

Unless I see. A sermon preached on April 3, 2016
at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George
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Lessons: I PETER 3-9
JOHN 20:19-31

While we may not know everything that
happened in the 40 days between Jesus'
resurrection and ascension,
The Gospels of Luke and John do recount some
encounters with the risen Christ and the power
the Risen Jesus had to transform lives of those
who had abandoned him,
Run away from him,
Even denied they even knew him!

This morning's lesson from John, which
William read so well, is Jesus' first meeting with
ALL the remaining disciples.

Then a second meeting at which the disciple
Thomas is the centre of Jesus' healing and
forgiving touch.

It's a great story!

The stories the women and John tell of the
Risen Jesus do not make much an impression on
the disciples do they
They listen – but more out of politeness than
conviction

Mary is not a credible witness in a male dominated society.

I wonder whether her joy and excitement confirm in the disciples' minds that she is unhinged.

I wonder if late into the afternoon of "the day" one of the disciples says "this rising from the dead is all talk.

I wonder if they are now getting twitchy, for they know that meeting together,
Repeating the story that Jesus is alive is not going to go well for them – if they are discovered, the Romans do not issue 'get out of jail free cards!'

Then they hear a noise outside the room in which they are gathered

Someone's outside one whispers,

It's the Romans whispers another

Who didn't dim the light says a third

Stop it says a fourth

It's only the wind says a fifth

Wind nothing! I know it is the Romans – says a sixth

Everyone is now twitchy

And at that moment says John, Jesus appears in the midst of them **Peace be with you.**

The voice triggers memory

It cannot be...yet....

The disciples remain paralyzed – fear terror, disbelief, awe

Jesus stretches out his scarred hands to them.

It is a powerful gesture

Of what are you afraid?

Why are you so troubled?

See, I am no spirit sent to torment you

A ghost does not have flesh and bones

I am very real

**Peace be with you' Jesus said to them again,
Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so
I send you. When he had said this, he breathed
on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy
Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are
forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are
retained (Jn. 20:21-23)**

And just as suddenly as Jesus was physically with them,

He leaves them.

I wonder how the disciples now feel

I wonder if they feel as if they have been released from some horrible nightmare

I wonder – was their sense of oppression and despair now beginning to break up

I wonder – do they really hear what Jesus has just said to them – forgiveness – they have been

forgiven by God.

We do not know specifically who asks the question, but when it is asked, the others take note.

Where is the disciple Thomas?

Why is he not here?

A number of the disciples are all for looking for Thomas,

But I wonder whether everyone wanted Thomas found.

Remember, Thomas has to this point not been endowed with rousing and encouraging words.

In despair, who wants someone like that around, feeding the discouragement?

He is the true Biblical Eeyore isn't he?

The one who is without too much effort able to seize defeat from the jaws of victory
The one who seems to say, the worse is yet to come.

Perhaps one of those gathered has even suggested that Thomas would go into shock if something good really happened

Yet, despite the wet blanket nature of Thomas, the community of remaining disciples does not favour shunning him do they.

They determine Thomas needs to know

They determine that Thomas needs to know the Teacher is not dead

They determine that Thomas needs to know that they have seen Jesus

Thomas needs as much as each of them does – to know the power of Jesus’ presence and his words of “Peace”.

The text does not tell us HOW the disciples ensured Thomas was with them a week later. But with them he is!

And Thomas ratchets up the conditions of belief doesn’t he

Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.

So a week later the disciples, gather as they had the week before.

The doors of the house are shut

As before, Jesus comes and stands before them.

Same greeting **peace be with you.**

Then to Thomas

Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe (vs.27)

The gospel story does not record that Thomas actually touched the risen Jesus

The scriptures only report Thomas’ declaration
My Lord, and my God.

To which Jesus replies with that open ended question and declaration

**Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet
have come to believe (vs.29)**

A disciple of Jesus – one of the inner circle –
wrestling with doubt – doubt about the
Resurrection

What reminders need to be highlighted
from this encounter of the Risen Lord with
Thomas?

*Sometimes doubts about the basics of the faith become
the default position in our lives.*

Question: If a member of Jesus' inner circle had
doubts,

What makes us think we are immune at points in
our lives from doubt in matters of faith?

There are times in our lives when the
unexpected,
The unwarranted,
The unnecessary and the unwanted shake us to
our spiritual cores.

There are times when the promises of God seem
like so much sand in our mouths

There are times when doubt and despair become
in our lives like an enveloping fog

Times when we cannot see where we have
been.

Nor can we see where we are going.

And we are not even sure where we are!

How can I be sure of the Risen Christ? –that is Thomas’ question.

Thomas’ story is so believable, so identifiable, so human isn’t it.

Admitting doubt at times and seasons in our lives is not to admit faithlessness

It is to cry out to the Lord

It is to lament

It is to understand that suffering is real,

Life is difficult

It is to draw in a new way, hope and closeness to the Risen Christ.

Thomas had doubts – yes,
But the doubts emerged out of wanting to believe, and yet at the moment having great difficulty so to do.

That is so human!

Another reminder to highlight from this encounter with the Risen Christ is what I term as *Miracle of the fellowship*.

It is so easy to dismiss the people who drive us crazy

The naysayers, the wet blankets, the negativists

Easy to say to them “talk to the hand”

The disciples here were able to look beyond Thomas the doubter, Thomas the negativist, Eeyore Thomas, to Thomas a fellow follower of Jesus.

Can we do the same thing – not just the people who we like, think like us, agree with us, energize us

But also the draining people of our lives that are part of a Christian fellowship?

Like those determined to get the paralytic to the feet of Jesus,

So they cut a hole in the roof and lower the paralytic down

Here in John 20, the disciples do the same thing

They rise above their hesitations about Thomas – legitimate though they are –

To a wider view

That is, they do everything they can to ensure that Thomas does not lose touch with them or with Jesus

Text does not tell us precisely how the disciples do this

OR what they say to ensure Thomas is with them a week later.

Perhaps just as well or such information could easily devolve into 10 straight-forward ways to love the other as a brother and sister in Christ.

What we do know is that the disciples are able to cause Thomas to return to the fellowship at the decisive moment

No church or community of faith is perfect
Often we still shoot our wounded

Make insensitive remarks to one another
Dismiss those with whom we disagree like the
proverbial 3 minute egg.
Still want to call them foolish and shortsighted,
even though we dare not.

I do not want to dismiss or make light of
these things – I slip into this sort of behavior
when I ought not.
At the same time, I live with a greater hope and
conviction
That when the community of faith – this or any
other is doing what it is supposed to be doing –
loving God and loving other people – this enables
the other to see the presence and to know the
reality of the Risen Christ.

St. Andrew's Welland was not a perfect
church.
The behavior of some of its members drove the
leadership to distraction on more than one
occasion.

However, while I can tell stories about the
bone headedness and the majoring in minors of
some at certain times, that would "try the
patience of Job"

What I remember with more clarity and
encouragement are the church school teachers of
this imperfect congregation, telling me the stories
of Jesus.

I see an elder taking me aside and offering encouragement when things did not work out as I thought they would in terms of vocation – for parish ministry was not what I thought I would be doing when I was in high school.

I see faces of a congregation that surrounded me on the night of my ordination
 And then 4 years later when my Dad died
 I see the faces of those who are absent from the body and present with the Lord who wrote notes of encouragement,
 Made timely phone calls
 And now send emails when the demands of parish ministry overwhelm

I saw and felt this *miracle of fellowship* most recently over the past year when Katharine was diagnosed with colon cancer, and through the recovery from surgery, and treatment. She has told you about knowing that people were praying for her, for all of us through this time and continue so to do.

I tell you this as well.

We would not have made it through as well as we have without this *miracle of the fellowship – this connectedness with the Risen Christ under which all of us live.*

By the power of God's Holy Spirit, any community of faith, if it is prepared to do so can

be and is a formative influence in helping people see Jesus.

In bringing people into the presence of the Risen Christ.

A third and final thing for this morning that I want to highlight from this story in John 20 is *What Jesus says and does as he approaches this 'doubting disciple'.*

What Jesus does not do, is just as important in this case as what he does.

Jesus does not say, Peace be with you – except Thomas – because Thomas doubts me. Nor is there anything in the text that leads me to believe Jesus is angry, impatient or frustrated with his doubting disciple.

Instead (and this important) Jesus lets Thomas know he (Jesus) understands

Jesus does not approach Thomas with deep explanations and talk.

Rather, Jesus meets Thomas where Thomas is at And brings Thomas along to the place where Jesus wants Thomas to be.

Touch point for us
Jesus will never hold our doubts about him, against us.
There may well be times and seasons in our lives where doubt in the Risen Christ and God's promises is reality

Jesus though continues to meet us where
we are and bring us along to the place where He
wants each of us to be

Our doubts must never lead us to believe God
has washed his hands of us

Jesus does not come to argue with Thomas
Rather, to Thomas, and to us Jesus reaches out his
hand and says, here, trust me

Follow me,

Lean on me

Learn from me.

Make no mistake about it

In God's power, the presence of the Risen Christ
continues to daily work to help people move
from doubt in God's power to certainty that there
is no other way, but with God

And I think that is something for which
each of us can give profound and continuous
thanks and praise. AMEN