

Fast-Track Reconciliation

John 20:19-20, 24-29

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you."²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy.

²⁴ Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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."

²⁶ After eight days his 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." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!" ²⁸ Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

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Here it is the first Sunday after Easter. This text in John's Gospel is about how Jesus miraculously appeared to the disciples after his resurrection. After the guilt of desertion and denial on Good Friday, and the fear and fleeing of the steel magnolias on Easter morning, it seemed to me that we ought to celebrate the joy found in that closed room.

The text begins on Easter Day. Sometime earlier in the day, Peter and another disciple had seen the empty tomb. But, while they obviously saw that the tomb was empty, it's not at all clear that they understood that Jesus was resurrected. Now, it's evening, and the disciples are gathered together in fear in a closed room. They know what happened to Jesus when the religious leaders decided he was a threat to their security. They know the Romans decided that Jesus should be executed. How dangerous is it - for people who were his followers? His accomplices? Are the Romans sweeping the streets for fellow conspirators?

Now the tomb is empty! What does that mean? The women say a man told them that Jesus is looking for them! That's hard to believe. Why didn't Jesus save himself with one of his miracles? But, no, Jesus was executed, that much is certain. If he really is alive, what is he going to do to us? We didn't stick with him when he was arrested. We didn't show up at the cross when he was in so much pain. Most of us just let him die all by himself.

Suddenly, there's another person in the room. How can that be? The door was bolted! Actually, the Greek says that the door was closed. Either way, the point seems to be that the disciples were hiding in seclusion and now there is another person in the room. We are told that it's Jesus, but it isn't clear at all that the disciples recognize him immediately. Do you remember that we're told how earlier Mary Magdalene thought he was a gardener? Remember how the two people walking to Emmaus talked with him as they walked along and didn't recognize him for the longest time? Why? Some of these people had been with Jesus for years, traveling with him, eating with him, spending lots of time with him. How could they possibly not recognize his appearance or his voice? Still, all of the gospel writers mention or suggest that this lack of recognition was common.¹

We tend to focus on Thomas – Doubting Thomas, we call him. Shame on him! He said, "I won't believe unless I see the wounds. I have to see - to believe!" Somehow we seem to think that this set Thomas apart from everyone else. Well, we need to rehabilitate Thomas, a bit. The two

¹ Matt 28:17, Luke 24:11,25,37, & 41, Mark 16:14

people walking to Emmaus earlier that day hadn't believed that Jesus had been resurrected. They had heard rumors, but filled with disbelief and disappointment, they had headed out of Jerusalem. The dream was over. Their hopes were dashed. In more than one gospel account of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene, and perhaps other women, come to realize at some point that Jesus had been raised from the dead. But when they tried to tell others, they weren't believed. Now, later in the day, Jesus appeared to these doubting, confused, and fearful folks in the closed room and showed them his wounds and they believed. Thomas needed no more evidence than almost everybody else. Doubting Thomas? It seems that everybody was a doubter.

Still, the story of Thomas highlights a problem. Thomas, like many others failed to believe his closest companions. Just as they hadn't believed the women, so he failed to believe them. Thomas knew how life was. You lived. Then you died. And there was no returning from death. He knew what he knew and he was certain. When I was younger, I was very certain about many things regarding what Christians were to believe and how Christians were to behave. On many topics, I felt that I had found rock solid eternal Truth with a capital "T." Fortunately, some of my certainties were challenged by information and ways of understanding that were new to me. I realized that while I thought I had arrived at my faith destination, in reality, I was on a faith journey. My focus changed from trying not to mess up, to looking for opportunities to do good. All of this was possible because I began to realize that I didn't know all of the answers, not all of the answers were easy, and that I might find deeper and wiser answers in the thoughts of others who had studied longer and harder than me. In short, if I disagreed with someone about some matter of Christian faith, I might learn something if I listened and considered their understanding. Moving from certainty to searching isn't an easy thing to do.

Let me go chase a rabbit trail for a moment. While I was in the hospital, attendance at the Maundy Thursday service and Easter worship dropped off. It should have increased! There was an opportunity to hear a fresh word from another person who is dedicated to sharing what they have learned by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Now, before long, I will be away for three months. Besides resting and being restored in body and soul, I will be digging deeper into how we can understand what Christ did on the cross. It is a fundamentally important topic that deserves, not trite slogans, but deep understanding. And because a lot of people have spent a lot of time down through the centuries thinking about this, I'm going to go digging through a good library to listen to what they have said. While I am gone, you have a wonderful opportunity to hear what a freshly minted Master of Divinity has bubbling up from his studies and his thinking. Don't miss this opportunity for your own growth in faith! Doubting Thomas was held up as an example of our resistance to new ideas, even from friends we trust. Don't be a Doubting Thomas! Nathan has a younger and limber mind. His generation cannot help but see the world through their experience and he can provide a window into how younger generations see the church and how they can find food for their souls in this place. Show up! Pay attention! This summer you may get real insight into how First Pres can move into a wonderfully effective and faithful future! While you're at it, please show Nathan and his wife some of your powerful Christian hospitality!

Looking again at the first few verses of today's text, there is something startling to be noticed. We tend to get lost in the miracles. Jesus is alive! He seems to suddenly appear in this closed room. Some of us might expect Jesus to flip open his communicator and say, "Thank you, Scotty. Correct coordinates, as always." Jesus speaks! "Peace be unto you." Then Jesus shows them his wounds. Now, they know for sure who this is that has suddenly shown up. Despite the initial greeting of "Peace be with you," they have to be feeling uncertain and queasy. "I ran away." "I denied even knowing him." I didn't believe the women this morning." "Jesus has to be even more disappointed in me than I am in myself! He must be furious! What will he do to me?"

And then. Jesus repeated himself, "Peace be with you." Peace. Not just the absence of conflict or war or hatred - but peace in the same sense as *shalom*. Peace that includes harmony and

order and general well-being. Peacefulness. Contentment. Peace that you feel when all is right in the world. Peace in your hearts and in your conscience. This is reconciliation.

A few weeks ago, we looked at the reconciliation between twin brothers, Esau and Jacob. It took twenty years for them to let go of the greed, the hatred, the theft, and the desire to kill that had burned furiously between them. Twenty years. And here Jesus stands, three days after desertion and denial, only hours since they had disbelieved the witness of some among them and had chosen disbelief and fear. This wasn't twenty year reconciliation. It was fast-track reconciliation. Here, if you desire miracles, is the third miracle of the day. Jesus forgave them! Notice the circumstances. They hadn't gone looking for him. They didn't drop to their knees begging forgiveness. They didn't grovel and promise to repent, to change their ways and be better disciples in the future. No, despite their actions, their weakness, their lack of trust, Jesus appeared and said, "Shalom is yours."

Julian of Norwich touched on this Fast –Track Reconciliation when she wrote, "God looks on our struggling and falling with pity and not with blame. For this passing life does not require us to live wholly without sin. He loves us endlessly, and we sin customarily, and he reveals it to us most gently . . . Our courteous Lord does not want his servants to despair because they fall often and grievously; for our falling does not hinder him from loving us."

And wonder of wonders, Jesus immediately follows his pronouncement of reconciliation with, "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." (John 20:21 CEB) This may well be one of the most atrocious things Jesus ever did. He took this disappointing ragtag group of quivering nobodies, reconciled them to him with a word of peace, and sent them out! He gave them purpose and mission! "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Go do what I've been doing. What have you just experienced? Love! Forgiveness! Fast-track reconciliation! This is gospel! This is good news! Go treat other people like this!

There is our message today. Act like you're forgiven and that you're happy and peace-filled as a result. And when someone asks you why you have that silly grin on your face, say, "I'm just amazed every time I think about how quick God is to forgive and accept us." Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
We have been given the ministry of reconciliation.
Go forth as ambassadors for Christ.