

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, April 12, 2015)

Text: John 20:19-31 (The Inclusive Bible)

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were locked in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Temple authorities.

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Having said this, the savior showed them the marks of crucifixion.

The disciples were filled with joy when they saw Jesus, who said to them again, "Peace be with you. As Abba God sent me, so I'm sending you."

After saying this, Jesus breathed on them and said,

"Receive the Holy Spirit.

If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven.

If you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."

It happened that one of the Twelve, Thomas—nicknamed Didymus, or "Twin"—was absent when Jesus came. The other disciples kept telling him, "We've seen Jesus!"

Thomas' answer was, "I'll never believe it without putting my finger in the nail marks and my hand into the spear wound."

On the eighth day, the disciples were once more in the room, and this time Thomas was with them. Despite the locked doors, Jesus came and stood before them, saying, "Peace be with you."

Then, to Thomas, Jesus said, "Take your finger and examine my hands. Put your hand into my side. Don't persist in your unbelief, but believe!"

Thomas said in response, "My Savior and my God!"

Jesus then said,

"You've become a believer because you saw me.

Blessed are those who have not seen

and yet have believed."

Jesus performed many other signs as well—signs not recorded here—in the presence of the disciples. But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Only Begotten, so that by believing you may have life in Jesus' Name.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: "Peace Be With You"

When most of us look at our passage for today, I think the thing that often sticks out for us is the doubt. Poor Thomas, saddled with that adjective for all time just because he acted like most of us would. Could YOU truly believe that someone had come back from the dead? How could you trust that this person standing before you in all His radiant glory could actually be the Christ, risen from the dead just as he said? But more about that later.

The thing that stuck out for me even more than the doubt this time was the peace. You may have already gotten a hint about that if you paid attention to the songs and looked at your bulletin. In

fact, do me a favor, and look at your bulletin right now. Do you see how the three songs we sang at the beginning decrease in word length, going from the longest with “I’ve Got Peace Like a River” down to “Peace Before Us” and then finally just, “Peace?”

Peace is like that, you know. The more peace you have the less words you need to describe it. Chaos takes a lot of words and a whole bunch of letters. In fact, when I think of chaos, I think of many things jumbled together, all fighting for a place and finding none, kind of like this graphic of many letters exploding across the screen and finding nowhere to rest. No simplicity. No peace.

When Jesus entered through the locked doors of that upper room in John’s account Elsie read for us today, he entered a room where chaos ruled. He tells us the doors were locked because the disciples were afraid. And they had much to be afraid of, in fact. If their leader had been killed what was going to stop them from being killed as well? How were they going to be able to go forward without Jesus? Who would guide them now? What would become of them?

And into this place of chaos and fear Jesus enters quietly and utters the simplest words, “Peace be with you.” And then again, after showing them the marks of His crucifixion, repeats those words and reassures them that as Abba God has sent Him, so He is sending them. With the simplest of phrases, Christ commissions His disciples and all of us to come to go forth without fear and to know that eternal peace is ours.

What is peace actually? Webster’s defines peace in a number of ways, with definitions that include, “a state of tranquility or quiet”; “freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions”; “harmony in personal relations”; and “a pact or agreement to end hostilities between those who have been at war or in a state of enmity.”

I think Jesus’ greeting of “Peace be with you” encompasses all of these meanings. Throughout his ministry, he would bring tranquility and quiet to his disciples whether it was in the midst of a storm out on the ocean or gathered on the side of a mountain as he blessed the peacemakers and the meek.

In our setting for today, Jesus brings the peace that offers freedom from disquieting thoughts or emotions as he calms the fears of those gathered in that upper room, and reassures them of his eternal life and the surety of theirs.

In our world today, I think Jesus offers us peace in many of the same ways he did to those disciples gathered there so long ago. And, just as he did with them, He exhorts us to bring peace to others and to the world in which we live. Christ offers us the freedom from oppressive thoughts and emotions that we might be able to give that same kind of freedom and peace to others. He knew that his disciples wouldn’t be able to move forward and continue the ministry God had begun with Him if they were caught in a miasma of fear.

Christ knew as do we that fear paralyzes. Fear keeps us trapped. Fear makes us forget who we are, who we belong to and what we believe. “Fear not” we hear again and again throughout the scriptures.

The great clergyman and peace activist William Sloane Coffin, once said, “As I see it, the primary religious task these days is to try to think straight....You can't think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. If your heart's a stone, you can't have decent thoughts - either about personal relations or about international ones.”

I know that when my mind is filled with fear and I find myself basing my decisions on what I’m afraid of, I am most certainly not at peace. Rather, I am filled with anxiety and tend to make tepid choices and treat people in ways that bring chaos instead of peace.

When my mind is filled with love, however, it’s a different story. When I remember the God who loves me and is always there for me and hold fast to the truth of God’s promise revealed in Christ, I am able to step out and make the journey I know I’m called to take because no matter what happens I know God is with me, and I am at peace. And this peace is Christ’s promise.

“When our hearts fill with a fear we can't organize or get our arms around, a fear that makes us feel weak and small and inadequate,” Rev. Coffin said, “all of us disciples receive that same gift of

grace, forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit, a gift that limbers up our minds and our hearts, turning them from hearts of stone to hearts full of love.”

Jesus continues to offer peace to us throughout every moment of our lives. He breathes the Holy Spirit upon us that we may know peace and know that it is there for us to experience and be available to us at all times. Even when we forget; even when we mess up, even when we are responsible for the chaos, God forgives us again and again and makes it possible for us to know true peace and to offer that peace to others.

Our refusal to live in the light of Christ’s peace and to experience God’s forgiveness by forgiving not only others but ourselves as well, keeps us in conflict with the truth of our hearts and keeps us from experiencing the peace that is offered to us.

Gail O’Day, Dean of the Wake Forest University School of Divinity sees it this way, “Jesus comes again and again to these scared and confused disciples,” she writes, “who may not deserve Jesus’ peace or his faithfulness. In the same way, if we long to see Jesus, he offers us the same gift of himself, not just once, but over and over. It is, however,” she admits, “so hard to persist in faith, because it does not take long for the vocabulary of death to creep back in and to push Easter out.”

That vocabulary of death she’s talking about I think is the words that come forth when fear, hesitation, and confusion comprise our language and our thoughts, and we don’t hold true to the promises of God. It’s the vocabulary we use when we doubt the peace Christ brings.

Which, of course, brings us back to our dear Thomas.

I don’t really remember ever hearing about Thomas in the church without the “Doubting” descriptor preceding his name. It was certainly meant as a pejorative rather than as praise. And yet, I have come to believe that Thomas is actually one of the most hopeful characters in the Bible. For in him we see that we are not alone in our skepticism and our doubt, and our white knuckled grip on what we would call “reality,” and that Christ STILL offers us the blessing of His peace just as He did Thomas. There is great hope in that for me.

“What changes when Thomas is confronted by the risen Lord,” Dr. David Lose wrote in his article this week called “On Realities Old and New” is not that he is no longer a doubter...what changes is his perception of reality itself. Of what is possible. Of what God can do. Even of what God can do through him.”

And here is the same hope Christ holds out to us. Look forward to what is possible. Don’t be trapped in your upper room (your brain) by fear and the dread of what could come to pass. But rather, be bold, change your perception, accelerate with the assurance that God’s got your back and that whatever comes to pass you will be at peace.

Dr. Lose challenges us to exhort one another with the idea that, “part of what it means to come to church is to have our view of the world challenged with the possibility of something more...Life is real, and life is hard, and sometimes life is real hard,” he writes, “and if our vision shrinks it’s usually under the duress of personal hardship and tragedy... [We don’t] have to surrender [our] sense of realism, but instead [we are] invited to a whole new reality that God created. That new reality began, of course, when God first raised Jesus from the dead, but it continues, grows, and expands each time we gather in of the resurrected Lord.”

I’d like to leave you today with a lovely prayer for Eastertide I found this week in a book called, “Before the Amen” by the wonderful Maren and Maria Taribassi who have often gifted me with their words.

“God of resurrection power;
break through the locked doors of our certainty
to encourage our wonderings and our questions.
Break through the walls of our fears of others,
that we might make room for all at your table
Break through our doubt and confusion,
that we might come to know your presence

more fully in our lives and in our world.
When we seek to judge ourselves and others
for disbelief and questions,
open the locked doors of our hearts
and give us the patience of the risen Christ,
in whose name we pray. Amen.”