

2nd Sunday of Easter
April 3, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of our Risen Savior Jesus. Amen.

The doors of the house where the disciples met were locked for fear of the Jews, fear of those in power, fear of those who had silenced Jesus and who had the power to crucify his followers as well. Fear locked up, paralyzed, those first disciples and it has the power to do the same to us today. We live in a climate of fear fed by our 24-hour news cycle, by politicians who try to make us afraid of others, and by advertising that tells us we aren't safe and secure unless we do and buy the right things.

Our Gospel story today gives us two gifts in the midst of all this fear. In the witness of Thomas, it gives us an example of how to live even when there are reasons to be afraid. And it assures us of Jesus' presence and peace with us as we face a frightened and frightening world. So let's take a closer look at this story.

It is evening on the day of Jesus' resurrection. Though Mary has reported to the disciples that she has seen the Lord, none of them have seen Jesus for themselves. Hours have passed but Jesus has not appeared. The disciples are hiding out behind locked doors, afraid for their lives. They've just witnessed the worst life can throw at them. They've placed all their hopes in Jesus and now those hopes have been crushed along with him. As far as they know, their journey with Jesus has come to an end. Whatever faith they received as they watched Jesus move through the world has been shattered.

They've also not responded well to the events that have just unfolded. Peter denied Jesus, most of them fled as he was crucified, they were consumed by fear. Fear kept them from remembering what Jesus said to them during their last night together. Jesus promised, "I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." But they are afraid. Mary has brought them incredible news, but they can't believe it. Fear has taken up residence within them and there is room for nothing else. There is no room for hope that might disappoint them yet again, no room for trust or courage. The doors are locked, keeping out not just the perceived threat, but also any hint of joy. The doors are locked for fear of what might happen next.

But what actually happens next cannot be stopped, not by locks on doors nor fear-filled hearts. What actually happens next is Jesus standing among them and saying, "Peace be with you." Jesus comes without anger for their fear, for the ways they have forgotten his words of promise. He comes and breathes the Holy Spirit upon them and assures them again of the gift of his peace. He gives the disciples what they need to become apostles - those who go out and share the news of the resurrection. He gives them what they need to challenge the Empire and the powers that have silenced Jesus with a boldness that we hear about in the readings from Acts today and throughout the Easter season.

Not everybody is there that night though. The disciple Thomas is out for some reason. When all the rest of the disciples are huddled together behind locked doors, Thomas isn't with them. Thomas certainly knows and shares their grief and fear but he doesn't let it stop him; he is out and about. This isn't the first time Thomas has shown such courage. Earlier on in the Gospel of John, when Jesus learns that his friend Lazarus has died, Jesus says he wants to go to Lazarus' tomb. Except, Lazarus' tomb is in Judea where people have just been

trying to stone Jesus. All the other disciples are afraid to return to Judea. They try to talk sense into Jesus. But Thomas says to his friends, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." He displays great courage and convinces his friends to go with Jesus to Lazarus' tomb even though it is risky.

Thomas so often gets a bad rap for being "Doubting Thomas", but I think we should call him "Courageous Thomas." He is a great role model for us as disciples today. We are so often tempted to stay where it is safe, to huddle together with like minded people against the rest of the world. The witness of Thomas challenges us to leave the safety of our churches and our comfortable lives even when things are hard out there, even when people are angry, even when we're afraid. We need to go to those places of death, with Jesus, to bring resurrection hope.

Thomas also isn't afraid to express doubts and ask for what he needs. When the other disciples tell Thomas that while he was out and about they have seen the Lord, Thomas isn't willing to just jump on the bandwagon and go along with everyone else. Thomas insists that he needs to find out for himself, he needs to have his own encounter with the risen Jesus too. And he gets what he needs. Jesus returns to the disciples and gives them all, including Thomas, another experience of his presence and his peace. Jesus meets Thomas where he is to help him, and he helps the other disciples who aren't naturally as brave as Thomas.

Today we aren't gathered behind locked doors, but we too are so affected by fear. We have many reasons to be afraid when we look at all the challenges in our world today. How will we, our country, and our world respond to climate change, to terrorism, to racism and Islamophobia, to the Syrian crisis, and to increased polarization and tribalism in our political system? Fear leaves little room for hope, for creative ideas, for active engagement in the challenges we face. It paralyzes us. It makes us unwilling to leave our safety zones or go against the flow of those in our social networks. But just as on that day of his resurrection, Jesus doesn't let fear and paralysis stop him.

Today, Jesus comes to us, into the midst of our fearful world, to be present with us in his body and blood and to give us the gift of peace. When our hearts are locked in fear, Jesus comes and stands among us and says, "Peace be with you." When we're sure that we've failed Jesus by giving in to fear, he says, "Peace be with you." When we have doubts about this whole resurrection thing, "Peace be with you." When we want to stay safe with like minded people, "Peace be with you." Jesus comes and says, "My peace be with you. A peace unlike anything the world has to offer. A peace that can unlock every door, every heart and challenge empires. Peace be with you."

And then he sends us out to live with hope and peace amidst the fear of this world. He sends us out to follow the example of Thomas and to be as courageous as the apostles were in the book of Acts. He sends us out to bring hope and faith to a world so in need. And he gives us all that we need for this work - his presence and his peace.

Let's take a few moments to receive and rest in this peace so that we can go out and share it.

Thanks be to God.