

FINDING TRUE PEACE

APRIL 8, 2018 – 2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER (JOHN 20:19-31)

Grace and peace to you from the risen Lord. As we look at His Word this morning, the passage from John 20 concerns the disciples and examines their doubts and concerns following Christ's crucifixion. Thomas is the one disciple that becomes known as doubting Thomas as the story is retold. But I wonder if that is an accurate understanding of who Thomas is and what Thomas and the others are really expressing.

Today, as disciples, we will look back at the doubt, at the belief and at the peace these disciples found. Together we will seek the truth – the truth that Christ gave to us following His resurrection. We can gain a stronger understanding and become more confident as His disciples knowing where our true peace resides.

First, we must ask ourselves, what was going on in the lives of the disciples immediately following Jesus' resurrection? The disciples were crowded into the upper room. They had heard just that morning that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb. The women had come to tell them he had risen. But they failed to believe. They had their doubts.

John and Peter went to check out what they had been told about the risen Christ. Peter saw, but he couldn't put it all together. John saw and believed. He may have even gone back and spent the rest of the day trying to convince the rest of what he had seen, the empty tomb, the folded linen clothes, the head piece sitting by itself -- all the signs that Jesus had indeed risen.

Can we imagine the conversations that might have taken place that day? They were too afraid of the Jews and the Romans to go out and see, or look for Jesus, so they sat in that upper room sulking, praying, arguing, discussing, pondering, recalling the words of Jesus. Can we imagine the possibility that John was leading the conversation and Peter boldly trying to make sense of it?

The women, especially Mary, were trying to convince the rest of them to follow their conviction that Jesus had risen. Mary had already traveled the winding road of doubt and despair, coming to the realization and belief that Jesus had indeed risen.

As they were all talking and pondering about the good news they had heard from the women, Peter and John – the news that the body was missing. Suddenly, Jesus appears in the room. Notice the first word out of the Jesus' mouth, "*peace be with you.*" Jesus came and immediately brought a calming effect to the disciple. He brought peace.

As we welcome the women from the Village House back to St. Timothy's this month, my hope and prayer for them is that they are able to find the true peace Jesus offers them. For those with us that may not know the details, Village House is an Interfaith Ministry of Hope allowing churches to partner together and serve as a place of refuge for homeless women looking to transition and turn their lives around.

St. Tim's and our Village House partners address the needs of these women through the provision of food, shelter, hygiene services, and spiritual support, while they work with a case manager who is the coordinator of social services for them throughout their time with Village House.

Our desire at St. Tim's is to provide these vulnerable women with a caring, loving environment where we can share Jesus and the peace He offers while they grow spiritually, recover physically, and stabilize their lives emotionally so that they may move beyond their homelessness. True peace can be found in His promises following His resurrection.

As Jesus came and stood among the disciples having overcome the penalty of death, He says, "Peace be with you!" We can only imagine the pictures that raced through the minds and imaginations of his followers. One vivid illustration I came upon while preparing for this message shows the different ways we might depict peace in our minds.

In this illustration, an artist was commissioned by a wealthy man to paint how he would see peace in his mind. After reflecting on the idea of peace, the artist put paint to canvas and created a beautiful scene of a country home. Sitting among green pastures with animals grazing for food, people were enjoying one another's company, and a lovely little village lay in a distant valley. The artist shared the picture with the wealthy man.

But when He did so, the the man has a look of disappointment on his face. He turned to the artist and said, "This picture is not a true reflection of peace. You must give it another try."

Returning to his studio, the disheartened artist thought for several hours about what true peace might look like. He then returned to his canvas and began to paint anew. His finished work on the canvas depicted a beautiful mother holding her sleeping baby, the sunshine peeking through the window, and a smiling, loving child at peace in her arms. He thought, surely, this is true peace. He returned to share the picture with the wealthy man. The man once again said the painting felt short of what he imagined true peace to be.

The frustrated artist returned again to his studio. Tired and disappointed, his anger rose inside him as he felt the rejection of his work once more. He prayed more deeply for inspiration asking the Lord to give him a more vivid picture of true peace. A fresh perspective began to take hold in his mind. He returned to the canvas and began to paint with a fervent passion.

When he finished, he hurried to share the picture with the wealthy man. Pleased, the wealthy man responded, "Now this is a picture of true peace."

And what was this picture of true peace?? The artist's rendition painted a storm-filled night with the sea pounding against a rock cliff. The raging of the wind whipped the dark rain clouds as bolts of lightning struck the ground. The sea roared among the rocks as the waves tossed the water violently up against the cliff.

On closer examination, there sat quietly snug in the lower half of the picture, under a cliff, a small bird. She was protected and dry in her nest tucked safely among the rocks. The bird depicted a calmness and peace while the storm raged all around her.

Jesus promises each of us a peace that is as calming as that young bird nestled in the rocks as the storm engulfed everything around her. In the upper room with the disciples, Jesus brought a peace that comforted the disciples. His peace allowed them to more fully understand that He had been raised from the dead.

Can we imagine such a peace? This peace from Jesus. A reassuring peace that settled in the minds of the disciples and drove away the doubt they had been experiencing. A quietness within them that would allow them to whole heartedly believe that Jesus was resurrected fulfilling His promise to them. This was not their imagination playing tricks on them. The Jesus they were witnessing was not a ghost.

Jesus was standing before them and bringing peace to their journey. *The disciples were overjoyed... Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Can we imagine the conversation the disciples had after Jesus departed?*

They believed it was him. Did they celebrate? Were they excited? Can we imagine them dancing around, hugging each other, and envision the tears flowing from their eyes?

Can we hear the conversation, "John was right! Mary was right! He has risen INDEED! He told us he would rise again after 3 days. How could we have doubted?" Can we imagine the joy, the excitement, the wonder, the thrill of His disciples?

Jesus appeared in the middle of them. Jesus was, alive, risen from the dead. He stood among them.

Their reaction was joy, tears, happiness, excitement, a burden of despair had been lifted from their hearts and souls. The sorrow of the previous Friday had turned into excitement, joy and fulfillment of the resurrection promise.

In the middle of that celebration Thomas returns. Thomas had left that upper room – possibly to get some air; to gather his thoughts; to try to make sense of all of this; to be alone with his grief. Then he returns and finds out that Jesus had appeared to the group. Thomas comes in and the rest exclaim, 'Thomas, we have seen the Lord.'

Can we imagine his reaction? He looks around at them with an utter lack of comprehension. For him, Jesus, his friend, his master, his teacher, the one whom he had placed his entire trust, faith and belief is dead. His despair was great. And now he decides to return to his friends and mourn with them, and they tell him "Thomas we have seen the Lord."

He must have thought they were simply crazy with grief. In his misery and loneliness, he feels rejected. He feels like an outsider, and so he remarks angrily, "So, so you've seen the Lord, so what? I'll believe that when I see him myself, when I stick my finger into the scars in his hand. and thrust my hand into his side, then I'll believe and not before." Can we sense his utter despair, his hopeless anger?

And then, Thomas has to endure a week of waiting, wondering if Jesus will return to the group again. Jesus does return and shows Thomas what he had shown the others the week before. Jesus shows him his hands with the nail marks, his side with the spear mark, and Thomas like the rest doesn't have to touch or put his hand into his side, all he says is' "My Lord, and my God!" He believes.

Thomas believes. He does not have to touch Jesus. He just hears the words of Jesus and he believes. Thomas no longer doubts but believes. The doubt he initially expressed was more a sense of confusion mixed with his frustration. He had not received the peace of Jesus, so he did not have that calmness the others had received. So all the emotions that were welling up in him came to the surface so he uttered the words, "*I will believe if I touch his hands and see the spear make in his side.*" Thomas did not doubt as much as he let all the other emotions rise to the surface and he uttered what we have come to think was an expression of doubt.

Thomas believes as the rest of the disciples did. No one touched Jesus, they all, including Thomas believed as they saw Him appear to them. All they needed to believe was the appearance of Jesus. Thomas believed just like the rest of them. He believes not by touching Jesus, but just looking upon him as the rest did.

The text does not say if Jesus gave his peace to Thomas before he left, However, I am convinced that the peace of Christ that passes all human understanding washed over Thomas, the same as the others.

Jesus says to the disciples, *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.* Jesus is saying that each of us, also having not seen him, are blessed and washed over with His peace.

In the book *40 Day Journey with Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Bonhoeffer shares “those who follow Jesus’ ... those who let Jesus’ yoke rest on them without resistance, will find the burden they must bear to be light. In the gentle pressure of this yoke they will receive the strength to walk the right path without becoming weary....Where will the call to discipleship lead those who follow it? What decisions and painful separations will it entail? We must take this question to him who alone knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows where the path will lead. But we know that it will be a path full of mercy beyond measure. Discipleship is joy.”

We are blessed as His disciples were because we have faith in Jesus without seeing him face to face. Thomas had faith and his faith allowed him to question whether Jesus was alive or dead. We have faith and that allows us to believe in the risen Lord without seeing him face to face. But at the same time, we have doubts from time to time and that is alright, because those doubts make our faith stronger. Lord we know that in our journey as disciples you will allow our doubts to make our faith grow stronger and stronger.

And so, on this Sunday following Easter, Jesus invites us to bring our doubts into His presence, into the fellowship of all here at St. Tim’s, and with the faithful, struggle to allow God’s Spirit to strengthen our faith fully realizing Christ’s resurrection victory over sin and death. Yes, His resurrection is an incredible story that we are called upon to believe and trust. It defies logic and human reason.

Yet, that is the witness and testimony of those who had come to see and believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead. And they gave witness to what they had come to see and believe with more than their words. We know as the disciples journey unfolded that Peter was crucified, rather than deny his witness to Christ’s resurrection. Many of the other disciples were also martyred for their faith. Stephen was stoned to death, and Paul was beheaded. All for their belief, for their faith.

As difficult as it may be rationally to explain the resurrection of our Lord, it also defies logic and reason to believe that these early disciples would have stolen our Lord’s corpse to invent the hoax of his resurrection, and be willing to die for a lie.

So let us place our doubts before God, and invite his Holy Spirit to enable us to believe the concluding words of John’s Gospel:

30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. Blessed are those who believe and have not seen. Let us pray...