

**Sunday, April 16, 2023**  
**I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31**  
**"No Doubt About it"**  
**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

Sometimes I like to begin with a little humor. So, here goes . .

A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no body. In the defense's closing statement the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, resorted to a trick: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch. "Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case, will walk into this courtroom."

He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I therefore put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

The jury, clearly confused, retired to deliberate. A few minutes later, the jury returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty. "But how?" inquired the lawyer. "You must have had some doubt, I saw all of you stare at the door."

The jury foreman replied: "Oh, we looked, but your client didn't." No doubt about it. (Oh I love jokes.com!)

It was the evening of Easter Sunday and there they sat. All of the disciples, except Thomas, behind locked doors. And they were terrified – do you blame them? Everything had happened so fast – the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the breaking of the bread, the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the cross, the grave. They had just lost their friend, their mentor, their Rabbi. They had given up everything to follow him – their families, their jobs, their communities. The Sabbath was now over, and the authorities could and probably would round up all of Jesus' associates. Maybe they would be blamed for stealing the body of Jesus. More likely they would be stoned, just for being associated with Jesus. Imagine the conversation pondering what Peter and John had seen, what Mary had said, what Jesus had told them would happen. "What did he say about this being raised from the dead – does anyone remember?"

Sitting there terrified and confused, suddenly Jesus appears before them – did they scream? I would have! So let me ask you this, what are you most afraid of? And I'm not referring to Jesus suddenly appearing or to say a fear of heights, or snakes, or a fear of the kinds of bugs we see on the show "Survivor". I'm asking about your greatest fear. What is it that can wake you up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night? Many of us fear – death. Not knowing exactly how or when we will die, not knowing exactly what happens to us when we die, what we will feel or not having accomplished all we wanted to do, see, feel. Many of us fear loss. Loss in our abilities, our health, independence or of a loved one. Many of us fear failure. Making bad decisions, wrong choices, disappointing others.

And when fear sets in, real fear, it affects us in many ways. We lose our confidence and assurance. And we begin to doubt. We doubt our abilities. We doubt the words other people say. We doubt our faith. And this can cause us to close ourselves off from the world, to stay entrenched in our fears and doubts, as if hidden behind locked doors.

When Jesus appears that Easter Sunday evening, he doesn't knock; he doesn't unlock the door, he simply appears, and we aren't quite sure what his appearance was or for that matter what he was wearing – remember last Sunday, the grave clothes were still in the tomb -thanks for coming back! - but we do know, right there, he becomes a *living hope* right in front of their faces. You know, none of us can escape the love of Christ because God will always find a way to be with us, even behind our locked doors, afraid and alone. And in that moment Jesus bestows upon the disciples three gifts. Three gifts we too are given because of Christ's resurrection.

First is the gift of peace. Jesus appears and states, "peace be with you". In other words, calm down, it's really me; I'm here as I told you. Come see my hands, come feel my side, and believe I am here. Do not be afraid any longer, but be at peace. Each day we too need to breathe deeply and remember those words, "peace be with you, my peace I give to you."

Now Thomas has always gotten a bad rap for being "the doubter". Most see him as a rather wimpy disciple because he didn't take the disciples witness of Christ at face value, he had to see Jesus for himself. But as many have written, you have to respect Thomas! He had a right to be doubtful! When a person is crucified, dead and buried, they usually stay that way!

We too doubt, we too need confirmation from time to time, just as all of the disciples did, but guess what - we are supposed to doubt. Yes, we are supposed to doubt. It's a part of our faith, asking the questions, examining the issues; is all part of our journey. But there is a big difference between doubt and disbelief. Doubt is essentially saying, I just can't believe this. Disbelief is saying, I won't believe this. See the difference? Doubt is always looking for the light, the explanation, the reason, show me. Disbelief is very content to stay in the darkness, wallowing in sorrow and pain and grief, not even looking for a way out. Thomas doubted, we all doubt.

And Jesus gets it, he understands Thomas and all of us doubters. The first thing Jesus says to Thomas is, come here, I understand you -- even though I told you over and over again, how I would die and how I would come back again, I get it, this is just too much to comprehend. And Thomas' response is the highest word of personal confession spoken in the entire Gospel: "My Lord and My God". This is the climax of their understanding as disciples – Jesus is Lord, Jesus is God. And Jesus doesn't say, blessed are those who haven't seen or touched or witnessed anything but believe regardless – he says blessed are those who have come to believe. Blessed are those who have looked and studied all of the evidence and listened Sunday after Sunday and have come to believe.

Fredrick Buechner states, "if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts," he states, "are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

The second gift Jesus bestows upon his disciples is the gift of the Holy Spirit. He breathes on them the breath of God. And they receive peace and wholeness and new life as his living spirit enters each one of them. And because of God's love for us, the Holy Spirit continues to be given to *all* of us. And that spirit has the power to guide us through our times of fear and doubt.

When Jesus was raised from the dead, his wounds were still there, scars for eternity, they didn't go away in whatever form he was as he stood there before them – the wounds in his hands, his side, they were a part of the living Christ – they are there for us as well, for our wounds never fully go away, and we are all wounded.

There are times when life weighs us down, for there are many Good Fridays and horrible Saturdays before there is a Resurrection Sunday. And the proof we seek in order to eliminate the doubt, may never be seen like Jesus' wounds. And the proof we seek is not only about eternal life, life after death, Jesus risen. The real meaning of the resurrection is about our relationship with God, a relationship that not even death can bring to an end. As Rev. Lewis writes, "resurrection is relationship. A relationship that will never be broken, that will never be abandoned, that will never know separation and will forever be. We live for and exist in relationships that will change, that will end. But not so with God. The point of God's revealed self in the Word made flesh, the Word crucified, the Word resurrected, and the Word ascended, is the commitment, like no other, to show what true relationship means." (1)

We, like Thomas, need a personal encounter with our Lord, but what most of us don't realize that this can happen, in a way. When we fear, when we doubt, we need to seek the company of others and get out from behind our locked doors and search for that peace, those lasting relationships, new life in the spirit.

The third gift Jesus bestows upon the disciples is the power and commission to carry out God's forgiving work in the world. With the peace of Christ in their hearts and the Holy Spirit at work in their souls, they were ready to go out into the world with confidence and assurance and begin a new church. We too need to learn how to be a new church. Forever changed. And the church is not seeing is believing but believing is seeing, seeing where Christ has moved us, and guided us to be his hands in the world of tomorrow.

So now that the disciples were commissioned to begin their ministry, what is the first task Jesus asks them to do? Is it to heal the sick, preach good news to the poor, feed the hungry? No, it is to forgive, and not retain the sins of others, to let them go. At first I thought, what a strange thing for Jesus to say! But first the disciples must forgive those who had killed their Savior. First they must forgive those believers who turned their backs against him. The disciples had to learn to love them first before the message of Christ could be spoken. And where could they receive the power to love them, to forgive them? From Christ, who while dying on the cross states, "Father forgive them."

Christ died for our sins, and we need to receive and bestow that forgiveness. But let me be clear, forgiveness is not something we do; it is something we discover. It is a process of overcoming our *own* fears, faults, doubts, and those of others, and reaching a place of belief and peace by letting that go. With the peace of Christ in our hearts and the holy spirit flowing through our lives, we have the ability to forgive and serve others. We have the power to be the hands of God in the world. And when we doubt, when we are afraid, to search for the hands of God all around us.

Being people of the resurrection means that we must not stay behind locked doors, but be a witness. A witness, not to the facts, not like Thomas who had hard evidence, but to be more like character witnesses, to witness with our own lives.

When I was in Seminary I heard a terrific sermon called "Against All Preachers of Bad News." Funny how even though it was written nearly three decades ago, Tom Long's words,

still ring so very true today. He states, "These are hard times, and there are many preachers of bad news. Sometimes the bad news is that everything is really sweetness and light and people are basically good, and our social system is just a little out of joint, and there are simple ways of restoring our economy and our educational systems, and simple ways of restoring family life and a sense of hope, and simple ways of bringing peace to the world. Its bad news preaching because it isn't true. It makes a mockery of the pain which we experience, and the poverty which surrounds us, and the malaise and despair which saps the strength of the American people."

"But it's also bad news preaching when we are told that we are only sinners condemned and dying, when we are told to be suspicious of every experience of love, every generous act, when we are cynical and despairing about ever reaching a time of peace, told to accept captivity and hunger and sickness as the normal lot of human beings upon this earth and that every effort to make radical change is doomed to failure." That's also bad news preaching because it's also not true. (2) We cannot reach the resurrection of promise without the cross of suffering. But Christ became visible again so that our fears, our suffering, could be released and we could live as people of the resurrection – people of peace –people of hope - people of forgiveness.

We no longer need to see Christ's hands to know his sacrifice; we no longer have to see Christ's side to know his promise. Let us dwell in the peace of Christ, and the love of the Holy Spirit as we join the many witnesses and through no fear, no confusion, no pressure, become people of the resurrection and help others come to believe. For as Peter states, "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy." May it be so, Amen.

(1) Lewis, The Rev. Karoline. "Resurrection is Relationship." 3/27/2016.

(2) Princeton Seminary Course, Preaching Professor Thomas Long, sermon, "Against All Preachers of Bad News"