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You Want Us To Do What?!? 2. Doubt

John 20:19, 24-31 NRSV 19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Our scripture for this morning is a continuation of the one we looked at two weeks ago. It is, for those of you old-timers like me who remember Paul Harvey's signature phrase, the "rest of the story" concerning that first meeting between the Risen Christ and his disciples on that first Easter evening. In the first part of the scripture, the one we looked at two weeks ago, you may remember that Jesus' words were about forgiveness, and we considered what it means to say "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." My take on those words was that Jesus is simply honestly reminding us that without forgiveness – hard as it is sometimes – we will indeed "retain" the sins against us for they will continue to affect us, our resentments will continue to fester, and it will be difficult to move forward. I also noted that forgiveness never means to set yourself up for abuse - you can forgive for the sake of your own healing even if the relationship with the one who has hurt you has to have some boundaries put around it, or, sometimes, even must be ended. If you weren't here for that

first sermon in this series concerning the things that the Risen Jesus told his disciples I would remind you that sermons are both posted on the church website and are available in printed form in the rack near the Welcome Center.

So, now, back to the “rest of the story.” Apparently at that first meeting on that first Easter evening in that locked room where Jesus brought those words about forgiveness, one of the disciples – Thomas – wasn’t there. We don’t know why. It doesn’t really matter. But what we do know is that Thomas was very skeptical and our scripture picks up the story a week later when the disciples again gathered, this time Thomas with them, and again Jesus appears to them.

Now, on this second occasion on which the disciples and the Risen Jesus gathered, I invite you to notice what Jesus’ greeting to them was? “*Peace.*” And he said it not once, but twice: “*Peace be with you.*” It’s an apt way to begin, because you and I know it’s hard to be at peace when you’re afraid, fearful, or ashamed. And those eleven disciples were no doubt all of these things. Why? Well, they hadn’t behaved very well in these last two weeks. And I suspect they were now remembering all the things that Jesus had told them to do: Feed my sheep, follow my commandments, love one another, and how much they had instead failed him when they bickered, for example, about which one of them was to be the most important. Jesus had spent so much of his ministry trying to tell them what they needed to be and do, how to follow him and follow his example. And now they were no doubt been remembering all the times they had failed to do what Jesus asked, and how they had deserted him on that last ugly and awful day of his earthly life. How could they possibly have felt at peace at such a time?

You and I too know what all that feels like. We know what it is to have not done something that we know we should have done, that we wanted to do, that we even intended to do – but didn’t. You and I know what it feels like to have spoken a word that we wish we could have retrieved as it was leaving our lips because it hurt somebody in a

way that was completely unnecessary. You and I know how we can brood over those times and occasions when we *didn't* speak up and knew that we should have said something in the face of cruelty or bashing. We know those times. We know them too well. And what happens is that the memory of those occasions can sometimes immobilize us: Precisely because we **are** good people we know that sometimes we have not done the good that we were capable of, that we wanted to do, that we should have done. And it shames us. And, I don't know about you, but when I am ashamed of something I've said or done, I either turn inward and brood and get completely stuck, or I get defensive and angry and lash out even more – thereby making the original hurt, the original mistake, that much worse. Does that happen to any of you?

There are also other times when our disquietude, our lack of peace, is not due to something we did or said, but due to our outrage or our anger or our despair at what is happening around us. That has been what this week has been like, hasn't it? The week began with the horror of bombs mangling and snuffing out lives at a moment that should have been one of celebration, to the decimation of a little Texas town gone up in conflagration, to a Friday in which we were transfixed by more evil and mayhem and awfulness, mesmerized by the courage and the sacrifice of law enforcement officials, and finally wondering with deep sadness and anger how two men could have apparently gone so odiously and unspeakably and evilly wrong?

And so no wonder Jesus' greeting to the disciples – and to us! – is, and has to be, "*Peace.*" Be at peace. Do not let yourselves be immobilized and trapped you and stymied and stuck. Peace. Peace be with you. *But how do you do that?* Because it sort of feels like telling a person who is depressed that he or she just needs to cheer up. It isn't very effective and it isn't very helpful. Which is why Jesus goes on to add something crucial to this traditional Middle Eastern greeting (one which, by the way, is still the traditional greeting in that part of the world to this day) of "*Peace be with you.*" Jesus adds: "*As the*

Father has sent me, so I send you.” What does this mean? Well, I think it’s really very simple: to be at peace is not to **forget** all the hurt you’ve inflicted or the hurt you’ve endured in your lives; it is not to forget the awfulness that sometimes surrounds us. For it is not possible to forget. It’s just not. But it *is* possible to move forward. Writer Anne Lamott says somewhere – in a line that Pastor Hatler quoted in his sermon a few months ago – that the secret to being a mature Christian is to stop wishing that you’d had a different past. Because it’s not possible. But it *is* possible to move forward, and Jesus knew that peace in its fullest sense is only possible when we accept the commission that he has given us: **you are sent**. The purpose of the peace of God that Jesus is offering us is never to be only for ourselves, it is never simply a kind of anesthetic that lets us get through our days, it is not just, even, the absence of conflict. It is not a despair in the face of a world gone mad sometimes. It is not a resignation or fatalism. No, the kind of peace that Jesus is offering, is exhorting us to is the kind of deep assurance that we can know – even in the midst of sin and hurt and pain – that God’s love is and will be stronger than all that hurts and maims and stifles and stymies. Because human life will always contain conflict and differences., it will always have those moments in which we cannot comprehend how some people can do such evil things, it will always have moments of tragedy. The temptation in the face of all these things is indeed to hunker down, turn inward, and to despair, thinking that resignation and stoicism are all that is left to us. But Jesus reminds us that even in the midst of the times that life is at its most difficult we **can** know a peace that passes understanding by following his command to go. We are always sent into the world, to do for the world, to care for the world, to feed his sheep, to love those whom he loves, to respond to evil with acts of good. For the old saying is true: the best way to move past whatever is immobilizing you is to do something for someone else. That is the way to true peace. And, as with Jesus’ disciples, sometimes we need to hear it twice.

And now let us turn back to Thomas. Thomas was skeptical of what the other disciples said had happened; he said he would not, could not believe their reports unless he had the same experience that they did. And in this second encounter with Christ, Thomas gets his wish. Not only does he see, but he touches the scars on Jesus' body from the torture and death that was inflicted on him. And Thomas believes. Now, here's the thing: Thomas sometimes gets a "bad rap" for his attitude. It is sometimes said of him that he has less faith than the others. He is sometimes held up to us as an example of what **not** to be.

But I don't think that's right. In fact, I think that Thomas is the patron saint – or should be – of every Christian. A writer by the name of Holmes Hartshorne once wrote a whole book called The Faith to Doubt. And in it he has some very important things to say about the importance of doubt in the Christian faith; hear his words: "*Truth and doubt belong together. As Saint Augustine observed, serious doubt is always for the sake of truth.... The power of doubt [is] to clarify our thinking, to judge our idolatries, to renew our honesty and our respect for truth.....*"¹ Let me tell you a story from my own life. I grew up very active in the church. I never missed a youth event. I was involved in the regional youth program. I was the youth representative to the church board. Everyone, including me, thought I was headed for ministry. Yet at the same time I knew – although would only acknowledge it in the middle of the night – that I had some doubts about this whole Christianity thing. And those doubts kept nagging. Finally, after my second year in college, I faced those doubts honestly and said to myself: I have to discover if one can be a Christian and at the same time be intellectually credible. I could no longer not deal with my doubts. And it wasn't because I was somehow anti-church or anti-Christian; no, I loved the church and I was profoundly grateful for what the church had given me and what countless

¹M. Holmes Hartshorne, The Faith to Doubt (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 96, 100.

Christians had done for me. So I set out on a journey to answer my question, to deal with my doubts. And I was blessed to be able to study philosophy and theology as an undergraduate and then in graduate programs before re-emerging, as it were, seven years later with my answer: Yes indeed, it is possible to be an intellectually credible Christian. In fact, my years of study had convinced me that Christianity rightly understood does indeed offer the most powerful, credible, and life-giving answers to our deepest questions. It was then that I went to seminary and got back on that road to ministry.

You know what? I am very, very grateful for those doubts. For they actually helped to strengthen my faith. And I continue to be grateful for the doubts that crop up even today in your life or in mine. Because such doubts are indeed in the service of truth; they are motivated by a desire to love and know God ever-better. One theologian talks about the difference between “unbelievers” and “doubters.”² Unbelievers, he says, take joy in raising questions just to be doing it, in picking things apart; they often delight in conspiracy theories and assume the worst. But “doubters,” to use the other category, do their doubting in the service of God. For it is because indeed they **do** love God that they want their beliefs to be as clear, as credible, as morally worthy as possible. If they don’t understand, doubters ask questions about their faith, about why something is this way and not that way. If something seems morally incredible they don’t blindly accept it, but want to know how it squares with a God of love and compassion unbounded. Do you begin to see why Thomas is not someone whom we should somehow be embarrassed by, but someone whom we ought to try to imitate, to be an honest doubter precisely because we want to love and understand God even better!

And when we do, what joy there can be Did you hear how Thomas put it after,

Cited by Edward F. Markquart in his sermon “Thomas the Doubter,”
http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_thomas_the_doubter.htm

indeed, his doubts had been answered by the compelling evidence of the scars? Did you hear it? *"My Lord and my God!" "My Lord and my God!"* May you and I know on this and every day that he indeed is our Lord and our God, offering us peace, offering us the gift of forgiveness, offering us the grace of honest doubting that our faith may be ever-deepened. For that good news, thanks be to God. Amen.