

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, April 24, 2022)

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

Introduction to the Text: For these reflections delivered on the second Sunday of Easter, also known as Low Sunday, as it comes at the end of Easter week, we recall that rather than being a Sunday to retire from and fold away the alleluias, this is a Sunday that speaks of bolder confidence and assurance from the disciples. In today's text, they are gathered in the upper room, afraid and unsure. Listen to the different ways in which they respond to the risen Christ.

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 am 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 Didymous—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.

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk: “Marks”

I wonder how many times you’ve heard today’s post-Easter story concerning the one known as “Doubting Thomas?” Or perhaps this is your first time encountering this particular disciple. Did you know that he actually has a whole gospel named after him? We studied it briefly in seminary, and I have to wonder if the denigration of his character so prevalent in many interpretations of the gospel accounts, may have something to do with it being relegated to secondary status. More likely, it’s the fact that his gospel wasn’t found until 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, and is composed of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus rather than an account of his life and work as in the four gospels found in the New Testament.

But I digress. Fascinating stuff these “extra-canonical” books that have been discovered and provide us with insights into so much more that was written concerning Jesus and his teachings than what we’ve been provided in that one big book known as “The Bible.”

But maybe this isn’t such a digression after all. For in Thomas, I think, Jesus is letting us know that there are many ways to learn and to comprehend and to believe and that He, the Master Teacher, is up for any of them. In that way, he’s like any great educator that understands how many different learning styles there are.

Jesus (who, as Mary proclaimed in our gospel from last week’s Easter service, is “the Teacher” that she saw) knows that each of us are unique and that there are as many ways to understand God as there are aspects of God – that is to say, innumerable and quite unfathomable. Jesus knows and understands the doubts we each have and Jesus also knows that, for many, it’s marks and signs that lead to faith and that’s quite alright with him.

As I was reflecting on this aspect of the Christ, I was reminded of my days as a theatrical director both here in our Stillspeaking Theatre as well as at the university back east where I taught acting and directed many a theatrical production. It didn’t take long way back then to realize that many of the skills I had learned as an English Education major were applicable to coaching and directing actors as each one of them seemed to need a way to understand or “take” direction differently.

For some actors, a direct approach, with little explanation or motivation was needed to get them to where they needed to go. For others, not unlike Dustin Hoffman’s actor character in Tootsie, a well thought out and detailed explanation of their motivation was needed in order for them to bring out the intricacies of whoever or whatever it was they were portraying. (“you played a tomato for 30 seconds and they went a half day over because you wouldn’t sit down!” - ...“if a tomato can’t move, how can it sit down?! I was a great tomato! I was a stand-up tomato!”)

Yes, I discovered often that the same method of directing I used for one actor to get them to understand a scene or their character didn’t work at all for another actor who would be reduced to tears by the same method. For them, I would need to communicate differently,

get into their heads and their hearts and understand what they needed to portray the person they were inhabiting. It wasn't a matter of them being a doubting, distrusting or obtuse actor as much as it was them being themselves and me being willing to bend and listen and really hear where they were coming from in order to motivate and guide them.

As is his wont, Jesus, through this encounter with Thomas, is once again showing us how to treat others and how to be loving and kind in the face of distrust and disbelief when others, often we ourselves, misunderstand and hurl judgment at someone who just isn't getting it. Rather than judgment and condemnation, Jesus offers the breath of peace and the patient pause that allows one of his beloved disciples to prove for himself the veracity of his divinity.

"We don't know exactly why Thomas requires such proof," notes the Reverend Michelle Torigian in her essay, "See God." "He understands that his fellow disciples had the opportunity to see the resurrected Christ and may believe that he needs the same experience as they received. Thomas could be processing the events of the traumatic days leading up to this moment. And he may be a person who processes information in more visual and tactile ways."

You see, maybe he's a guy who is used to having things to mark his way along his faith journey. Perhaps Thomas was someone throughout the days of following the Christ who went back to the blind man Jesus had just healed and asked him how many fingers he was holding up. Or maybe he needed to see the once lame man walk two times around the fountain instead of just once. Perhaps he even asked the young boy at the gathering of the 5000 close to Galilee just exactly how many loaves and fishes he really had started out with in his basket after Jesus had multiplied them and fed everybody there, with leftovers.

If this was Thomas' modus operandi, you can be assured Jesus knew it and loved him anyway. After all, this was the same Jesus who knew and loved another disciple who betrayed him with a kiss and allowed him to fulfill his dreadful destiny even though it literally killed Jesus to do so.

Rev. Torigian points us to Marcus J. Borg's book *Jesus: Uncovering the Life Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, where he wrote this concerning Thomas as we're reflecting on his journey today:

"...unless we inflect the closing words of the story with an accusatory tone of voice, there is no condemnation of Thomas. Thomas desired his own firsthand experience of the risen Jesus, and his desire was granted; Jesus appeared to him. The closing words of Jesus can be read without condemnation: 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not yet seen yet have come to believe.' [These words] simply affirm that those who believe without firsthand experience of the risen Jesus are also blessed, but they do not condemn those who, like Thomas, hunger and thirst for such an experience."

I really love that. It gives us a beautiful way of understanding others as well as ourselves with the light of love and forbearance that Jesus showed Thomas. Too often we jump to judgment whether internally or externally and forget to breathe deeply and allow ourselves to

enter into a state of peace. That is a state where we can comprehend more deeply what is happening in the moment and grant God's peace to those around us, even if we don't fully understand them or agree with their way of processing life.

Three times in our story today, Jesus offers peace to those gathered in the upper room. And not only is he calming their fears by doing so, but he's offering them a way of being, of breathing into their lives so that they may receive the Holy Spirit who will accompany them and all of us to come.

"Jesus gives us breathing space," asserts Dr. Bruce Epperly. "He breathes in and on us, giving us new life and energy to face our own trials and challenges. We need to open ourselves to divine breath and out of the spaciousness give grace and love to others... John's gospel invites us to be part of the resurrection story and become living witnesses to new life in our worlds. We are writing the resurrection story in our time by our faithful opening to divine resuscitation and willingness to go forth with good news of life-transforming love."

I'll leave you today with these profound lines from Ted Loder's beautiful prayer, "Breathe Deeply Into Us."

Oh, unwearying One
 who stalks us down all our days,
bring us up short, now,
 and breathe deeply into us,
for we come breathless to you from
 fretful times and frangible relations,
our attention distracted,
 our energy drained,
our intentions splintered,
 our love glazed over,
our hopes unmet,
 our faith frayed.

Still, we gasp to thank you...
 for this insistent yearning to know you...
and for this mystical, magical moment
 of peace and shimmering power,
 of grace and prophetic stretch,
in which you work the miracles
 of gladdening our hearts yet again,
in spite of painful patches, sobering losses, and puzzling trials;
of balming our souls with a touch of joy
 because we are,
 and are yours,

and you are forever;
of heeding our prayers beyond our words
in the spirit of Jesus.
Amen.