound, such as the total stranger who put a roll of paper towels in our cart when he realized that he’d picked up the last pack and we needed some, too. Or simply picking up the phone and calling someone you miss seeing in church. Every act of love and generosity and compassion and selflessness matters.

I invite you to look and see what love can do during these 50 days when the Light and Life of Christ fill our hearts and our world. We may be incredulous at first, as was old doubting Thomas. Still, Christ is here, right beside us, with us now and always. So in the midst of all this, let's continue to find ways to offer and share moments of joy, hope, and love in a world that needs as much of it as it can get. Let's look around and within for all the ways to "See What Love Can Do!"

So join me now:

Christ is Risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Alleluia! Thanks be to God!

Notes:


Buechner on Thomas