

Wesley United Methodist Church  
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter – April 11, 2021  
“Without Seeing”  
Scripture: John 20:19-31

Let us pray: God, we come to you as we are, with both our doubts and our faith. Show us your path, as we reflect on your word. Be present with us, that we may know your truth and find life and joy in your ways. Open our hearts and instruct our minds, O God, for you are our refuge and our hope. Amen.<sup>i</sup>

Last week was Easter, a day when the only fitting message was the proclamation of the resurrection. But now, a week later, we are reminded that Easter has affected everything we are and all that we do, so we look to how lives were changed after momentous news. For the Disciples and followers of Jesus, today’s Gospel from John describes something that happened on the same day as Jesus’ resurrection. It was the evening of that same day, according to John.

The disciples were gathered with the doors locked because they were afraid but at least two of them were missing. Judas who had betrayed Jesus was not there, and Thomas was also missing. Behind locked doors, gathered in fear, the disciples must have been rehashing the events of that week. Presumably, by this time, they had all heard Mary’s testimony that, “I have seen the Lord”. Peter and John had confirmed that the tomb was empty, but they were still confused and afraid.

Without them unlocking the doors, suddenly, Jesus appeared among them. He stood among them and spoke immediately to their fear. “Peace be with you!” Jesus met them where they were. He met them in their fear. He didn’t scold them for being afraid or for hiding. He came to them where they were and spoke to their greatest need. “Peace be with you.”

Just a few short days before, he had gathered with his Disciples for their last meal together. At that meal, he had spoken to them about peace; he had assured them that “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

These are words that we frequently quote at a funeral service, because they are a reminder that Jesus is present and offers his peace, comfort, and courage, at any time

in our lives when we need it. It's been a long year for us and we desperately long for words of peace, hope, and comfort.

Think about what you do when you are afraid? How do you calm your fears? For most people, that hope begins when we realize that no matter what is happening, we do not need to face it alone. That is why when something happens people often gather in the streets to be with others, to hear what's happening, and to know that they are not alone. I think that one of the hardest things of this pandemic has been that we have not been able to be together. We had "stay-at-home" orders and we have gone a very long time without being with other people. We've learned how to use technology to help lessen this frustration some but we still long for when we can be physically together in casual and supporting ways.

During these times, Jesus is standing in our midst, and in our isolation, proclaiming, "Peace be with you." Despite all the hurt and harm that the world can and does inflict, God's compassion and care embodied in Jesus stands again in the midst of the disciples, and in our midst. The one who offers us peace is the one who walked this earth as a man, who taught and healed, who was loved, but also betrayed, hated, and put to death. The one who offers us peace is the one who has faced all that the world can dish out and has survived it to come back to us and to offer us his peace.

After speaking these words to the disciples, he showed them his hands and his side, where he had been pierced by a sword. I used to think that it was strange that the risen Jesus would have the marks of the sword in his hands and side – I thought that his body would have been perfectly healed and the wounds would no longer exist.

However, I have come to believe that the wounds are there for several reasons. The first and most obvious one is that the disciples needed the assurance that the one from whom they hear the word of peace is the one who was crucified, dead and buried. There is no question that it is the same person – the one whom they have loved and followed. This is not some angel, or group hallucination. This is the real Jesus, dead but now alive; wounded and still bearing the scars.

I have also come to believe that the reason that the risen Jesus still has the wounds is as a reminder to us that when we are wounded in life, even after we have survived and come out on the other side, we still carry the wounds and scars with us.

Those wounds and scars can become a reminder to us and a witness to others of the possibilities of life.

A person who has lived through the pain of a divorce may be able to help another through that pain. A survivor of domestic violence may be able to help another person understand that he or she is not alone and that there are things that can be done. A person who has battled cancer may understand like no one else can. A person whose spouse or child has died can understand like no one else can. Our wounds and scars may be just what God can use to help another person deal with the fears and hurts of life.

Jesus came to the disciples in their fear and brought them peace. He came with the wounds of his crucifixion and showed them that he was the same person that they had known, who had died and was now alive.

Jesus then gave his disciples a mission. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Jesus is sending the Holy Spirit upon his followers; he is sending the comforter to the world, and sending the disciples and us on a mission to make God and God's ways known in the world.

John tells us that Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them. We don't know where he was, but his absence on this occasion has probably unfairly earned him the title, Doubting Thomas. When the disciples told Thomas what had happened, he found it impossible to believe. Before we are too harsh with him, remember that the other disciples who had heard from Mary Magdalene that Jesus was alive, were gathered in a locked room in fear until Jesus appeared to them.

Their account to Thomas must have fit into the category of "too good to be true". He wanted to see the nail marks in Jesus' hands and touch the wound in his side. I would remind us that this is exactly what Jesus showed the other disciples when he appeared to them.

I've always liked Thomas, probably because on some level I identify with him. Despite growing up in the church, there have been many times in my life when I have struggled to believe. I am a scientist and a mathematician at heart, and I like things to make sense. There have been times when I couldn't understand why any reasonable

person would really believe in God. However, God did with me, what Jesus did here with his disciples. He met them where they were and gave them what they needed in order to believe. God has also done that with me – met me where I was, time and time again, and given me what I needed so that I could believe.

Jesus never expressed impatience with his disciples' skepticism, and for that I am grateful. I have known people who thought that there was one way to respond to God and if you didn't respond in that way then you weren't really a believer. I celebrate that God made each of us as individuals with different needs, different likes and dislikes, different passions, different desires, so that God can reach out to each of us in the way that meets us where we are.

A week later, the disciples were together again, and Thomas was with them. John tells us that the doors were still locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and again said, "Peace be with you." "Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'"

Jesus did not scold Thomas. He met Thomas where he was and offered him what he needed. He knew Thomas and he loved Thomas; just as he knew and loved each of his disciples. There was much more to Thomas than his doubts and his questions.

We don't know why Thomas wasn't with the disciples the first time that Jesus appeared to them. I like to think that Thomas may have been out running errands or getting supplies. He might have been trying to gather news or maybe he was offering comfort to others while the disciples were huddled together in fear behind locked doors.

I think this is possible because of the other times we have met Thomas. Thomas was a solid realist and a man of courage. When Jesus received word that his friend Lazarus had died, Jesus announced that he would go to the home of his friend even though Jerusalem was becoming a dangerous place for him. At that time, Thomas proclaimed, "Let us also go that we may die with him." (John 11:6).

Closer to the end of Jesus' life, he was trying to explain to his disciples what would happen, and told them, "You know the way to the place I'm going." It was Thomas, who spoke up and said, "Lord, we don't now where you are going. How can

we know the way?” (John 14:5) Thomas could not stand the unanswered question and he was not afraid to ask the questions.

This is the man who in the face of the enthusiasm and amazement of his friends, in the face of the testimony of Mary that she had seen the Lord, wanted proof that it really was Jesus who had appeared to them. Jesus knew Thomas and loved him and offered him what Thomas thought he needed in order to believe.

When faced with the risen Christ, Thomas exclaimed, “My Lord and My God!” This is one of the strongest and clearest declarations of faith found in the New Testament.

The disciples had one more encounter with Jesus in John’s Gospel and Thomas was with the other disciples on that occasion. 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 was labeled 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.

This particular Gospel lesson is a favorite of mine as an Easter story because it reminds us first that Jesus came to the disciples in the midst of their fear and brought them peace. He comes to us in whatever condition we find ourselves and meets us where we are with what we most need.

Secondly, the Jesus who appeared to his disciples was most definitely the same Jesus who had been crucified, dead and buried. He showed the wounds of the crucifixion to them. He shows to us that there is consistency between the one who died and the one who lives. He reminds us that our wounds and scars can be used by God as a powerful witness to new life. He breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit, the comforter, the one who would always be with them guiding them and us every step of the way.

Finally, he sent them on a mission – the same mission on which we are sent. They, and we, are sent out into the world to witness to God, to share the story of Jesus, to tell others about God’s love and God’s forgiveness, and God’s inclusion of all people wherever they may be. The one who has hardwired our brains to seek understanding is also the one who holds the key to our hearts and our lives. Thanks be to God. To live as Easter people means that we can imagine Jesus at our “right hand” counseling us through our days, “peace be with you.”

Let us Pray:

Living Christ, you give us what we need to transform our doubt into belief. You come offering us peace and filling our lives with your living presence. With joy and rejoicing may we go forth, confident in your love.<sup>ii</sup> Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Abingdon Worship Annual 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid