

Sermon: Easter 2 (A)

St. Peter's, Norfolk

Text: John 20:19-31

Date: April 19, 2020

Let me start today by telling you about four people- four ordinary people like you and me.

The first is Marcus. Marcus is a college student who will graduate with honors this summer from a big, prestigious university in the Northeast. He doesn't have a job yet, but his resume is out there....and he's hopeful. Marcus recently told the university chaplain- ***"I'm finding it harder and harder to believe in God. I mean it's crazy.... just look at the world today.... it's gone mad.....it's out of control. If there is a God, why would He let all this craziness happen? I'm not too sure about Jesus, either. I just have too many doubts....too many doubts."***

The second is Mary. She is 16 years old. She is beside herself. She doesn't know what to do. Sunday is only three days away and she has to tell someone. Sunday is going to be a big day for her family. They had the celebration all planned. It would be just like it was the day Mary's older sister and brother were confirmed. Confirmation day was a very important day in the life of the Jones family.

Mary didn't want to let her family down. She didn't want to let her pastor down, either. Mary wished she could stand up with her Confirmation classmates on Sunday and profess her faith in Jesus Christ as her Savior. She wanted to, but she just couldn't. It would be hypocritical. She wanted to believe..... but it just seemed impossible to her that this Jesus could care for her in any real way. ***"Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so..."*** She had sung that song as long as she could remember. She sang it....but she didn't believe it. ***"Why could Jesus love me? I'm no one special."*** That was her question. That is what she doubted.

Ralph, our third person, had a different problem. He was a chemist working in industry. He grew up in the church....but he never gave it much thought. He just went along on Sundays with his family. Ralph pretty much took church life for granted....until he went to college. The more he learned about modern science, the less likely he thought those Bible stories he had learned as a kid could be true- Jonah living in the belly of a whale? Jesus turning water in to wine and then walking on water? The Resurrection?

The more Ralph thought about it, the more he was convinced that these stories just couldn't be true. And now, he couldn't bring himself to remain committed to a

religion with all these superstitions and with all these so-called miracles. Serious doubts had filled his head and he just couldn't bring himself to go to church any longer.

And then there is Sally. Sally is in her thirties and has just returned home from spending three years in Asia, serving in the Peace Corps. Her time there really opened her eyes to the religious realities of life. Sally had never really spent much of her time thinking about religion. Most of the folks in her small Mid-West town were Christians- if they were anything. There really weren't a lot of alternatives except sheer un-belief. But in Asia, Sally discovered many other ways of worshiping God. She found that the world was filled with religions and Christianity was just one among many.

Sally had some friends who were Christians. Several times since her return, they had invited her to come along to church with them, but Sally won't go. Christianity was just one of the ways in which people worshiped God. ***"How do you know your way- how do you know the Christian way is the right way?"*** She asked her friends. Sally just couldn't believe that Christianity was the true way- the only way. She had seen too many other religious expressions. She doubted that any religious path was the true and only path to God.

Four ordinary people, all of whom are in different stages of their lives and yet they all have one thing in common- doubts- doubts about the truth of the Christian faith. Many of us have such doubts. These doubts come in all sizes and shapes; they come at various times in our lives; sometimes they just appear for no apparent reason.

Today's Gospel reading introduces us to one of Jesus' disciples who had some doubts. Thomas had walked and worked with Jesus for nearly three years. He had heard him preach and teach. He witnessed Jesus performing miracles and healing people of their illnesses. When Jesus had announced to his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem where he would be persecuted, it was Thomas who replied, ***"Then let's go with Him, that we might die with Him."*** Surely, if anyone would have a rock solid faith, it would be Thomas- a disciple!

And yet, Thomas had doubts. In fact the poor man has become a sort of *patron saint* for doubters. Even today we use the phrase "*doubting Thomas*" to describe someone who has trouble believing something.

Do you carry some doubts about the Christian faith and about Jesus? And if you do, what can you do with those doubts? Well, I believe that Thomas provides us with the answer to that question. He serves as a kind of role model for us. You see, Thomas brought his doubt to Jesus.

Thomas was not with the other disciples that first Easter evening. The disciples had reported to Thomas that Jesus was not dead after all- and that they had even seen him and talked to him. Thomas didn't buy it. ***"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."*** (John 20:25) In other words, ***"If I don't see it for myself, I will not believe it."*** I think Thomas represents all kinds of people who want some tangible evidence and proof for their faith.

A week later, Thomas was with the others and, once again, Jesus appeared to them. ***"Peace be with you,"*** he said. Immediately he turned to Thomas. Thomas just stood there and locked eyes with Jesus. Jesus knew his thoughts. Jesus knew his doubts. And he spoke to Thomas, ***"Put your finger here; see my hands; reach out your hand, and put it into my side; stop doubting and believe."*** (John 20:27)

Do you see what Jesus did? He accepted Thomas where he was. He accepted Thomas in his doubts. He accepted him and then he challenged him to put his doubts aside and believe. And Thomas chose to believe...Thomas **CHOSE** to believe. That's an important point! We are always left with the option to choose or not to choose to do things- things like to forgive, to love, to obey and to believe. Thomas **CHOSE** to believe: ***"My Lord and my God"***, he confessed. Out of the mouth of a doubter came a grand profession of faith. That is the way it is sometimes with doubt and faith. **Doubt and faith are really not opposites of each other. Rather, faith always lives on the edge of doubt. Doubt gives faith its character of risk. (Repeat)**

So what are we to do with our doubts? I think it's best to do what Thomas did. I think it's best to bring our doubts to Jesus. I think it's the absolute best place to take them. Jesus will not turn you away. Jesus never turns doubters away. Jesus knows that honest doubt is often the prelude to a stronger faith. It was so with Thomas. It might be so with you. Jesus is always ready to receive doubters into his presence. He showed Thomas his hands and side. He will show you what you need in order that you might come to faith.

Obviously you can't be in the presence of Jesus' risen body as Thomas was. You can, however, be present at those places where Jesus has promised to be present for

you- ***“....wherever and whenever two or three are gathered together in his name. (Matthew 18:20),*** whenever and wherever we eat and drink in his name, and wherever his story is told; that means church, Bible study, and prayer. Those are some of the places where we can meet and experience Jesus. Unfortunately, when folks do have doubts-they tend to do the opposite and avoid those things. That’s what Marcus did. That’s what Mary did. That’s what Ralph did. That’s what Sally did.

The thing is, there is no reason to feel guilty about having doubts. We all have them from time to time. Even Jesus’ disciples had doubts. Doubt is a fact of human life. Our doubts don’t scare Jesus away. The fact is that doubt can bring about faith and the birth of faith is never an easy matter. But the confession we make to Jesus, ***“My Lord and my God”***, can come in the midst of our doubts and struggles.

Yes, Thomas had a distinct advantage over us. He walked with Jesus. He put his hands on Jesus’ wounds. He witnessed firsthand that Jesus was alive-he saw him and talked to him face to face. But that doesn’t make it impossible to believe with any less conviction. Jesus, in fact, speaks a special word of blessing to those who would later come to faith, including us today. To Thomas he said, ***“Because you have seen me, you believe; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29b)*** That’s you and me, folks.

But I’d like to point to something else Jesus said to his disciples that day because it is very important. When he first appeared to them he said, ***“Peace be with you.”*** The words Jesus actually spoke were ***“shalom alechem”*** - the Hebrew words translated ***“Peace be with you.”***

Well what did those words mean to Jesus’ disciples? And what do they mean for us today? What exactly is peace?

A young school boy thought he knew something about peace. He was writing an essay about the Quakers. He handed in his report (which was very short) and this is what he wrote, ***“The Quakers are very peaceful people. They never fight or answer back. I think my father might be a Quaker, but my mother definitely isn’t!”***

My guess is that if you took a poll and asked people what words come to mind when they think of ***“peace”***, they would probably say things like ***“tranquility”*** and ***“quiet”*** and ***“calm.”*** Perhaps some would say that peace is something one experiences when they are able to go off by themselves for a while and relax.

Others might say that peace is watching a sunrise or a sunset or enjoying a long walk in nature.

Most of us (I think) imagine peace as being *“at ease”*, *“relaxed”* and *“without stress or conflict.”* And many of our common ideas about peace involve being alone- off by ourselves and away from the world. There’s certainly nothing wrong with that. Jesus occasionally went off by Himself to be alone.

But the word *“shalom”* doesn’t necessarily mean *“calm”* and *“tranquility.”* It doesn’t mean the absence of struggle or conflict. Rather, *“shalom”* means *“well-being.”* It means *“fullness of life.”* It means *“thriving”* and *“zest”* and *“delight.”* It means *“prosperity”* and *“happiness”* and *“growth”* and *“abundant life.”*

We call Jesus *“the Prince of Peace.”* But it’s an unusual peace He brings. It’s not the peace of *“solitude”* and *“tranquility.”* Rather, it’s the peace that can be found in the midst of the storm. It’s the peace that can be found in the midst of trauma. It’s the peace that can come, even in the midst of darkness. It’s the peace that can come in the midst of a pandemic!

Are you experiencing that kind of peace right now in your life.... in your particular situation? If not, why not? You know sometimes things happen to us that cause us to fear, to become anxious, to worry, to get depressed. If you are a human being (and I’m going to assume you are) you probably have and are probably going to experience these feelings from time to time. We all do. And sometimes, these feelings can cause us to doubt.

But do you remember what Thomas did with his doubts? He brought his doubts to Jesus. And we can do the very same thing. We can lay all of our doubts, all of our fears, all of our anxieties, all of our cares, all of our worries....we can lay them at the feet of Jesus and, in return, receive His peace....His *“shalom”*- a peace *“that surpasses all human understanding.”* A peace that will help us to endure, a peace that will bring us hope- even in the midst of what might seem like hope-less situations.

After Jesus told his disciples, *“Peace be with you”* he added, *“as the father has sent me, so I am sending you.”* As Jesus disciples, we are not only to be seekers of His peace, but we are sent into the world to be the bearers of that peace...sent to bring His *“shalom”* to others.

My dear friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, my prayer for you today (and for everyday) is that you will experience Christ's "*shalom*" in your life and then, having done so, that you will receive the grace to pass it along to someone else in need of it their life; and that God will bless you richly in that. Amen.