Receiving and Believing Peace Presbyterian Church

John 20:19-31 2nd Sunday of Easter

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At airports and waiting rooms, I play this game on my phone called Wordscapes. It is a kind of personal scrabble game, where you have six letters and have to fill the board with words from those letters. Along the way you receive gifts which is Wordscapes way of keeping you from giving up. When you receive that extra gift of a clue, you keep believing you can get the word. And so you stay in the game.

Faith is a gift that you receive to stay in the game of life. You have to receive some clues, or reassurances to keep the faith, to believe, like Doubting Thomas had to see Jesus himself, to see his scars, to believe that he was really alive. Believing is sometimes really hard – like believing there was dancing in this sanctuary – if you were not here to see, you might have a hard time believing it, but it really did happen!

Thomas wasn’t there when Jesus breathed Holy Spirit on the disciples Easter night, but later he had his own experience of receiving and believing. I saw a good comic of Peter and Thomas, where Thomas is saying, “Give it a break, Peter! Stop calling me Doubting Thomas. I don’t call you Denying Peter.” It is hard to believe until you receive, until you have that experience of the Spirit that enlivens your faith. Jesus does not express any disappointment in Thomas, but gave him what he needed, and only then said, “Do not doubt but believe.”

NRS **John 20:19** 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." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 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." 26 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." 27 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." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 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." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 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.

Gathered in fear and confusion, they locked the doors, and waited. And suddenly there he was, in their midst. What are his first words? "Peace be with you." No scolding. No turmoil. Peace. Those words that we say to each other every week. I hope that’s what you say to each other, instead of “Good morning. How’re you doing?” No “Peace be with you.” It is a powerful statement. I hope when you say it to a friend, to a spouse, to a newcomer, to a person who irritates you, I hope you are saying it with real intentionality.

I hope you are saying it not just for our relationships in this congregation, but you are saying it for our community, our country, and our world.

In classes today, you can live out peace in the Love Languages, you can live out peace with Earth Honoring Ethics, and you can live out peace by getting better acquainted with the letter of James which challenges us to with Christian integrity – making our action and our words match the faith that we hear and say that we believe. Our name is Peace, so every one of us who claims the name of this congregation should be like Christ walking into a room of hopelessness and despair, offering people the gift Christ gives to the world,“Peace be with you.”

As Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to the disciples, we can hear in this breath the echo of Genesis and “God's breathing life into creatures at the beginning of the world (Gen. 2:7). Easter tell us that we are recreated through Christ's resurrection...a current and continual experience of new life in Christ available to all” (O. Wesley Allen, New Proclamation 2008).

Jesus then talked about that difficult subject – forgiveness. Eugene Peterson's casual translation of Jesus’ words provide a very different way of seeing the gift of forgiveness and grace: “If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?” (The Message). Oh, what a beautiful witness to God’s love when we let go of the bitterness and forgive those who have wronged us or those we love. When we hold tightly to anger at others, it occupies entirely too much of our soul, leaving less room for gratitude and joy and love and peace. Anger and fear go hand-in-hand, and Jesus says, “Peace be with you. Release it and find your liberty.”

This text tells us that "We cannot keep the Spirit to ourselves. We are gifted with it for the sake of others. God gives the church the spiritual gift of resurrection life so that the church will bring it to bear on the world." (O. Wesley Allen) A personal, private faith while significant, is not the ultimate goal. Jesus intends us to have a vibrant faith and be a Spirit filled church as a gift to the world. Receive and believe is not for you alone – it is for you to bring peace to a hurting world.

John’s Gospel is always interested in “seeing” in the vision of Christ’s people. Mary Magdalene said, “I have seen the Lord.” Thomas says, “I will not believe until I see for myself.” He not only wanted to see. He wanted to touch. Life is sensory experience. We church folks have been rather judgmental of "Doubting Thomas." After all, the disciples have all seen Jesus and the marks on his hands and side. But once Thomas "sees" and even touches the wounds of Jesus, he believes, too. Don’t we all need to see, and to feel it ourselves – in order to believe? We cannot just accept what someone else tells us. I can stand here and say to you that Christ is alive and real, but until that truth dawns in your soul in such a way that you receive it, it does not become a reality that you can affirm. Each of us wants to hear for ourselves the words of Christ, “Peace be with you. Do not doubt, but believe.” And though we cannot see and touch like Thomas and the disciples, Jesus calls us the blessed for believing without seeing.

But we are not blind to the Risen Christ. We receive the gift of faith. For we can see the marvelous and wonderful ways the risen Christ is bringing new life, providing healing and grace, forgiveness and new hope. Relationships repaired and renewed, health restored after suffering and illness, delight in life after long grief, people growing in faith. We see, and we believe. Resurrection isn't something that happened a long time ago, something that we simply commemorate each Easter. In our day to day lives as the church in ministry, we put our own hands on the wounds of this broken world, and we also witness to the hope that sustains us in knowing that we are going to rise again, that everything is going to be all right in the end. Death may seem to win, but life gets the victory.

William Sloane Coffin, great prophetic preacher, who died more than a decade ago during Holy Week, once said: “You can't think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. If your heart's a stone, you can't have decent thoughts – either about personal relations or about international ones. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.”

“Whenever we're afraid and hiding out, all locked up, God comes to us in the midst of our fear and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever doubts churn in our minds, whatever sins trouble our consciences, whatever pain and worry bind us up, whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely, God comes to us and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever hunger and need we feel deep in our souls, God calls us to the table, feeds us well, and sends us out into the world to be justice and peace, salt and light, hope for the world. Peace be with you. Receive the gift of God and believe the truth of this love.

*Praying: Dear Christ, we open the locked doors and the fearful rooms of our hearts to your peace. We receive your Holy Spirit to heal the wounded parts of our souls and make us whole. Give us the gift of faith. Give us that experience of your presence so that we like Thomas can bow in humility and awe, saying “My Lord and my God” and be effective witnesses to the faith which gives us hope.*