Sermon, April 24, 2022

John 20: 19-31

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I’m not exactly sure why I chose to begin my sermons this way. There are other alternatives that I’ve heard pastors use to welcome their congregations into this space of the spoken word. “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.” That’s from Psalm 19: 14.

Others will start with a prayer and say something like….won’t you pray with me? Of course there are those who have no regular opening line. They just launch into their sermon.

If you get an e-mail or a letter from me, I usually put “grace and peace” at the end. I use this instead of “sincerely” or “yours truly” or “love,” when I am writing on behalf of the church or about a church matter.

Paul began many of his letters with a version of “grace to you and peace.” It was a typical way people in Bible times would open their letters. They began with some type of greeting. For Paul, he wanted his readers to know on whose behalf he was writing.

The first part of our gospel has Jesus offering a greeting to his disciples. It was the evening of the first announcement of Jesus’ resurrection. The disciples were hiding behind closed doors. If the Jews had done such a horrific sentence on their leader, might they be next? They not only were mourning the death of Jesus, but were living in fear for their own lives. It must have been a very traumatic time.

Suddenly Jesus comes and stands among them. John doesn’t tell us if he knocked on the door and was let in. Did he have a key? Did he just materialize out of thin air?

John wants us to be assured that Jesus is not a phantom or a ghost that can walk through doors. Jesus is truly alive in his body. But it is a body no longer hindered by the physical world. Jesus is the first born of the dead, as Paul says, and his resurrected body is at once the same but different than it was before.

The usual greeting from angels or God is “do not be afraid.” The disciples were already afraid before Jesus showed up. Now they are taken aback at Jesus standing among them.

Jesus speaks the calming words….peace be with you. This was a common greeting at the time. It was rather like “hello, how are you?” When we say that, we’re not expecting a long story about how someone really is. When someone says that to us, we usually respond….fine or good.

But coming from Jesus, it takes on a more weighty meaning. Jesus comes to bring that peace that is not casual or off-handed. When John’s church heard Jesus say “peace be with you,” they heard it as how they were to greet others in their community and how they were to treat each other.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes: the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. This peace of God will take away those fears of the disciples so they will be able to carry out the mission he is about to give them.

Jesus shows them his wounds. He is the one crucified but now risen. The cause of his death and his death itself has no more power over him. Never again will death over take him.

His disciples, now realizing that this person is really Jesus, rejoice at his presence. Jesus again offers his peace to them.

Then he commissions them for their work. Just as Jesus was sent by God to spread the gospel, they are now sent by Jesus.

In a little Pentecost, Jesus breathes the breath of the Holy Spirit upon them. This is the breath that first was breathed on creation, calling everything into being. It was the breath breathed into Adam and Eve to make them live.

This life-giving breath marks the beginning of a new life for the disciples. They receive the Holy Spirit, given to them by Jesus. This giving of the Spirit opens new responsibilities for them. They now have the power to forgive and to withhold forgiveness.

Sometimes we read this as a very frightening responsibility. Who are they, and also, who are we, to not forgive someone? After all, isn’t Jesus all about forgiveness? Isn’t that what we are assured of in our baptism and in communion?

The disciples are given not a vindictive pass to withhold forgiveness. There is no peace in that. They are given the choice to forgive or not. With the working of the Holy Spirit, they offer forgiveness always. It will be up to the person who needs forgiving to accept it. That is when the Spirit will work through both the one forgiving and the forgiven to bring grace and peace.

Then we have the second part of our text for today. We hear this whole story from John every year on the Sunday after Easter. Every….year.

I think this text is why many pastors take the Sunday after Easter off. In most of my churches, there has been a seminarian, either in teaching parish or an intern, who has been assigned to preach on this day. Several churches I’ve served in would make this Youth Sunday.

There have been very few times that I have been able to take off the Sunday after Easter because the pastor would take vacation that week and someone had to stay around the take care of things. So I have heard many a sermon about this, often by people who had almost no experience with preaching. That means I have heard some that stuck with the part about peace and ignored the part about Thomas. Or they have had some interesting takes on the Thomas story.

It's become such a tradition that many seminarians begin thinking about this day and what they will say months in advance. Pastors also think about it because another tradition is to call this day “low Sunday.” After the high attendance on Easter, many people stay home the next Sunday. And the one after that and the one after that in many cases. But maybe that makes it a little safer for seminarians or the youth for they have less of an audience to be nervous about.

I’ve thought about Thomas and doubt this past week, too. Thomas is usually referred to as “Doubting Thomas,” although John tells us he was also called the Twin. He was absent that evening of Jesus’ resurrection appearance to the disciples. He does get the whole story from them after the fact.

They tell him they have seen the Lord. And Thomas famously says that unless he sees and touches Jesus, he will not believe. Thus, the name he is saddled with…Doubting Thomas.

We doubt probably more times a day than we think. Someone asks you if it will rain. You look at the sky and say…I doubt it. Someone asks if you will attend one event or another. You look at your calendar and say….I doubt it. It’s a way to say….no, without being too specific. I once asked someone here in church to read sometime and their first response was to say I doubt it. I knew that was a no…but then they did! Doubt can leave you a bit of an open door for a change of opinion.

It’s difficult to say no sometimes. A friend of mine has a habit of never saying no to his son. The son will ask if he will do something and he’ll say….we’ll see. I have learned over the years that “we’ll see” is no. I’ve even chimed in to say….just tell him no! Don’t leave room for hope!

Thomas leaves a bit of room about his doubt. If he can just see and touch Jesus, he’ll believe. He is not closing the door altogether.

A week after his first appearance, Jesus appears again to his disciples. This time, Thomas is with them. Again the doors were shut, but again Jesus stands among them. He greets them with his comforting words….peace be with you. Earlier in John, Jesus gifted the disciples with peace. He tells them that this peace is different, not a peace gained from the world. It, as Paul says in Philippians, is to guard their hearts and their minds. They are not to be afraid.

Jesus turns to Thomas and addresses him directly. Jesus invites him to see him and to touch him. He tells him not to doubt, but to believe.

Although John doesn’t tell us if Thomas did as Jesus told him, he does give an outburst of faith. My Lord and my God!

Thomas recognizes both the earthly and the heavenly Jesus. The one who was his teacher and master and friend, the one he called Lord, is now before him. There is an added dimension. Jesus is not just a human he followed, but he truly is God.

The words spoken by Thomas in recognition of Jesus may have been the basis for an early creed. My Lord and my God invokes the name of both Jesus as human and Jesus as God.

Jesus asks Thomas if believed because he has seen Jesus? The gospel of John is full of signs and wonders that Jesus did. From the turning of water into wine at the wedding of Canaan to the multiplying of fish and bread, Jesus’ signs were often the catalyst for belief in him. But these signs were also often not enough for people to believe in Jesus for who he was. Yes, he could do miracles, but Jesus is God? That’s when many walked away.

Thomas had witnessed all of those signs with the other disciples. Was he able to say…my Lord and my God…before this meeting with Jesus? We don’t know.

Maybe the hardest thing is for those who have no physical evidence to still believe. Jesus calls them blessed. They have no evidence to point to. They have no proof or experience that can be catalogued. The only thing they have is the story.

John writes to his people that Jesus did many other signs that the disciples witnessed. Maybe they were signs that happened before Jesus’ resurrection. Maybe he is including ones that were performed before his death on the cross.

But there was just not room for them in John’s gospel. John picked out the parts of the story to relate to his listeners and his readers. Thomas is representative of the denials and doubts that permeated John’s first century community. The intention of his gospel is to offer a way to come to belief. This belief will bring new life.

John circles back to Nicodemus’ seeds of faith at the beginning of his gospel. He recognizes Jesus as a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.

The words of Thomas confess Jesus as the teacher from God. My Lord and my God. The seeds were planted and now have come to bear fruit.

Sometimes Thomas is seen as a bad guy. Or at least someone we want to be better than. He had to see and touch Jesus to believe. All we get is a book about Jesus to believe. We want to be those blessed ones who haven’t seen and still believe. We don’t want to think about doubt.

But if I ask you if you have complete faith all the time, you’d probably say….I doubt it. I’m here to tell you, that is OK. It’s normal.

I heard that it’s only when you aren’t a bit concerned about your belief, that you should be concerned. And if you are concerned, that’s God working in you. We in the church may joke about this “low Sunday.” Maybe we hand it off to inexperienced preachers much of the time. Maybe people don’t want to think about being a Doubting Thomas.

 Our doubts or misgivings or questions are what drive us to grow in our faith. Without seeking answers, such as Nicodemus did, or asking for help in our doubts, such as Thomas did, we are unable to expand our faith.

As our faith expands, it might be surprising that our doubts also expand. The more we explore our faith, the more questions we have. The more questions we have, the more we come to doubt what we previously thought.

That’s what a faith journey is all about. Doubts are the motivation for us to grow and learn. In prayer, Bible study and worship, we bring ourselves before the one who can help us.

Jesus comes to us with his words…peace be with you. Through our doubt and fears, Jesus reaches out his hands, marked with the nails of the cross, to offer his peace.

Today we will share the peace of Christ with one another. Whether we are able to touch each other, or not in this period of COVID, the sign of peace reminds us that Jesus is present in our sharing.

The words of Paul from Philippians are sometimes used to end sermons as well. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. God does guard us, both in heart and mind, as doubts try to overtake us. Let us be like Thomas and use our doubts to help us grow. Peace be with you. Amen.