

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year A  
April 19, 2020  
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church  
John 20:19-31  
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson

### **"Faith and Fear"**

That first Easter as recorded in John's gospel begins with Mary Magdalene going to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark. When she arrives she notices that the large stone that had been placed over the entrance had been rolled away. In shock, she runs to Peter and another disciple and tells them that the tomb is empty and shares with them her fears that someone or some persons – perhaps the Romans, perhaps the Jewish authorities have taken Jesus' body and she laments that she does not know where they have taken "her Lord." Peter and this other unnamed disciple rushes to the site and also witnesses the empty tomb – sees the linen wrappings lying in the place where they had placed Jesus just days before. The scriptures tell us that they didn't understand yet what had happened, and went back to their homes.

Mary, however, stays in the garden where the tomb is, weeping. There a man comes up to her and asks why she is crying. She restates her fear that someone has taken the body of her Lord. Perhaps her fear is centered on not being able to anoint Jesus' body and perform the rituals of her culture and religion around burial and properly be able to mourn the death of her beloved teacher and friend. The man who Mary mistakes as a gardener reveals himself to be Jesus, resurrected and alive, when he says her name – Mary. Immediately she recognizes him as her teacher and she believes. She leaves with a mandate from the risen Christ to tell his brothers what she has seen. And so Mary, the first to witness the resurrection, returns to where the disciples are and tells them everything she has experienced, saying "I have seen the Lord."

Our passage today picks up after Mary's initial encounter. It is the same day, but later in the evening, the disciples are all huddled together in the upper room. They have

locked themselves in this place, fearing the natural consequences of being disciples of a seemingly failed messiah who has just been executed by the state, fearing that it's just a matter of time before they share the same fate as Jesus. And I wonder at this point what they thought of Peter and the other disciples' report about the empty tomb and how did they receive Mary's witness of the resurrected Christ? Did they dismiss these accounts? Did they explain it away saying Mary just must be hysterical in her grief to mistake the gardener for Jesus? Just what *were* they thinking!?

Jesus suddenly appears among them! Those locked doors become meaningless as Jesus breaks into their secure hideaway and proclaims, "Peace be with you." He shows them the marks of his torture and crucifixion to prove that it's him, and perhaps to prove that all the events of the last few days really did happen, that it wasn't just an illusion or trick, and that he has indeed died and risen to new life. Maybe he was met with stunned silence, because he repeats again, "Peace be with you."

From the text we assume that all the disciples were there in the room except Thomas – maybe he drew the short straw and it was his duty to go out and do the grocery shopping, to get the bread, eggs, toilet paper, hand sanitizer, etc. When he returns and is told about what happened, his response is incredulous as he says, "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." Now it's really easy to make Thomas some sort of scapegoat or example of unbelief and doubt, but we gotta cut Thomas some slack, all he's asking for is the same thing that each of the other disciples and Mary had already received – a personal encounter with the Risen Christ.

A whole week later Thomas gets his wish. Jesus again appears before the disciples still locked up in their room – showing us that even with a close encounter with the resurrection, fear can still be present. And Jesus doesn't chastise Thomas or lift him up as a model of what not to do, highlighting how weak and pathetic his faith is. Instead

he meets Thomas where he's at and gives him what he needs for faith. Thomas' reaction is one of great faith proclaiming Jesus, "My Lord and my God."

Every year this text comes up as the lectionary gospel reading for the Sunday after Easter, in fact a working title for my sermon was – Another Doubting Thomas Sermon: An Associate Pastor's Lament. But we notice different things in this passage this year. The beauty of reading these stories year after year is that they can speak to us in different ways based on our circumstances each year. As we are sequestered in our homes, living in fear of the outside world and of the future, we relate a little more to the disciples in their circumstances that first Easter day. Our fears may be different, but the fear is just as real for us and as for them. We fear the uncertainty of the future – that life may never go back to normal or that nothing will have changed and that life will go back to the way things have always been. We fear getting sick, and our loved ones getting sick. We fear the loss of our jobs, our homes, our financial security, our way of life. We fear losing all the wonderful cultural touchstones that make living in this city so unique and wonderful. We fear death and dying alone – not only ourselves, but maybe even more so for those we love. Sometimes it feels like we're waiting out a slow moving hurricane and we don't know what the landscape of our lives is going to look like once it finally passes.

Each of the followers of Jesus goes through a journey of grief to hope in the resurrection – Mary, Peter, the other disciples, and Thomas. None of their encounters with the Living Christ is exactly the same, just as none of our encounters with Christ is the same. So how have you encounter the living Christ in these times? How are you being moved from grief to hope? How has Jesus shown up for you in your fear? Or are you like Thomas and are still waiting? In what ways is Jesus speaking peace into our lives?

This year for me the most powerful part of this story is that it reminds me that even though our doors are closed Jesus can still stand among us and say "peace be with you."

Before his death Jesus tells his disciples all these things that must happen. He tells them about how he will be betrayed, his death on the cross and how 3 days later he will be raised from the dead. In what is known as the farewell discourse Jesus tells his disciples this – “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Jesus reassures his disciples that they will never be alone. He will send them an advocate, a comforter, a companion. Jesus promises his followers that they will be blessed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. And here in these final chapters of John’s gospel, we see that promise fulfilled. Jesus breathes on the disciples, an act reminiscent of God breathing life into the first humans, and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” We can be assured that that same Holy Spirit remains with us today, in whatever state of grief or doubt, or joy, or hope, we find ourselves. And where ever that is for you today, friends, may the peace of Christ be with you.