

John 20: 19-31

This is the ending of John's gospel.

It's the first day of the week, Jesus has conquered death...Alleluia! OK so why are the doors locked in fear? FEAR!

And before we go on... I just want to say - that Fear itself is a posture (it's not good or bad per se)! It can be a very good thing when it keeps us healthy and alive...our survival instinct...but it can also be a bad thing when it keeps us from truly experiencing all life has to offer...fears can be both real and imagined.

John's gospel comes along to reveal that the story's not over yet...no ...it has just begun. It wasn't about death was it?...no it is really about transformation...so what's fear have to do with this?

Jesus comes among his afraid followers and says peace be with you, as the father has sent me so do I send you...he breathes on them and they receive God's Holy Spirit... He then comes to them a second time and they are still once again holed up in fear and we have this scene with Thomas.

Now of all the characters Jesus meets after his resurrection none have left a stronger mark on our imagination than Thomas. Doubting Thomas...that's his new name after this one moment!

He represents the incredulous non-believer who hides inside every one of us – the questioner in us who wants the proof...seems we always want just a little more proof... until we don't...especially if that proof shatters our world view.

Now most of us experience different kinds of doubt when it comes to God...especially when everything seems to be going to hell? Where is God in the pain and suffering of the world? Why does God allow this or that to happen? Oh My God where are you when I need you most!?

What remains a constant in the midst of all these questions is the answer to the doubt we find in John's story today, an answer that contains not so much who Thomas is, but rather who Jesus is... especially when confronted with all our fears and doubts.

It is here that we come to the point! It's a story about God... once again... God coming to us... Emmanuel – God with us!

However we are... and wherever we may be...even locked behind whatever fortresses we've constructed to protect ourselves...whether that be a physical building or the walls we put up around our hearts and minds...we try so desperately to keep away all those things that frighten us!

John's answer for us begins at a door, at the beginning of the passage.

Instead of depicting Jesus as opening the door then walking right up to Thomas, and presenting Thomas with a rational argument - we see a very different picture. John tells us first that Jesus walks through a closed and locked door to get to Thomas.

It is Jesus reaching out to us, the closed or fearful skeptic, whom no one else can get to, reach, or convince. It is Jesus who refuses to let deadbolts or chains lock the movement of God's love towards one of His disciples...especially one who is in doubt and fear and may be lost.

Nothing can separate us from the Love of Christ! He will always leave the 99 behind to search out that one who has been left behind...in the dark...perhaps alone and afraid. A lost sheep when frightened will freeze and must be carried back to the fold by the shepherd...the shepherd goes to the sheep.

So to it is with us. When doubt and fear crowd out hope, we can rest assured that Jesus will come and meet us where we are... and how we are...even if it is at the edge of faith, even if we are locked behind closed doors... real or imagined.

God reaches out with an invitation to relationship... an invitation to the center of our doubts and fears, a dark place where God is reaching out to hold us.

What a strange thing to hold on to: this certainty that our most profound answers come not because we seek them out with focused determination, but rather because God comes seeking us... through the locked doors and walls that life, and our hardships, have built up all around us... offering peace, hope and love at the very moment that grace may seem so very far away!

And note that when Jesus does come, Thomas doesn't even recognize him. So there is also a good chance that when Jesus does come to find you in your own dark place, that just like Thomas, you may not even recognize him...even when she's standing right in front of your face.

So how then are you to know when God is seeking you?

John leaves us with some clues: First he speaks the simple words "peace be with you". And secondly, He offers His presence to His friend in a way that Thomas would understand...peace and presence is the key.

We recognize God's presence when peace is offered...peace...in those moments when life's most brutal times are honestly acknowledged, and when in the midst of this raw honesty we realize that we are not lost and alone, but in fact, have already been found.

It is good news indeed, throughout our lives that Jesus will come to us in many ways and through many guises. But whatever Jesus' appearance may be... we will know it is God if we find... not a logically argued response to our fears... but instead an offer of peace...peace...right in the midst of our circumstances, rooted in an abiding love...that is stronger than even death itself.

Jesus comes again and again to his scared and confused disciples and offers Himself and His peace..."Peace be with you". Shalom Aleichem (the actual phrase) equates to a peace personally felt, a deep calmness that comes to those who are in relationship with God...grounded and connected with the Divine Source of All Being.

Jesus personally calms the last of his Disciples with the proof Thomas requires, and Jesus adds "...blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Again

this theme of fear... of being hunted and persecuted is reflected in the Gospels...in fact Mark's gospel just ends with the disciples running away in fear...that last part was added on centuries later by the church.

His peace will bring them inner security and fearlessness so that they now may continue the mission of continuing God's work in the harsh realities to come. See only with God's peace and presence can the Disciples...Jesus' students... now become Apostles ...those sent to represent, and bring God's love and peace to others in darkness... to others locked behind their closed doors...afraid.

God's peace is given both personally and through the Spirit - presence. Knowing that Jesus will be leaving them, this passage uses Thomas as the example for every one of us that will have to then trust in Jesus without His actual physical presence here.

He would now literally be with His Apostles (and those of us who come after) in Spirit. And through trusting in Him we will receive life everlasting in Him...a life worth living now and forever!

Jesus bestows on them the grace of His risen and glorified life. He also grants them grace and power in His Holy Spirit, reflecting the empowerment of His own transformation...His resurrected life; and with this gift they can now release others' fears and anxieties... bringing all people once again into right relationship with God. Bringing them into Shalom...into oneness.

The resurrection thus creates Christ's Church – its unity, its commission, its inheritance. All that Jesus has gained is now passed on to us... both as disciples (students) and as apostles (those sent)... in order to continue the work of God's restoration in the world – Tikkun Olam.

Thomas is given exactly what he is looking for, he did not reach out and touch Jesus, but rather it is Jesus who offers for Thomas to touch him. Jesus not only offers Himself the first time we doubt, but He offers Himself over and over and over again to those people who need Him most and who long for hope, peace and love...hope, peace and love...that's what our world so desperately needs right now.

And Jesus gives us the repeated gift of his peace and his presence when we need it most. Jesus defeated death so that we may have hope and a future to look forward to...and He left behind His Spirit to strengthen us in our time of need until that day comes for us.

Throughout the New Testament we see the apostles as human... even in the physical presence of Jesus. We see their human frailties in the face of fear...even Peter himself, Jesus' best friend...when terrified, denies Him to save his own skin...Fear is a powerful motivator and it usually leaves us vulnerable and sometimes paralyzed or unable to act.

Like Thomas many needed "proof" in order to process what had just happened... And when needing to focus on physical proof alone... many may not even see or hear God in the noise and fears of the world.

But I have to be honest here...if you truly want to experience God and Shalom...just open your eyes...open your eyes long enough to see God standing right in front of you!

Just remain open and you'll experience God right where you are...God will always seek you out 100% of the time in some way. I know this because...This has personally happened to me over and over and over again in my short lifetime! And God will reveal Godself in many ways known only to you...

God will always seek you where and how YOU are! There is no formula...that is why witnessing is so important...sharing your stories with one another...telling one another about your experiences of how God showed up in your own lives!

Where have you met God lately?! ...If you ask each other that question I promise you will find not a "NO Show God" ...but rather a God who shows up all over the place... in the most wonderful and unsuspecting of ways...there are no coincidences...only God-incidences.

Just open your hearts and minds. See Most folks believe Hate and Love are opposites (see those reflect emotional states) ...but that's not true at all...Fear is the opposite of Love. This reflects our posture in the world... That's what Jesus meant when He spoke about love...not a feeling but a posture! That's agape.

Fear is being in the literal and figurative posture of being Closed... Whereas Love is a posture of being open.

Now being Closed will never ever change you and being Open always will...most of us resist change and transformation so we reject anything that is different from the way we look at the world. We close ourselves off from anything that doesn't look, feel and act like we do...we surround ourselves with mirrors don't we? God then becomes just a reflection of us...You come to see yourself as God and disconnect from the Source...closed and looking inwards!

I love a line that Jesus uses in "The Chosen"...Matthew, the tax collector, is portrayed as oddly different...different from everyone else and this is upsetting to the other disciples...they are uncomfortable...and Jesus quickly tells them "If you are following me ...Get used to Different"

Following Jesus and letting God become part of your life requires openness...and the open of posture love...so GET USED TO DIFFERENT! For that's the only way one can truly be transformed...only if you let God and others in!

Not much has changed from our story this morning, has it? Today we face the same fears, we look to science to tell us what is real (yet that changes almost daily), we look to our leaders and governments to set our morality (yet wars are still raging and those at the margins are still made invisible or are vilified by our systems of power) we look to our peers and the media to establish our norms (which provide us only vanity, self-absorption and a flavor of the month mentality)...

Like the early Christians, as exemplified by Thomas, we are all looking for answers...blessed are those who do not see yet still believe...faith and trust in Jesus allows us to step beyond the earthly self-absorbed "rat race" we often find ourselves in...

HERE We are able to see more clearly when we are above the haze... or hear clearly in the silence outside the day-to-day "noises" of the world...it is here and in a posture of openness that we can allow for God's Spirit to fortify us with God's Peace and God's Presence.

Let us be ever mindful of our posture, and when doubts and fears arise...and they will for everyone one of us... it's at those EXACT times that we need to take a step back - tune out our senses - and listen with our hearts...and there...right there... we will find our Lord and Savior giving us that which he gave his scared and frightened apostles over 2000 years ago - His Peace... and His Presence!  
Shalom Aleichem!

Amen

Your faithful servant,  
carmen