

“SHARING THE PEACE”

John 20:19-31 April 23rd, 2017

This morning’s message is the first in a short series for the Easter Season about Awakening: Awakening to our ministry as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Awakening to the nourishment we receive for this ongoing work through the sacrament of Holy Communion. And awakening to what it means to live fully as baptized members of our Christians community.

Are we fully awake in our practice of Christian discipleship? Or are there some things we still need to work on?

Most of us are probably familiar with the story of Thomas. Doubting Thomas. Thomas, the one disciple who stubbornly refused to believe until he saw with his own eyes the risen Christ. Silly Thomas. If only he had listened to the others, but no. He has to see for himself. After all, seeing is believing. He has to ask questions; he has to make sure.

Buy let’s really look at Thomas. Is he really all that different from the other disciples? When we think back to the Easter story, Mary went to the tomb and it was empty, so she ran back and told Peter and John. Did they immediately believe her? No, they went to the tomb to see for themselves. It isn’t until they go inside and see the cloth and the linens lying empty in the tomb that they believe. What is it that they believe, though? That Jesus has risen? No. We are told, “They did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” (John 20:9) They return back home, knowing only that the tomb is empty.

Even Mary, when Jesus appears to her directly, does not recognize him at first. And even after she does recognize him, she goes back and tells the disciples, but we are given no indication that they do anything about it. In fact, in the other

Gospels, it tells us that they did not believe what she told them. As Luke puts it, “These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” (Luke 24:11)

Then we get to the passage for today and what happens? The disciples are in a locked room and Jesus comes and stands among them. Do they immediately cry out in relief? No. Then “After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. THEN the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. (John 20:20) Are these really the faithful disciples of whom Thomas is the only skeptic? No. All the disciples need proof to believe. All of them see Jesus, all of them hear Jesus, and all of them see the evidence of his bodily resurrection. It is only after they see this proof that they rejoice.

But, of course, after they believe, and they tell Thomas, he still wants proof for himself. I mean, sure, no one believed Mary Magdalene; but she’s only one person, and some would say, not even a “real” disciple. But now Thomas has the word of *ten* people, all of them disciples of Jesus. Why would he still doubt?

Perhaps we need to think about Thomas himself for a moment. What else do we know about him? Has he always been such a mediocre disciple? There isn’t much about him in the gospels. In fact, aside from his name appearing in the lists of disciples, there are only two other instances where Thomas is identified by name, both in the Gospel of John. One is when Jesus insists on going to Judea after the death of Lazarus. The disciples know this is not a smart move. The last time Jesus went to Judea, the Jews tried to stone him. But Jesus is determined to go. And it is Thomas who says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (John 11:16) This doesn’t sound like the Thomas we know, the doubting Thomas, the stubborn, hard-headed one. This is a Thomas of courage and conviction.

Thomas appears again in John 14. Now, this is more like the Thomas we

think we know, the questioning one. Jesus is telling the disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them in his Father's house and that they already know the way. "Thomas says to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'"

Thomas has been told by Jesus himself that by seeing Jesus he has seen God. So when the disciples tell him three days after the crucifixion that they have seen Jesus alive, is it any wonder he wants to see for himself? He knows what seeing Jesus means. Seeing Jesus means seeing God. Well, yes, you might say, but he doesn't just *want* to see him, he says he *will not believe* until he does see him. But, here again, we see Thomas actually being faithful to Jesus. Because Jesus has told the disciples, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!' Do not go after them." (Luke 21:8. Thomas will not be led astray. He's going to test.

Looking at Thomas, "the doubter," we might be moved to think that Thomas actually gets the short end of the stick in most Christian traditions. In The United Methodist Church we have room for the question-askers, the doubters, as they seek to learn and grow in their faith. We really encourage everyone to read the scriptures, to follow the Spiritual disciplines, and to become more mature Christians as they do so. While we have our core doctrines, of course, we don't expect blind faith, but we continue to take this faith journey with our Lord as we become more faithful disciples.

In the painting by Carvaggio, "The Incredulity of Thomas, Jesus appears to Thomas and Thomas is leaning over looking intently at Jesus' wounds as he

thrusts his finger into Jesus' side. But what is especially striking is that in this painting Jesus is not viewing Thomas accusingly. He has no expression on his face that says, "There! Are you *finally* satisfied? What does it take to convince you?" Instead, Jesus is looking down at Thomas and guiding his hand into the hole in his side. He offers himself as physical proof.

It's true that Jesus asks for faith, but he does not ask for blind faith. Jesus is willing for us to have open-eyed faith!

But what about that pesky part at the end, "Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have believed"? Okay, so Jesus forgives Thomas for wanting to make sure, but isn't Jesus saying that those who *really* believe won't need that kind of proof?

The thing we should remember here is that Thomas did not just believe what he saw. Thomas also believed what he did not see. Thomas has seen someone come back from the dead before. He was there when Jesus raised Lazarus. Being alive after being dead does not necessarily equal being God. The key for Thomas is that he knows the implications of what he has seen. He believes that Jesus is not only alive, but also is God. The other disciples rejoice at seeing Jesus alive, but Thomas is the only one that proclaims, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas is both the one who sees and believes that Jesus has risen and the one who has not seen, but believes beyond seeing that Jesus is Lord.

The Christian faith will always face challenges from those who claim it will not stand up to scrutiny. John says as much in the sentences right after this story of Thomas, when he says, "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.) Clearly, John know that like Thomas we are going to need evidence for our faith. And he provides it.

In a culture that seems to waver back and forth between on the one hand uncritically accepting and forwarding every sensational e-mail that comes along—especially when it strengthens our political positions or confirms our long-held beliefs—and on the other hand skeptically crying out “that picture is photo-shopped!” when something seems too fantastical or challenging, we seem to be caught between blind faith and blind doubt. Perhaps it is time to let Thomas be our guide. To not be afraid to ask questions or seek evidence—God can stand up to it- but also to not be afraid to accept the amazing reality that is the resurrection. To see with open-eyed faith the confirmation of Jesus’ life and the revelation that he is our Lord and our God.

Now I would like to back up a little ways in the text for today and go back to when Jesus first appears to the disciples in John 20:19-21. “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’.”

In many United Methodist congregations across the connection, there is a pattern in worship that begins when the pastor or another worship leader stands and greets the gathered worshipping community with an enthusiastic “Good Morning!” And then at some point in the service he or she invites those in the congregation to greet their neighbors, welcome their visitors, and “pass the peace of Christ.”

In some churches, the invitation to pass the peace functions primarily as an extended time of congregational greeting. In one church, people turn to peo-

ple seated immediately around them and say “Good Morning,” shake hands, or even embrace their neighbors. In another church, people leave their pews and wander around the sanctuary greeting their fellow worshipers with handshakes and hugs until the pastor is able to regain control of the service. (Does this one sound familiar? Especially when it mentions the pastor losing control...) In many churches, the people actually do greet one another with words specifically about peace: Peace be with you. And also with you.

But as we begin the work of Easter Awakening it is important for us to be reminded that sharing the peace of Christ is not just a fancy way to invite people to greet one another in worship. Sharing the peace is part of our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the United Methodist tradition, the passing of the peace serves as a reminder that those who came to the table are called to be reconciled with their neighbors. We retain this language in our current eucharistic prayer in the United Methodist Church, for example, in the invitation to the table, “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.” After we offer our community prayer of confession and are pardoned, we are invited to immediately turn and express signs of God’s peace to those around us.

Do we take this call to be at peace with our neighbors seriously? As we have moved the sharing of God’s peace from the service of Holy Communion and reassigned it to a position during the weekly service, has it become an issue of hospitality or an unwanted invasion on our personal space?

What is critical for the text we just focused on is that we see—people hiding. People who are literally locked in a closet, like you do when a tornado is

headed your way. People who are hiding because they are afraid to live in the light of day. It is into this scene of fear and hiding that Jesus appears and offers us this blessing “Peace be with you.”

The good news is that Jesus Christ appears. He rises from the dead and walks directly into this place of hiding and terror as one who has not just been wounded (as he shows them his hands and side), but as one who had just literally been murdered by the very people from whom the disciples are hiding. He strolls right into their hiding place and speaks love directly into the face of their terror and hatred and fear. And it is from this place that he gives them, and all of us, the authority to do exactly what he is doing. “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

He gives us authority to offer forgiveness. He gives us a mandate to offer peace to others. He commissions us all for this work of ministry. And in doing these things, he awakens us more fully to the ministry of discipleship to which he is calling us.

Peace be with you. I am sending you as God has sent me, to go forth and minister into the midst of the fearful, the hidiers, the closeted, the condemned, the ostracized, the haters and the hated. I am sending you, as God has sent me, to breathe peace into these places of darkness.

Jesus sends God’s people out into the world to do what he has done. He sets us up here to have great responsibility for one another’s care and for one another’s very lives. So let’s hear Jesus speaking his words of comfort and commission to us when he says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Let us be awakened to a renewed understanding of what it means to share the peace of Christ. Let us understand that when we offer peace to someone,

it is not the same as saying “Good Morning.” It isn’t the same thing as greeting people or welcoming a visitor to worship.

This is the good news offered to us directly from Jesus!! He is proclaiming power and blessing us for its distribution to the world. And he is showing us that when we do this, when we extend the hand of peace and reconciliation in Christ’s name, we offer God’s peace out of our own places of woundedness & brokenness.

We offer ourselves as part of Christ’s risen body, yes. But we must not forget that we are also a part of Christ’s wounded body. We are willing to bear the wounds of Christ not as a sign of dishonor or shame, but as a sign of who we are in the risen Lord. We have been wounded, but we have been renewed—born again—to be victorious in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is why it is so critical that we don’t come into the community of faith holding grudges. We don’t come to the table holding grudges. And we don’t go to our graves holding grudges.

No. We let all things go in the name of Jesus Christ. We speak the saving power of forgiveness through our words and actions. We come to all of these spaces and to all of God’s people, bearing the wounds of our Savior and responding not with anger, fear, and judgment, but rather, by reaching out with open hands, open hearts, and open minds to offer God’s invitation of peace and reconciliation.

As we awaken to our ministry of discipleship, let us hear Jesus speaking to us. Let us hear him calling us and commissioning us, everywhere and always, to breath God’s reconciling love into the world. Amen and amen.