

Preacher: Pastor Twyla
Scripture: John 20:19-31

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

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 that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

A hesitant driver, waiting for traffic to clear, came to a complete stop on a freeway ramp. The traffic thinned, but the intimidated driver still waited. Finally, an infuriated voice yelled from behind, "The sign says to yield, not to give up."

John gives us a glimpse into the disciples' world on the evening of the resurrection. They were staying together in a place, and John says, "the doors were locked, for fear of the Jews." They were afraid. They were so full of fear that they were hiding. The shock of what had happened to Jesus gripped them with doubt and unbelief. How could this have happened? The crucifixion of Jesus was a totally-unexpected outcome of the ministry they were working on with him. They had to wonder whether they, as associates of Jesus, would be hunted down and made to suffer and die just as Jesus did.

Oh, and how about that unbelievable story that Mary Magdalene had told them about the empty tomb, and the man, she said was Jesus, who spoke to her outside the tomb! How could that be? Everything they knew about death told them that rising from the dead is not possible. Sure, Jesus brought people back to life—that was totally amazing; but this time he was the one who had died. Could he really have come back to life?

Confusion about what to do next had to feel overwhelming. They gave up everything to follow Jesus. Now what? They were not the same people they were before they met Jesus. He changed them, but now, what were they to do? Where would they go? Who would lead them? If you ask me, they had good reasons to feel afraid. Obviously, they knew they could not stay in hiding.

Fear, once it gets a grip on someone, can have a paralyzing effect on him or her. No doubt there are many, many things that instill fear into our being. Wars abound. Although they may be occurring in distant lands, we fear it could happen here. Our fear closes doors to dialogue with potential threats and denies opportunities to build bridges that cross the divide.

But let us not ignore the reality that this same dysfunctional behavior happens in our immediate lives. We can become prisoners to fear in our own neighborhoods because of crime. We live in a society where many feel on edge, creating inaccurate notions of suspicion towards those who are different from us. Fear feeds our ignorance and prejudices, rather than looking for real solutions to issues that hit at the heart of violence and crime. We look for quick fixes, not real-lasting, heart-changing solutions.

Marriages and family structures fall apart because of fear. Financial instability, alcohol or drug abuse, infidelity, threaten the feeling of security in our relationships. We can become prisoners to our fear of illness and death. Fear of failure at some pursuit may hold us back from trying something new.

John tells us that the disciples that the door where they were staying was locked and they were hiding in fear. What fears do you have that keep you behind locked doors in hiding?

John goes on to tell us that there is a key to unlocking that door. He tells us that Jesus came to be among them, and said, "Peace be with you!" He said it not just once, but twice, perhaps for emphasis, or maybe because they were awestruck that he was there, and he knew they needed to hear him say it again. Jesus recognized the disciples' overwhelming feelings of doubt, unbelief and fear that were a result of all that had happened in the last couple of days. He knew that even the story Mary told them about seeing the risen Lord had perplexed them.

Yet, he brings to them the much-needed encouragement of peace to help overcome their fear, not only through spoken words, but also as he breathed onto them, the Holy Spirit; and he instructs them to go out into the world to continue God's mission. He spoke words about forgiveness. Perhaps reminding them of God's sovereignty, and that they are the ones called to point people to him and even to those who seem so undeserving of God's love and saving grace.

But I found myself wondering also if these words of forgiveness were also not meant to communicate that they would find freedom from their anger and fears over what had happened only as they would let God handle the judgement. Unforgiveness holds people captive to doubts and fear.

The feeling of peace is what we all long for when situations arise, when our world is rocked, when dreams are shattered, and we are gripped by fear. Peace not only brings a calmness to our being, but it gives us hope by bringing light into our darkness. It helps to bring an appropriate perspective—a sense of order to the disruption in our lives. Peace offers us direction in moving ahead with our lives. This much needed peace is ours as Christ stands with us.

Now, the text also tells us the story of Thomas. He was not present the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples. He indicated that he would not believe they had actually seen Jesus, until he had the opportunity to see Jesus and put his fingers where the nails had been. Thomas really gets an undeserving bad rap for this. Thomas really was no different than the others; he just hadn't been with the others the first time Jesus appeared to them.

Who among us, having the foundation of our beliefs about the finality of death in this lifetime would not have the same doubts? Honestly?

The story goes on to tell us Jesus appeared to the disciples again; and this time, Thomas was present. Jesus not only offered him the same peace he offered once again to all of the disciples, but he offered him the proof Thomas sought by inviting him to put his finger into the holes in his hands where the nails had once been. But Thomas didn't need that extra proof. His doubt about the risen Lord was erased when he saw Jesus. In fact, as far as we know, he was the only one that verbalized recognition that the one standing before him was Jesus.

People look to experiences to provide the proof we need to overcome our doubts and fears. Even self-confessed Christians feel this need. The need for proof is the only thing that will allow some people to truly believe in the risen Lord. Jesus tells us that this is backward thinking. Believing involves a stronger power, and that power is faith. With faith, we choose to believe.

We have the written word to tell us the stories and give us insight and guidance in developing our faith. The word heightens our awareness of what to look for to find Jesus in our lives. Without belief in the risen Savior, we will not avail ourselves of the experiences we seek in making Jesus more real to us.

Doubt can get in the way of our ability to believe in the risen Savior who stands with us through even the most trying of circumstances, offering us peace, thereby, paralyzing us with fear that leaves us to hide behind locked doors. That's not living, is it? None of us wants to be paralyzed by fear that holds us back from enjoying the life God has given us. Likewise, all of us seek purpose in life, but if we are hiding behind locked doors because we are afraid of what we might encounter or because we are afraid we will fail, we never discover our purpose and feel fulfillment in life.

As Christians we know that God has given us gifts and talents to use to help point the way for others to find him. Yet our doubts and fears hinder the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to fill us to help us and guide us to use those gifts. That leaves Christians to question their worth, but it's not God who says we are worthless—it is ourselves, when filled with doubt feeding our fears, which then allow the doors to our lives to be locked, trying to keep Jesus out.

But Jesus never gives up on us. He walks into our lives although we may try not to notice; but I suspect those feelings we get that tell us we should be doing something, really are an awareness on some level of our being, that Jesus is there.

The disciples did not remain behind locked doors. They overcame their doubts. Of course, seeing the resurrected Christ helped with that, but even so, they had to overcome their doubts in their abilities to continue the mission of spreading the Gospel, and their fear of what might happen to them. They had to choose to believe that Jesus would continue to be with them. They had to choose to believe that, like Jesus, they would have an everlasting life. Then as they believed, they experienced his peace and his guiding presence. Their faith grew stronger and the fears they might have encountered did not overwhelm them.

Carl Sagan, an American astronomer, planetary scientist, cosmologist, astrophysicist, astrobiologist, author, and science communicator, was fascinated that educated adults, with the wonders of science manifest all around them, could cling to beliefs based on the unverifiable testimony of observers dead for over two thousand years.

"You're so smart, why do you believe in God?" he once asked cleric Joan Brown Campbell, an American Christian minister and ecumenical leader. She found this a surprising question from someone who had no trouble accepting the existence of black holes, which no one has ever observed (choosing what to believe).

"You're so smart, why don't you believe in God?" she answered.

Sagan never wavered in his agnosticism, even when he was dying. "There was no deathbed conversion," his wife, Ann Druyan, said. "No appeals to God, no hope for an afterlife, no pretending that he and I, who had been inseparable for twenty years, were not saying good-bye forever."

"Didn't he want to believe?" Someone asked. "Carl never wanted to believe," she said fiercely. "He wanted to know."

To know God exists, to know the resurrected Christ, to know one is never alone, to know life does not end with this lifetime is to first choose to believe. Are you choosing to believe, to push through any doubts you may have now or that may arise sometime down the road of your life? Choose to believe in the resurrected Christ, walk in faith, and any doors of fear will be unlocked; and you will experience the peace Christ brings to all areas of your life. Amen.