

Touching Jesus IV
Easter 2 2024 B John 20:19-31
Malta

Good morning, Malta/Whitewater Lutheran. He is Risen!...

It's so good to be here with you this Holy Humor, Doubting Thomas Sunday.

I bring with me my sadness at the death of Steve Schumacher. I know you must miss him terribly even as you celebrate his life, gifts and service to you and the church he loved.

I also bring you greetings from the many congregations and ministries and the synod staff serving in the Montana Synod and the ELCA. They stand here with you in spirit and in prayer, thanking God for the faith-filled ministry you have been and are currently doing. I give thanks to God On behalf of the MT Synod for your continued presence and service to your neighbors in the Philips County and Hi-line area of MT. You are an important partner with the churches of the MT/NWY Synod as we work together "to equip one another for building up the body of Christ to proclaim Christ's gospel and love our neighbors."

Finally, I thank you for the gifts of resources, talents, and prayer that you continually share with the Montana Synod and the wider church. I especially thank you for the financial gifts you give. These blessings help God's church in Montana and beyond to equip the followers of Christ to proclaim the gospel; to collaborate in building up the body of Christ across the synod; to support and train our pastoral leaders, including clergy, deacons, LPAs, lay leaders; and to actively love all people, particularly those who are most in need.

Your generosity is appreciated because it is through your support that God equips us as a synod to do the ministry of God's coming kingdom together!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Savior, Jesus the Risen Christ.

Today is the Sunday of the church year often called "Doubting Thomas Sunday," the day when we usually haul out poor Thomas to be the prime example of how NOT to be a Christian. Usually the message has something to do with doubt: how Thomas has it and how we're supposed avoid it with some version of false certainty. But I think Thomas has gotten a bad rap over the years. We've judged him unfairly and too harshly. So let's cut poor Thomas some slack today. If we do, we might see that Thomas gets a much happier ending to his story than Christianity has often judged him to deserve.

You see, Thomas isn't much different than the rest of the disciples...nor is he much different than us. Thomas may have doubted, but then again Thomas was living in a world that was very much in doubt. His life was full of uncertainty. His teacher and friend was dead. The tomb where his teacher's dead body had been laid is empty. People are talking resurrection, but no one (except Mary) seems certain about anything.

And now that Jesus is gone, everything is changed. The disciples' world has been rocked. For 3 years they followed their teacher who had promised them he was bringing in a new kingdom...but where was it? For 3 years they'd listened to his teachings and stories...who was going to teach them now? For 3 years they'd watched Jesus heal, calm storms and ease fears...who was going to heal them now? And what were they supposed to believe anyway? Was Jesus the Messiah or not? What would they do now? Who would lead them?

And don't forget the authorities...the Romans and the religious leaders. What would they do? Jesus had ticked off some pretty important people. He had challenged their beliefs, their power. He'd advocated for changing how lives were to be lived and how religion was to be practiced. And this made some people mad, mad enough to kill him. Would these rulers come after his disciples now? Would the disciples be declared guilty by association and crucified too? Everything was unpredictable, uncertain, doubtful; their whole world was falling apart.

No wonder the disciples were doubting. No wonder that on the day of Jesus' resurrection, even after Mary Magdalene announced, "I have seen the Lord!" the disciples were huddled together in a closed room, hiding behind locked doors, frightened and worried...

...all the disciples, that is, except for Thomas. Where was Thomas the first time Jesus appeared? The story doesn't say. Perhaps, rather than hiding, Thomas was out in the streets gathering information, or getting food, or helping someone. We don't know. All we know is that on the evening of Jesus' resurrection, the rest of the disciples were locked behind closed doors, asking: "what are we gonna do now?" and Thomas was nowhere to be found.

We might be asking ourselves the same question: what are we gonna do now, God? All it takes is one night of watching the evening news to make us realize that we too are living in a world of doubt and chaos. Everything is changing so fast. Things around us seem so unpredictable, so uncontrollable. The disciples were living post-crucifixion; we live post- 9/11 – what are we gonna do about the terrorists? What about all the refugees trying to migrate to safer places? What are we going to do about them? What about our political system or our ways of life? What are we gonna do to fix them? Or are they broken beyond repair? What are we going to do about mental illness, cancer, the high cost of health care? Or hunger or homelessness? Or school shootings? Then there's the weather. What are we gonna do about the consequences of our changing climate? As an agricultural community, you know this uncertainty. You face it every year. Will there be too much moisture this year? Or too little? Will there be flooding or drought? This list of questions could go on and on, each one full of doubt and fear.

Now our tendency when we're faced with such uncertainty is to do exactly what the disciples did that evening – we lock ourselves behind closed doors and thick walls where we feel safe and secure. Uncertainty breeds anxiety; anxiety breeds fear; and fear breeds anger. And in our doubt, fear and anger, we try to secure ourselves by constructing locked rooms with sturdy doors that nothing can break through...or so we think.

Think of the different types of locked rooms some people create for themselves. Some build social or political bunkers and gather into groups of like-feeling tribes, blaming and attacking those

others who think and feel differently. Some take refuge in violence and bullying, believing that hurting others will create security for themselves. Some turn to alcohol, drugs, gambling, or material pleasures to dilute their fear. Some turn to science -- "Research tells us," they say, only to announce later that research now tells us something else. Others turn to false religions and demand mindless certainty, when in fact it's their own doubt that is building a locked box around God. Some think that the answer to this uncertainty is to dive right into the chaos, follow an "anything goes" policy and live in anarchy. Others think the answer to all this uncertainty is to be found in laws, stricter laws, that are easy to follow...at least on paper. These are only some of the walls we build to protect ourselves from the doubt and fear this world brings.

Thomas too had built his own locked room. "Unless I see, unless I touch, I won't believe," he stated. Even after his friends had told him that they'd seen Jesus, Thomas couldn't leave the walls of his own senses. What if it were all some trick, an April Fool's joke, a lie, disinformation? "Unless I see...unless I touch...unless you do things my way, rule in my favor, think like me... unless I see, I won't..." What sturdy walls those "unless I's" can be! Just like Thomas and the rest of the disciples, we like to hide in locked rooms, build walls around ourselves, and avoid the uncertainty of the world.

But Jesus...Jesus doesn't care about locked rooms. He doesn't worry about our "unless I's." Jesus acknowledges our fears. He understands our doubts. But Jesus never retreats behind locked doors or builds walls that separate us from him or our neighbors. And there is no way he's going to let us retreat behind our walls and doors. Instead, Jesus walks right through those doors, brings us the peace we need to face the doubtful world. And he dares us to share his peace with others. Rather than removing the problems of the world, at least in this life, Jesus injects himself into them, filling us with a deep, cleansing breath of life, hope, and peace so that we can face the world's dangers head-on. As German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. Peace is the opposite of security."

Look at the story from the text. The doors are locked, the disciples hiding, and Jesus just comes and stands in the room with them. No locked doors are going to stop him, no fears or uncertainty are going to keep him from entering that room. But he doesn't stop there. Jesus brings the disciples the gift of peace. "Peace be with you!" he announces, three times. "In the midst of your doubt, peace. In the face of your fear, peace. In all your uncertainty, peace." This is the peace that passes all our understanding, a peace that fills us with faith, hope and wholeness that is breathed into our bodies and our souls by the Holy Spirit.

And just look at how Jesus gives his peace. He steps into our doubts, touches us in peace and

then calls us to step out of our locked rooms to share that peace with one another. How? By giving us the strength to do something extraordinary: forgive. By coming into that locked room and announcing “Peace be with you,” Jesus forgave the disciples their doubts. But at the same time, he also gave them...and gives us...the ability and courage to share his peace through the gift of forgiveness. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them," he announces. "If you retain the sins of any, they will be retained."

Several years ago, I heard a story about a woman whose 4-year old daughter had been shot, hit by a stray bullet, and was now paralyzed for the rest of her life. The report told of how both the mother and the daughter were working to forgive the man who'd pulled the trigger. The most powerful image of the report was when, in the courtroom after his sentencing, the mother reached out her hand to the shooter and, once her hand had clasped his, she pulled him into a hug, a hug of forgiveness. She didn't excuse his crime, didn't stop his punishment; but she said that if she didn't forgive him, the anger and hatred that she retained would eat her up and prevent her from caring for her children.

This mother understood Jesus' words. She knew that when we give and receive forgiveness, as hard as that is sometimes, a peace is given to us that can ease the uncertainty in our relationships. But when we choose not to forgive or not to receive forgiveness from others, our actions and all their consequences – the doubt, the fear, the anger, the uncertainty – will be retained in us, locked into our lives, and they will end up harming the lives of those we love.

But what about Thomas? What about his happy ending? Well, you see Thomas gets to receive this peace and forgiveness in a very special way...through the gift of touch. Jesus returns a week later when Thomas is with the disciples. And he lets Thomas touch him. Jesus could have chosen not to come back at all; or he could have yelled at Thomas for doubting and said “don't touch me” the way he told Mary. He could've decided NOT to forgive Thomas. But instead, he gives Thomas exactly what the disciple needs so he can find peace in his doubt. "Touch my hands; put your fingers in my side," Jesus says. "Touch me; I'm here, I'm real. I'm alive."

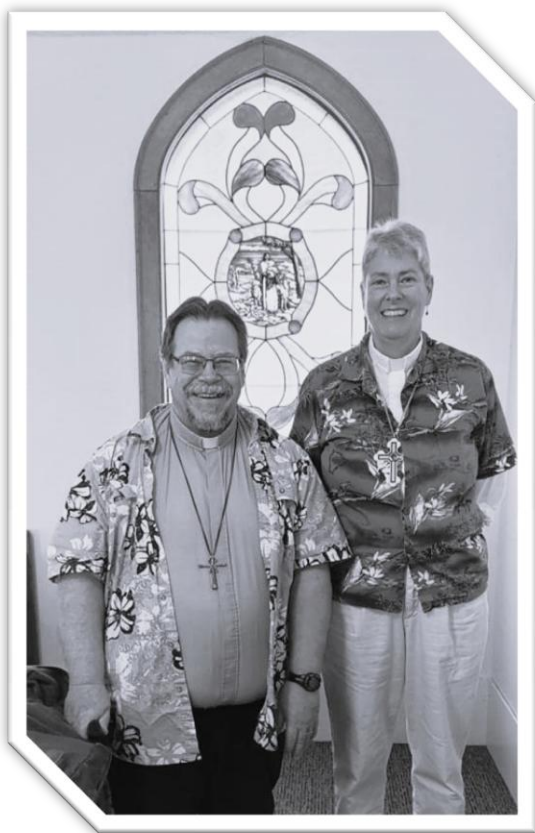
Thomas was given a great gift that day -- the gift of being able to touch a friend and teacher whom he thought he'd lost. By letting Thomas touch his body, Jesus filled him with the comfort and courage of God's peace, breaking down Thomas' locked doors and shattering all his doubts. "My Lord and my God!" Thomas cries in response, a cry that can only come from the peace given through faith in Christ's love and forgiveness.

Touch is a powerful thing – it can bring comfort, hope, and peace to a person's life; it can also bring pain and suffering. Not all touch is the touch of peace that Christ gives; some of it is the touch

Jesus received from fists and weapons. But, when followers of Christ touch one another with compassion, kindness, and love...When you help in times of need, when you encourage those who are sad with a kind word, when you reach out your hands across fear to accept those who the doubting world tells you to hate, when you nurture one another in thought, word and deed – when you do these things in love and respect, you are indeed touching the body of Christ. And when you receive this compassionate, loving touch from others, the body of Christ is touching you.

We give and receive this touch of Christ each Sunday in the Sharing of the Peace during our worship service. This Peace Sharing is not a time to say “hi” to friends...it's about sharing the very peace that Jesus shared with Thomas on that day so long ago -- sharing a peace that forgives, a peace that brings new life, a peace that tears down our locked doors of fear and doubt, a peace that empowers us to go into the world and touch the lives of our neighbors with love. That's our calling and purpose as Christ's disciples: to touch one another as we would touch Christ -- with reverence, with compassion, and with love.

Today, I'd like to conclude with a blessing that I hope will fill you with courage and new life of Jesus' peace so that you may be inspired to live his peace into the world:



And so receive this blessing...
May each word of your mouth be a song of good news;
May every touch of your hand be a gift of grace;
May every beat of your heart be a prayer to God;
And may the sum of your days be a life of praise. Amen.

Sermon shared with Unity Lutheran Parish
9 am Malta Lutheran Church
11:15 am Whitewater Lutheran Church
Holy Humor Polka Sunday
April 7, 2024

Pictured l to r in Hawaiian shirts; Pastor Bob Nagy and
Bishop Laurie Jungling.
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Bishop Laurie Jungling
April 16, 2024