

*Sermon John 20: 19-31 The Second Sunday of Easter April 12, 2015*

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." After He said this, He showed them His hands and His side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent Me, so I am sending you." Then He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven." Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into His side, I won't believe." After eight days Jesus' disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at My hands. Put your hand into My side. No more disbelief. Believe!" Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see Me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe." Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in His disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in His name.

This story is not really about the disciple with doubts even though we all know the name - even culturally we know the name - of Doubting Thomas. This story is about Jesus, and about us. I saw a New York City Episcopal priest interviewed a few days after 9/11. The interviewer asked him (of course) "How can you have faith in God - and believe in the goodness of God - when such a terrible thing happened?" The priest said (all the right things about grief and not understanding how people can cause such suffering and then he said) "Of course I doubt. Faith and certainty are not opposite sides of the same hand. Faith and doubt are the opposites." I was grieving and shocked and horrified like all of America in the weeks after 9/11 and I loved hearing people express their faith during that time. I loved the priest's response; that faith and doubt co-exist, that they're different sides of the same hand.

Today is the second Sunday of Easter. Last Sunday we heard the story of Mary and the other disciples finding the empty tomb, and Mary talking with the Risen Christ in the garden. This morning we hear again from John's gospel, that it was still the first day of the week, later in the day, when the disciples were all together. For them it was like the shock, horror, murder, mayhem of 9/11. When the unthinkable happens we react with similar shock and grief and fear... and doubt. Faith... in the goodness of God, in our ability to survive, in the resiliency of the human spirit; that comes later. I was serving the Palo Alto First United Methodist Church on 9/11 and on Sunday 9/16 the church was packed. There were probably 1,000 people in worship that day. We were shocked and grieved and afraid and full of doubt about the future; and we came to cry and sing and cry and pray and be together under one roof and to hear some the news that the Risen Christ was with us.

John tells us that after Jesus' crucifixion the disciples were huddled together behind locked doors because they were so shocked and grieved and... afraid. Jesus came and stood among them and breathed His peace upon them. Thomas wasn't with the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. Later when the disciples saw Thomas, they echoed what Mary had told them early that morning: "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas didn't believe them. And it's clear the disciples hadn't believed either, when had Mary told them, "I have seen the Lord!" for here we find them, behind closed and locked doors because they are so full of doubt and fear.

After eight days Jesus again appeared to the disciples, who were again behind closed and locked doors. After the unthinkable happens, faith takes time. Faith that God is present, that love triumphs, that we will smile and laugh and trust again, takes time.

The disciples had seen Jesus but Thomas doubted their word, and it seems that doubt is able to seep under doors and into the very air we breathe. And so again the disciples gathered behind locked doors. And Jesus again appeared to them, and breathed His peace upon them. He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at My hands. Put your hand into My side." There is no disapproval or disappointment in Jesus' voice that Thomas (and all the disciples) were doubtful and afraid. Instead there was reassurance. "Put your finger here. Look at My hands. Believe."

Doubt and fear are natural reactions when the unthinkable happens. Put your hand up, palm facing out. Doubt holds up its hand to ward off more attacks. Jesus was a human being in all our fullness and He understood us as only another human being could understand us. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus sweat blood and wept in fear and dread, and prayed, "If it's [in any way] possible let this cup pass from me." Jesus understood that the disciples were afraid and full of doubt. Just as it was unthinkable that the Lord had been hung naked on a cross to die an excruciatingly painful and humiliating death - a criminal's death - it was unimaginable that He was raised from the dead. The stone blocking His tomb had been rolled away. The tomb was empty. A woman disciple, Mary, claimed to have seen the Risen Christ.

You've been given some small stones. Easter is a season of stones. The stone was rolled away from the tomb and the disciples were given the choice to believe that just as He said He would, Jesus was risen from the dead. Clench your hand around those stones - not to hurt yourself - but to hold them as tightly as you can. Those stones contain the fear and doubt the disciples experienced, huddled behind closed and locked doors. Those stones contain the 9/11's in our lives, and in the history of humanity; the

unthinkable tragedies and horrors and our own doubts and fears. Now open your hand and look at those stones and name them. Health concerns. Loneliness. War and poverty in so much of the world. Violence. Crime. An unrewarding job. Broken family relationships. A financial downturn. Mental illness. Addiction. Our fragile planet. Can you name those stones as fears you have? Close your fist again over those stones. Let's imagine our hands as the doors that are closed and locked against our fears. And now open your hand again. If doubt and fear hold up their hand to ward off attack, faith, I think, is found the palm of the hand, held open and vulnerable. Opening our hands and naming our fears and seeing that we all have them, as even Jesus did, lets us see, lets Jesus see, where we need healing. Where we need His peace. It was the palm of His hand that Jesus offered to Thomas, to show His woundedness: "Put your finger here. Look at My hand."

Easter Sunday is the hardest day of the year for me to preach. Good Friday and Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday are three days of unthinkable, unbelievable, impossible events that are cornerstones of the Christian faith. And to those who are strangers to the story, the crucifixion and resurrection must seem like madness. Without the love of God [which came to us in the birth of Jesus] to give life and flesh to this story those who hear it must be doubtful. I think everyone can relate to Doubting Thomas: "Unless I see Jesus... I will not believe." Faith and doubt are opposite sides of the same hand. They co-exist. For those who have not heard the story of God's love for us, or more importantly, for those who have heard the story but have not experienced the radically inclusive and compassionate love of God, Thomas' words must speak for them: "Unless I see Jesus... I will not believe."

Jesus must be seen in *us* or this story from John's gospel remains words on a page that will someday fade and crumple into dust. If we want to see Jesus we must hold both faith and doubt in our hands and acknowledge them. If we want to see Jesus we must choose to have faith. If we want to see Jesus we must open ourselves to experience His love and grace for us, sinners and broken bits of humanity that we are. If we want to see Jesus we must breathe peace into stressful and hurtful and doubtful situations. If we want to see Jesus we must see Him in ourselves, and in the stones we hold of doubt and fear and disbelief, and see that He does not judge us for our woundedness. If we want to see Jesus we must understand that He loves us and comes to us as we are. He shows us His wounds. His hands. His side. Jesus comes to us to breathe peace on our fears and our doubts. Jesus comes to us.

Each one of us is a Doubting Thomas. We all doubt. We all want proof. We all wish we could shut and lock the doors against the things we fear and the things we don't understand. And Jesus comes to us through those closed and locked doors. As He came to Thomas, Jesus comes to us, breathing peace upon our fears and doubts and inviting us to see His wounds. Doors and locks can't keep Jesus away from us. Wounds and fears and doubts can't keep Jesus away from us. We have doubts, we have fears. But we can choose to have faith, and to see (with the gift of holy imagination) that Jesus comes to us, to breathe peace upon us. As we continue to live into the Easter season, we'll see and hear, along with the first disciples, the Risen Christ. As we walk through this resurrection season let us hear Jesus' words to Thomas as said to each of us, "Put your finger here. Look at My hands. Believe!"

After our time of prayer, as we are invited to receive the Body of Christ and the Cup of Salvation, please bring the stones with you and place them in the bowls nearby. These stones, representing our fears and doubt, will remain here throughout the season of Easter. At any time you may come back to the bowls and retrieve your stones and pick up your doubt and fear and worry. But praise God! you don't have to clench your fist around them. You can hold them in the palm of your hand and ask Jesus to breathe His peace, and His healing upon them. To breathe His peace and His healing upon you. And by His example may we breathe peace upon the world. Amen.