

# Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

## “Glimpses of the Risen Christ”

John 20: 19-31

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On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **"Peace be with you!"** After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. 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. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (called Didymus or the Twin), who was one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, **"Peace be with you!"** Then Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

-- The Gospel of John 20: 19-31

*Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, we gather together this morning after the joy and glory of Easter last week. Be in our hearts this morning as we look at this familiar text. We have arrived this morning at different places, O Lord: some of us are happy and healthy and centered and in a sunshiny place in our life. Some of us are bored and too comfortable and need a little nudging out of our comfort zone. Some are expecting great changes, and wait patiently with hope-filled hearts to walk into the future you have prepared for us. Some of us are worried about family situations. Some of us are grateful for Easter blessings and the promise of new life all around us. Some of us feel anxious or confused. Some of us have closed the doors to our hearts so that no one can come in or we struggle with a loved one who won't let us near. Meet us right where we are. As you said to the first disciples, "peace be with you," calm our hearts and quiet our minds. Open our eyes and ears to your message for us this morning. To that end, O God, I pray that you might pour through me the gift of preaching, that by some miracle of your grace, you might speak to each one of us right where we are, and we believe that you will for we pray in the name of Jesus the Risen and the Reigning Lord. Amen.*

Could I just see a quick show of hands to see if anyone else is a little tired after the whirlwind of Easter week? It is hard to believe that we go from one of the highest attended Sundays of the church year, to one of the lowest attended Sundays in just 7 days. In the trade, the first Sunday after Easter is known as "Seminarian Sunday." As I looked back in my files, I have preached on the Sunday following Easter five out of the last six years for sure, and maybe even as many as 12 out of the last 14 years. Each year I remember my target audience: the choir, the other ministers, and those who attend as regularly as the ministers.

Now, if you have been paying attention, you will know that we generally follow the lectionary with the rest of the churches around the world, which means that we are on a three year rotation through Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The first Sunday after Easter, however, does not follow the lectionary rotation and is always the story affectionately known as Doubting Thomas. As I prepared to preach from this very rich text this year, I decided to change our focus from Thomas to Jesus and focus our attention and energy this morning on the ways that the disciples recognized or saw glimpses of the risen Lord.

At 22 months my daughter Avery loves the game of hide and seek. We can play it over and over again, and she giggles and never grows sick of it. We play hide and seek most anywhere, and sometimes I only have to hide my face, and she pretends that I have appeared out of thin air right in front of her eyes. Her favorite place to play hide and seek is in our family room, because there are two low cabinets, where she can duck down and hide, and close the door behind her. After a few seconds, I knock on the cabinet door and say, "Where's Avery?" She opens the cabinet door, bursts out laughing, and smiles from ear to ear. Then she crouches back down and goes back into hiding.

It occurred to me that in our text this morning, there seems to be a game of hide and seek going on. Jesus appears to the disciples and says, "Peace be with you." They recognize Christ's presence, and then he disappears. The Risen Christ might seem to be quite good at hide and seek because he appears in a changed form, so they don't recognize him at first, and in his resurrected form, he can walk through locked doors and walls. Over and over again he appears, as if to say, "here I am." Mary mistakes him for "the gardener," on Easter morning and Cleopas mistakes him for a stranger on the Road to Emmaus (Lk 24). Scripture tells us, each time their "eyes were opened" and they recognized him.

What was the point of recognition? For Mary, it was when Jesus said her name, and she fell to her knees and said, "Rabboni." For Cleopas it was the way Jesus broke the bread and blessed it, and gave it to them, perhaps he said "take eat, this is my body, broken for you." For Thomas it was when Jesus shows him the holes in his hands where the nails once were, and the gash in his side. For some fifty days Jesus appears and disappears, and the disciples' eyes are opened, and they recognize the Risen Christ in their midst.

As I read the text over this month and prayed about what I would preach this morning, God kept nudging me away from Doubting Thomas this year to focus on Jesus' phrase "Peace be

with you" and to ask each one of you, where have you seen glimpses of the Risen Christ? I would like to focus the rest of our time together on those two things.

First of all, did you notice that Jesus says "Peace be with you" three times in this morning's passage? Three times! "Peace be with you." Why are those words one of Jesus' greatest blessings?

"Peace, be with you." I turned this phrase over and over in my mind all month, emphasizing different words. "Peace be with you." "Peace be with you." What on earth does he mean, and why does Jesus say it over and over again, not just in these resurrection passages, but throughout the gospel texts? Jesus says it almost like a blessing. I wondered, is it?

A minister and psychologist who runs a clergy group I attended regularly, used to remind the ministers gathered there each week that when you are in a crisis or sometimes even when you are around others who are in crisis, your natural instinct is to break into "fight or flight" mode. After you freeze with that deer in the headlights look, you have a choice: you can either fight your attacker, or you can run. In fact, medical studies show that you use primarily the brain stem when you are in crisis mode. In other words, you have fewer choices: freeze and hide, fight what threatens you if you feel you can beat it and/or scare it off, or flee and hope the danger doesn't follow.

Once the danger is gone, and you relax and get out of crisis mode, you regain your ability to think creatively and problem solve. Here is the thing: if you can learn to relax when a crisis presents itself, if you can use mind over matter through prayer, deep breathing, meditation, and relaxation, you will actually give yourself the maximum chance to creatively problem solve, because when you relax, you can access the parts of your brain associated with creative thinking. But when you are in the moment, when you are in the crisis, and danger is staring you in the face, we tend to take shallow breaths, our hearts race, and we panic.

There is a notice posted in many hospitals which states, in case of cardiac arrest, check your own pulse. In other words, when it's a matter of life and death, breathe deeply and remain calm.

"Peace be with you," Jesus tells his disciples who are overcome with grief and fear when he sees them in a locked room on Easter evening. Do you think Jesus knew that "peace" of mind, peace of the heart, peace in their lives was the thing that his grieving friends needed most? Whether he knew it consciously or not, Jesus understood that "inner peace" was a key element to the way he lived. Deep abiding peace was one of the legacies Jesus wanted to leave with those he loved, including us!

You may remember this is not the first time Jesus has taught this lesson. Why are you worried about the storms of life? (Mk 4) Jesus asks before calming the seas when their boat almost capsizes. "Peace be with you." Why do you worry about what you will wear, what you will eat, where you will live? "Peace be with you." (Mt 5) Like us, perhaps the disciples are a little slow to grasp the idea of deep and abiding peace and its benefits for our lives.

As I look out at your faces, I want you to know that I know that some of us have been in tough times. Some of us are dealing with challenging times even now. **Christ's blessing to his first disciples was also meant for us: Peace be with you means: peaceful minds, peaceful hearts, peace-filled lives.**

We cannot walk away from this passage for another year without pausing to ask the question: Where have you caught glimpses of the risen Christ?

If you will indulge me, I would like to share three personal stories about where I have caught glimpses of the risen Christ in recent days and months.

- ❖ This morning as I arose, and saw my daughter's tussled hair and fed her breakfast in her highchair, I experienced the unmistakable presence of God. Just to watch a child is to be in the sure

presence of God. Can God be present in the smallest and most common details of every day life like watching a child feed herself yogurt for breakfast and then taking a bubble bath? I think so.

- ❖ A few weeks ago the youth cooked and served dinner for the 85 men who live at the Stamford Homeless shelter. That night a resident of the shelter named Warren thanked me for the delicious meal and then said that he knew we were from a church because we have that "Jesus glow." What is the Jesus glow, I asked, not quite understanding. Christians have that Jesus thing going, Warren said, "your faces shine because you love God, and you radiate his light." Church folks have the Jesus glow, he said, don't you know? In the car on the way home discussing the night with the youth, I remembered Christ's powerful words: "when two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them."
- ❖ Last week, Don Hibbard brought me a megaphone for my egg hunt, yellow tape to keep our kids corralled, and thought of every possible way our first annual Easter Eggstravaganza could go better. Each week he amazes me by his unbelievable attention to detail and the way he keeps our church running tip top at two locations simultaneously. On Tuesday I walked by Judy Kelly's office and saw her faithfully writing welcome notes to each and every person who visited on Easter Sunday. On Wednesday, I watched Kevin Estes lead our children's choir and carefully teach them the meaning of each word line by line so they can fully appreciate what they sing. And on Thursday I stopped Bill Evertsberg in the hall and asked about how to translate a Greek word, and learned that *Paraclete*, the Greek word for the Holy Spirit, does not mean a pair of athletic shoes as it sounds, but it is Bill's favorite Greek word and means "the one who encourages us." The Holy Spirit is the one who encourages us, I love that. Surely the risen Christ

frequents 76 Progress drive the home of our temporary church office.

Several weeks ago, in worship, I prayed a pastoral prayer I adapted from one of my mentors in the ministry. I want to close by repeating a section of that prayer because it was the inspiration for this sermon. Listen again to this powerful prayer:

Each and every one of us, O God has been at sea in troubled water.....

- ❖ Whether it is in a waiting room in the hospital, while surgery for a loved one is underway; and we pray, “O God, if you have ever heard me, hear me now!”
- ❖ Whether it is at the time a relationship ends and leaves emptiness and doubt, wondering if we can slog the path of loneliness one more time.
- ❖ Whether it is after a long and valiant battle with a beloved one’s cancer, a battle which leaves us broken inside and wondering if the shattered pieces of our heart can ever be mended and healed, once our loved one is gone.
- ❖ Whether it is when profound depression leaves one feeling lost deep in a cave wondering if the light will ever be seen again.

Lord, even in the worst times in our lives, you are with us. You never leave our side. When everyone else abandons us or disappoints us, you are our rock and our redeemer.

All of us, O God, have been tossed and turned by our deepest fears of life and love. And then unpredictably in the middle of the storm, comes peace, and a confidence in our hearts that no matter what happens, we will survive. O Lord, was that You? *Was that You amidst the chaos and panic, who stilled the storm and showed us peace? Was that You who calmed our hearts and showed us a way out of the storm? Was that You, Lord, was that You?*<sup>i</sup>

Hindsight, they say is 20-20 vision. I hope that more than once a year on Doubting Thomas Sunday we will take the opportunity to look back over our lives and see the Risen Christ present with us at every turn. What will it take

to see Christ at work in our lives as our lives unfold right before our eyes? Is it a matter of calming ourselves down when we are in crisis mode? Or do we simply have to open our eyes to see and our ears to hear Christ’s blessing: “Peace be with you.”

I have good news for you: **There is no game of hide and seek. The Risen Christ is there for all who seek! Christ isn’t hiding at all, open your eyes and see for yourself.** In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, may peace be with you. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rev. Dr. William M. Longworth, *Seasons of Prayer*, p. 63. Bill Longworth has been a mentor and a minister to my family for over a decade. His prayers are poetry, and his ministry has inspired me for years to follow his gentle, humble way of leading others to know and love Jesus Christ, the risen and the reigning Lord.