

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – April 3, 2005

“The World is Different Now!”

I Peter 1: 3-9, John 20: 19-31
Easter 2/A, April 3, 2005
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Where was Thomas? No one seems to know. We know where the other disciples are. “Behind locked doors afraid” is the description of those disciples, that first Easter evening. Yet, is that not also a vivid portrayal of our lives? Many of us become isolated by fear. We’re terrified of violence, afraid of the stranger, worried about the future, fearful of giving our children too much freedom, fearful of not giving them enough, uncertain about the economy. Yet I imagine not many of us lie awake at night worried that in the morning someone might accuse us of being followers of Jesus.

However, that is what worries the disciples as they huddle barricaded behind closed doors that first Easter evening. If someone sees them in the streets, they might accuse them of being one of his followers. No one feels safe anymore. Who can blame them? Even worse, if what Mary says is true, if Jesus is not dead, but has come back to life, there will be even more trouble. The authorities won’t likely to stand for someone not staying dead. Mary told them that she had seen the risen Christ, that he had spoken to her and sent her to tell the others about this miraculous turn of events. Judging from their behavior, the disciples don’t seem to believe her and were taking no chances.

Into this den of fear, Jesus appears. What does he say? “Peace be with you,” such an ordinary greeting and yet such an extraordinary gift. What is this peace that Christ offers as you wrestle with your deepest fears? What is this peace Christ brings into our world in turmoil? There have been plenty of places where Christ’s peace would have been a welcome gift recently. Was there peace at the bedside of Terri Schiavo? Has this peace come to Indonesia where an earthquake has taken its toll on an already shattered community? Did our former governor Rowland know this peace as he said goodbye to friends and family and headed to prison? I believe Pope John Paul II lived into this kind of peace as he met his final days. For all the world, he was a witness to this gift of peace that Jesus bestows upon all the faithful.

We need this peace. Our fears, our doubts, our worries, our dismay are too real for us to bear at times. Jesus knows this. He knew what it would be like for his disciples in the aftermath of his death. He promises to never leave us alone. Therefore, in the midst of our fears and doubts Jesus appears. He not only blesses those disciples with the gift of peace, but gives them another gift as well. He breathes on them the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to allay their fears and to bring their blood pressure down for the moment. Jesus helps us to make room within for this peace to take hold. When we are so filled with fear the peace has no place to rest. We deny a place for peace when we hold so tightly to old pains, old worries, misconceptions and doubts about ourselves and our God. Holding on to this stuff crowds out the Holy Spirit. The disciples will have to move on. They will have to leave the supposed safety of this room and go out into the world to declare to others that Christ is risen! This is not possible until they receive this gift of peace and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is just as important as Jesus' gift of peace. Jesus enables the disciples to go forward to spread the Word, to be bold in their proclamation and unafraid of the consequences. This would not have happened if Jesus did not appear to breathe and to bless. We give that fearful group so much credit, more credit perhaps than they deserve. Until Jesus appears to them they are useless. They are not out spreading the Good News as Mary has instructed them to do (at Jesus' insistence, of course.) They are locked behind closed doors, hoping no one will find them, uncertain of who to trust or what to do next. Still, we wonder where was Thomas?

There has been so much written and preached about Thomas through the ages. I was thankful to Sarah Dylan Breuer for releasing me to a new understanding of Thomas. Preachers would often have us believe that we are like Thomas; unbelieving, skeptical, full of doubts, needing proof to believe. They make this sound like a bad thing. Yet, I wonder, as Sarah does, why was Thomas not there with the others? What was he doing that kept him from following the others into that room of gloom and doom? Was he unafraid of what might happen? Was he not with them when the others took off for safety? Was he unaware of the dangers the others seemed to perceive? Did he know something the others did not know? Or was he off doing what Mary had called him to do, proclaiming the risen Christ?

We don't know where Thomas was or what he was doing. I would like to think that Thomas wasn't present to receive Jesus' commissioning and blessing because he was not trapped by his post Resurrection fears like the others. Unlike the others, perhaps Thomas was already out in the world, uncertain of what might happen next, oblivious at worst, unafraid at best. Thomas was out somewhere meeting the future head on. Does this mean that Thomas is less faithful than the other disciples? Not necessarily.

Perhaps Thomas wasn't with the others to hear these words of blessing because, unlike the others, he was not locked inside in fear, but was witnessing to the power of the resurrection. Instead of being the only one to get it wrong, Thomas was the one who got it right.

When Thomas heard what had happened that night, he thought he had missed out on something. He thought he had been overlooked and wanted to share in the experience with his fellow disciples. He did not trust that he did not need to be with the others to live the resurrection. Sarah Breuer says if you want to touch Jesus, if you want to KNOW that God is real, that Christ is alive and at work in the world, the best place for you to be is out there, in the world. "If you want to have the most profound experience possible of the risen Christ," she says, "you'll need to touch Christ's wounds. Thomas is entirely right about that. Touch Christ's wounds and you'll find yourself crying out with Thomas, 'my Lord and my God!'"

If Thomas was out in the world, he was precisely where Jesus wanted him to be. He didn't need to hear Jesus' commission because he was already two steps ahead of the others. It is when we stumble, fears and all, into someone else's woundedness, fear or even their pain and there share the love of Christ that we become true disciples of the Risen Lord. We can not have this experience locked behind closed doors.

The world is a broken, dying, bleeding, hurting place and Jesus sends us out there to meet it with love. Forgive as we are forgiven. Love as we have been loved. Embrace as we have been embraced. This is where we will meet the Risen One. Jesus commissions us to participate in the reconciliation and healing that is Christ's work in the world. We are sent because each one of us—those gathered at this table, and at every other table at which bread is being broken in remembrance of him—are now the body of Christ, called and empowered to do what he did, and more.

If we want to know that, if we want to experience that, we will have to leave the rooms into which we lock ourselves. We need to do what Thomas did—get out into the world, and insist upon touching Christ's wounds. When we try to sequester ourselves away from the world or hide our children from the world's pain, we are hiding from Christ's presence. This will not deter Jesus. He penetrates our fortress of fear, breathes peace upon us and gives us the power to go out to touch the places where the Body of Christ is still suffering. Jesus sends us to touch, heal and make new a wounded world.

I believe I met Thomas just yesterday. With this new image in mind, of a Thomas who is unafraid to declare the goodness of God and touch the wounds of Christ, I met Thomas in our friend and pastor Edwin Ayala. He took us on a tour of Hartford and shared with us places of hope, corners of resurrection miracle. On one corner was a beautiful new school, on another a refurbished home, on another a cultural center, on another a Caribbean bakery. Signs of the resurrection were all around us and our tour guide was Thomas himself. Be not afraid! Touch the hands of Jesus! Work together to experience true resurrection joy. His enthusiasm is contagious and his zeal for life and love the Lord infectious.

Go into the world and be not afraid. Jesus has commissioned and blessed us to spread the Good News that Christ is risen and the world is different now! Go to make Christ's love and mercy real to others. Jesus has blessed you and empowered you to do what ever you can, no matter how insignificant it may seem. Thomas has been reborn this day, from "doubting Thomas" to "doing Thomas." Let us join him in his witness. Go be Thomas to a child who needs tutoring. Be Thomas with the family who dreams of owning their own home. Be Thomas to that person who needs a ride to a doctor's appointment. Be Thomas by speaking up for our brothers and sisters in Hartford when people say only drug dealers and welfare mothers live in those neighborhoods. This testimony to the resurrection we hear this morning, was recorded not to provide us with something to read as we wait in locked rooms and gated communities, but to inspire us to experience the life of the risen Christ by living as Christ's body in the world, touching, loving, healing, forgiving in Christ's name and to Christ's glory. Thomas calls us to join him, in the world, where resurrection life begins. May it be so! Amen

Hear us, O God, when we cry to you.
Look upon us.
We seek to turn away from our past.
And turn our lives toward you,
Forgive us when we have failed you,
Forgive us when we have ignored you,
Forgive us when we have denied you.
Walk with us again.
Lead us where you would have us go,
And we will follow. In Christ's name and for Christ's sake we pray.
Amen