

"We never know when Jesus Christ will intrude on us with a word of peace." That's exactly what happened in today's Easter story from the Gospel of John. The disciples were huddled in Jerusalem, recovering from the trauma of Jesus' death. The doors of the house were locked out of fear. Suddenly the Lord appeared to them and said, "**Peace be with you.**" He showed them the nail prints in his hands and feet, the sword wound in his side. With no small joy, the disciples realized the crucified Jesus had become the Risen Lord. Then, for a second time, Christ said, "**Peace be with you.**"

"**Peace be with you.**" He greeted them with a message of blessing and good cheer. The word of peace was the last message the disciples expected to hear.

Now here he was on Sunday night, somehow alive again, inescapably present in their midst. That must have been a shock. They had heard second-hand reports that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Yet it's one thing to **hear** the news. It's another thing to **see** a dead friend who had come back to life. No wonder they were terrified.

The Risen Christ came and said, "As the Father sent me, so do I send you." That's quite a challenge. As he gave his life, they were required to give their lives: to reveal a loving God to a hostile world, to speak truthful words to a deceitful generation, to wash the feet of a soiled church. Just like Jesus, the disciples were called to lay down their lives for their friends, and speak as witnesses for eternal life in the face of certain death. The continuing task that Jesus set before the church was to extend his simple greeting to others: "Peace be with you." Do we really want to pass the peace?

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus gave his peace to people as he blew his spirit upon them. He did not impart the kind of peace that offers an absence of hassle or disturbance. Neither did he imply that his peace provides a quiet weekend away from the troubles of daily life. If anything, the peace of Christ is a gift of assurance in the thick of difficulty. It comes as a breath of life in the midst of sorrow and pain. As someone notes, "The peace of God is the confidence that God is God and neither our gains nor our losses are ultimate. It is the trust that God loves the world, is for all creatures, and is present with us in every endeavor to make real that love in concrete ways."

What does it mean to pass the peace? First and foremost, it is a sign of forgiveness. The Risen Christ came to a fearful, unbelieving church that was scared of its own shadow, and his word promised to set all people free. He said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained". Jesus Christ charged his people to forgive, not because it is easy -- it isn't -- but because his people are witnesses of a merciful God whose very nature is to forgive. But if you don't practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. "Peace be with you." It is possible because Jesus Christ is risen. He is here among us, bearing a perfect love that casts out fear. He gives us the power to forgive and to stand with others.

Thomas does not believe and insists that he will not believe unless he sees Christ and feels Christ's wounds himself. A week later, Jesus appears again and knows exactly what Thomas has said. In other words, Jesus is just as much with the disciples when they do not perceive his presence, as he is when they do perceive his presence. Once invited to touch Jesus' wounds, Thomas has no need to do so. Thomas perceives Jesus' divinity and worships him. Jesus then says what John is teaching his readers, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." I wonder if that might not have been the motivation behind Thomas' doubt. The God he believed in and the God made present to the

disciples. I think that's what Thomas felt. Jesus took his doubt seriously and he didn't dismiss it. Instead Jesus offered the proof Thomas needed. I also think Thomas wanted desperately to believe, but he was a realist. He saw the spear pierce Jesus' side. He saw Jesus' body taken down from the cross. He saw the burial cloths. He saw the tomb sealed. And it had been three days. He wanted desperately to believe but there were so many things, so many unanswered questions getting in the way. Jesus knew all this. He understood completely.

There's a story about the four-year-old son of an undertaker who was rather perplexed after hearing the story of the resurrection in Sunday School on Easter. "Do you mean that Jesus really rose from the dead?" the boy asked. "Yes, Jesus really rose from the dead," the Sunday School teacher said. Shaking his head in wonder the boy said, "Well, I know my daddy didn't take care of Him then, cause his people never get up again!" Maybe that little boy was related to Thomas. He needed more proof. He knew what he believed and what the others were telling him was contrary to all that he'd ever seen or believed could ever happen. Once you were dead, there was no getting up. That was absurd. I guess Thomas forgot about Lazarus. Whatever the case, Thomas needed to Touch and Feel before he could believe. He needed to see it with his own eyes.

We don't all come to God or come to believe the same way. So Jesus meets us where we are. Whatever the case, Jesus didn't condemn Thomas for his doubt. And he used that moment of doubt as a teaching moment about faith. Doubt isn't bad or wrong or a sin. Doubt is actually quite useful in the faith.

Today we come to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion. Next to the Resurrection itself, this is as close as we get to be Thomas. This is as close as we get to the scars and the wounds. And yet Christ invites us to extend our hands, just as he did Thomas, not to touch his side or the wounds in his hands, but to reach out and receive the bread and the wine.

The Sacrament that symbolizes and embodies His sacrifice on the cross for us. Just as Jesus gave Thomas hope and a future and sealed his faith with that touch, this simple bread and wine that we receive this morning gives us hope, gives us a future and seals our faith. All we're asked to do is believe, stretch out our hands and receive. So, I give you this simple invitation.

Come to the table this morning. Bring your doubts and replace them with faith. Believe, stretch out our hands and receive.

Peace be with you. Amen.

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