

Wesley United Methodist Church

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A Place to Call Home

Title: All Are Welcome

Scripture: Acts 4:32-35

1 John 1:1-2:2

John 20:19-31

Today's Gospel reading is probably one of my all-time favorites. I have always liked the story of Thomas and identified with him. Thomas wasn't with the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them after his resurrection. The disciples were in a room with the doors locked because they were afraid when Jesus suddenly appeared among them. Jesus immediately told them not to be afraid, "Peace be with you." He showed them his hands and his side and told them that just as God had sent him, so now he was sending them.

Thomas wasn't with them when Jesus appeared. We don't know where Thomas was but when the disciples told him about Jesus' appearance he said, "Unless I see the marks 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." This has earned Thomas the nickname "Doubting Thomas".

We really can't blame Thomas for not believing immediately. In the verse just before today's reading, Mary Magdalene had gone to the disciples with the news, "I have seen the Lord". Yet, that amazing news had not immediately changed their actions – they were in a locked room when Jesus appeared. They were afraid. Yet, Jesus didn't chastise them. He simply announced peace to them. He showed them his hands and side.

A week later, they were still in the house, and the doors were still locked. This time, Thomas was with them when Jesus appeared to them.

Once again, recognizing and accepting their fear, Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you.” Then Jesus offered Thomas the very proof that he thought he needed, the same proof that he had shown the other disciples a week earlier, his hands and his side.

Faced with the proof he had needed, Thomas responded, “My Lord and My God!” This is one of the strongest and clearest declarations of faith found in the Bible. I like Thomas. I identify with Thomas. Like Thomas, I like to have proof; I like to have my questions answered. It’s important to notice though that Thomas didn’t live in doubt. His doubt was an honest reaction that named what he needed in order to believe. Thomas was open to being convinced and he gladly believed when he was given reason to do so. “He expressed his doubts fully and had them answered completely. Doubting was only his way of responding, not his way of life.”<sup>i</sup>

Thomas appears only occasionally in the scripture but on one of his other appearances, earlier in John’s gospel, Jesus has just told his disciples about Lazarus’ death and that he was going there to raise him. Thomas, knowing the danger that Jesus was facing said to the other disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Thomas was a man who asked questions. The only other time he speaks in the gospels is also in John’s gospel in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter when he asks the question that was probably also on the mind of the other disciples. Jesus had just explained that he was going away to prepare a heavenly home for his followers, and that one day they would join him there. Thomas reacted by saying, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”<sup>ii</sup>

Thomas appears one more time in John’s gospel after Jesus’ resurrection. The disciples, including Thomas, decided to go fishing in the

Sea of Tiberius and Jesus appeared to them. Jesus sent his disciples out to tell the world about God and God's ways and Thomas took this very seriously. Church traditions tells us that he preached in ancient Babylon, where Iraq is today, in Persia – present day Iran, and went as far as the east coast of India. When the Portuguese landed in India in the early 1600s they found a group of Christians there – the Mar Thoma Church established through Thomas' preaching over 1500 years earlier. We believe that Thomas was killed around 72 AD in India. Thomas, who we call the Doubter, came to believe so fervently that he spent the rest of his life preaching the Christian message of love and forgiveness to what were then the ends of the earth.

When I think about the disciples gathered around Jesus, we have vivid examples of how everyone was welcomed. Thomas the doubter was welcomed, never chastised. The impetuous and headstrong Peter was always welcomed by Jesus, even after he had denied Jesus three times on the night Jesus was arrested. The disciples who argued about who should be first were still loved and accepted by Jesus. There was never a question that Jesus rejected. There was never a person that he rejected. Throughout his ministry, Jesus always reached out to those who were considered the last, the lost, and the least in society. Everyone was always welcome.

This ideal would be important to the early church and throughout all of history -even though we have not always been very good at it. The Bible, both Old and New Testament, focus on welcoming others, welcoming the stranger, the immigrant, the person who is on the outside.

Psalm 133 begins: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" The Bible and especially some of our readings for

today hold out a beautiful vision of people living together in love and harmony. The reading from the Acts of the Apostles talks about the early community that followed the teachings of Jesus, or followers of “The Way”. “The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul... There wasn’t a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostle’s feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

The portrayal of this inclusiveness, and life in community can warm our hearts, and make us nod, cheer, and hope, but the reality is that welcoming all people, living together is not easy. It can be difficult and messy, but it can also be transformative. After today’s reading in the Acts of the Apostles that describes this unity of caring for each other, the very next chapter tells us a different story, showing us just how difficult it can be.

A couple sold a piece of property but instead of giving all their profits to the community they decided to keep part of the profits for themselves. There really was nothing wrong with this – it was their property to own, sell and do with as they chose. The problem, however, was that they were dishonest about what they did. They pretended that they were giving everything when they were not. They were pretending that their heart was in a different place than it really was. Sadly, they did not realize that they would still be welcome in the community even if they decided to keep all the profits for themselves. They would still be included if they had been honest about where they were and what they were doing.

I wonder sometimes about why they held back some of the profits. Were they afraid that their money would be used inappropriately? Were they afraid that they might someday need the money themselves and think they needed to keep some for a rainy day. Did they think that some of the

people needing assistance were not good enough, not worthy, were they afraid of them, afraid that they didn't share the same work ethic? We have no way of knowing what their motivation was, but it seems likely that there was some fear at the base of their actions.

First John was written to an early community of faith that had an internal conflict when some of the community began to drift away from the traditional beliefs about Jesus and from their high ethical standards. There were some that were proclaiming that Jesus was not fully human and they were not practicing love toward one another. They are being reminded of the importance of entering into full community and practicing love for one another.

It seems to me that we live in a culture today where much of what I hear is very different from practicing love for one another and taking care of those in need. It seems to me that there is a lot of fear and a culture of fear is being cultivated. I receive emails from both Democrats and Republicans and I have noticed a commonality to them. Democrats tell me to be afraid of what Republicans are doing. Republicans tell me to be afraid of what Democrats are doing. Emails from Trump's campaign tell me to be afraid of immigrants and that the only way that I can be safe is if we build a wall to protect ourselves. Democrats tell me that the only way I can be safe is if Republicans are defeated otherwise the things I value in life will be destroyed if they remain in control. Sadly, this approach is to use fear to try to get me to vote, act, support the approach of the particular party.

When I place these messages against the gospel message I see a huge gap and I don't really know what to do about that. Probably, like most of you, my alliances fall closer to one side than to the other, but I deplore the methods of both sides. Recently I was involved in a discussion with

three other women and the youngest of us offered her opinion that right now the best we can do is to get involved locally and work close to home.

As a pastor, what that means to me is that one of the places we want to start is with our own church and our own families. One of my sons has political opinions that are very different than mine. That does not change our commitment to love each other and to treat each other kindly even when we strongly disagree.

In our church, I am reasonably certain that we have a variety of different opinions about many things and not just politically. If we attend worship and leave immediately without speaking to anyone and if I am careful about what I say in a sermon then we might never become aware of our differences. But if we take the risk of interacting with each other, work on projects or missions together, participate in a study together or gather for fellowship and conversation, we might discover that we don't agree with each other about everything. We may even find that there are people who rub us the wrong way, people who we find irritating.

It is then that we are called to remember that with Jesus, all are welcome. Sometimes, even in the church, we can get caught up in fear – fear that someone will be upset by something we do, fear that someone will upset us, fear that the new person will change things, fear that the people who have been here for a long time will not be willing to try something different, fear that things will change, fear that they will stay the same, fear that someone will challenge us to see things in a different way. You name it. Fears are legion. It is easy for a church to get caught up in fear and start to lock its doors either figuratively or literally.

But Jesus won't have it. Jesus shows up in the midst of the disciples who've locked themselves in a room, probably feeling displaced and

distraught following the dramatic crucifixion. Jesus shows up in the midst of our fears whatever they may be and says, “Peace be with you.” Jesus shows up in the midst of our questions, our doubts, our conflicts and reminds us that all are welcome. Jesus reminds us that when Thomas doubted, when Peter denied, when the disciples argued over who should be first, that he still loved each of them and he invites and challenges us to do the same. When that seems difficult to do, we can ask Jesus to help us love through him.

Living as Easter people is living toward flourishing together. We try again and again to love, care, connect, share, and become more human. We try and sometimes fail to share God’s love in obvious and incarnate ways. As Easter people we shine a light on the ways that the resurrected Jesus is still at work in the world, not just in our feeble attempts at community but also in our exercising a shared life. The scriptures today invite us to connect in spite of our fear. They point us toward true community where none is better than another, none are excluded from the presence and love of the risen Christ. We are living resurrection together, encountering the risen Christ along the way!<sup>iii</sup>

Let us continue to remind each other that you never need to doubt or question whether you are welcome, because all are welcome in this place, all are welcome in this community.

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<sup>i</sup> Life Application Bible, NIV Commentary on Thomas, found after this passage. p. 1927

<sup>ii</sup> John 14:5 NIV

<sup>iii</sup> Abingdon Preaching Annual 2018 p.52-53