

2nd Sunday of Easter
Sermon 4.27.25

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, 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 his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 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 them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (336)

The Love Gospel Assembly was a small Bible church in a shabby storefront in the Bronx. It ran a large daily soup kitchen in the basement. When we arrived for our work, the only people in the otherwise nearly deserted neighborhood all looked like they could use a good meal and welcoming place to eat it. Most of the volunteers whom we’d work alongside were church members—Black men and women who were just a step or two up the socio-economic ladder from the guests they’d serve.

“Look at this napkin,” one of them said to us, a man whose job it was to train us for the day’s service. Teaching us the proper way to set a table, he held a white paper napkin up for us all to see. He’d taken it from the ream of napkins as they’d been packaged, and he said, “It’s all bent and wrinkled. Don’t use the ones that look like this.” He rummaged deeper into the pile and pulled out an unrumpled one. “Use the ones like this.” He set it down on the folding table that was covered with a vinyl cloth—one of 20 or so tables. He put a paper plate next to it and a plastic fork next to that. Then he sent us out to set the rest of the places.

We had an hour before they’d unlock the doors and the first guests would come in. There was a lot to do, but there were more than enough volunteers. Besides the church members us two

youth groups were there, the one I was leading and the other one, members of each sizing up the members of the other.

We were from my home church in New Hampshire where I was now a seminarian. Leading this youth service trip, I'd managed to get everyone on the bus from Newburyport to Boston and the bus from Boston to New York, then on the subway from Grand Central Station, off the subway at 103rd street, to walk the two blocks north and one block east to the youth hostel where we'd camp out in one of their bunk rooms for the week. We were a tight-knit group—middle class white kids from a mainline church who all attended high school together, all came from “good” families and “good” homes.

Oh, except for Joanne. She wasn't a member of the youth group. She was a frequent skipper of school and would one day soon be a runaway from her troubled home. She was here with us in New York because I had invited her, I who'd been her babysitter back in the day, and then her mother had urged her and urged her.

I had a soft spot in my heart for this girl: I'll admit it. Tall, awkward, she was hell-bent on her own failure. Her mother was loving but ineffective, her father was long gone, and her stepfather who was indifferent to her at best. Then there was the much younger half-sister, a shining star, smiles and sweetness, someone who was loved.

I probably overestimated what a service trip can do in the life of a young person. I probably also overestimated what I could do. I hadn't yet learned the truer fact, that the task of the minister is to disappoint people at a rate they can handle. For youth ministers, the likelihood of disappointing comes as a much greater risk.

On our first evening in New York, while the boys in the group played pick-up basketball on the court across the street from the hostel, and the girls sat on the hostel stoop watching people go by on Amsterdam Avenue, Joanne held fast to the payphone in the hallway across from our room—yelling at her mother for making her come on this dorky trip, crying to her friends that she hated the people she was with, complaining to anyone she managed to reach that she wanted to come home. When she got off the phone, I told her I'd overheard her and offered her the chance to catch a bus home. But she said she'd stick it out. It was only a week. Whatever.

The other group of volunteers at the Love Gospel Assembly set their sights on Joanne as if she were prey. From a more conservative church, they looked like us but seemed foreign in every other way. We all made some attempts at talking and getting along. We didn't get very far.

Only Joanne seemed to have much of an interaction with them. I glanced up from my work once to see a circle of them gathered around her, and a few minutes later she stormed out of the room. I followed to find her upstairs and outside, leaning against the crumbling building, smoking a cigarette and using language she didn't learn in youth group.

The gist of her rage was this—they'd interrogated her about stuff she didn't know anything about, and then they mocked her for her not knowing what they meant, and then they called her "Thomas" as if they were calling her a really bad name. "Oooh, Thomas," she mocked their mocking, though it clearly had hurt. "They said a bad word!" They were stupid. They were dorks. But they'd also caught her off guard and left her with no comeback and chased her out of the room.

Sucking on her cigarette now (which, by the way, was against the rules of the trip, but it didn't seem an effective time for that teaching point), she spit out the words, why were they calling her Thomas? Back inside, the others in my group were wondering the same. Why were they calling Joanne Thomas? Were they implying she looked like a boy? Was Thomas slang for something awful where they came from? It was an insult, clearly. But what did it mean?

Thomas, of course, is the disciple known for his doubt. That's what we've been told, anyway. Clearly, that's what those young evangelicals had been told, that Thomas is the one who doubted while the rest believed.

We're back in the upper room. We've spent a lot of time here lately. It's where we were for Maudy Thursday, where Jesus took a loaf of bread and, after giving thanks to God for it, broke it and gave it to his disciples, these whom he'd now call friends. It's from here, this upper room, that Judas had already headed out into the night. And it's to here that the disciples apparently retreated after the crucifixion, while Jesus hung there and died and some of the women stayed though at a distance, while he was taken down and buried. And maybe they'd spent the airless Sabbath day here, in this upper room, and it's perhaps from here that Mary headed out early in the morning on that first day of the week, while it was still dark, off to the garden grave where they'd laid her Lord—and then back to here, distressed, catching her breath, to find the disciples, to tell them that they'd rolled the stone away, that they'd taken the body away.

It's later that same day where the reading begins, when it was evening, and the disciples were locked in. The story notes they were locked in because of their fear, fear claimed to be of the Jews, which for our purposes is an unfortunate way to word it, unfortunate to say the least. The fact is, of course that everyone here was a Jew, those outside the locked doors and those locked

within. Everyone here is a Jew with the exception of Pontius Pilate, who was actually one to be feared, endowed as he was with imperial power, if also a feckless character. He'd crucify anyone: just say the word.

The only thing scarier than zealous conviction is no conviction at all but lots and lots of power.

The thing is, the Gospel of John comes to us from a time of crisis among 1st century Jewry, when Rome was increasingly menacing, and Israel was increasingly rebellious, and the emergence of this new offshoot, Jews who believed in Jesus, only made things more unsettled, terribly unsettled, utterly confusing, and more likely to be deadly, as it already had been. Jews were angry at Jewish-Christians because they attracted the deadly attention of Rome. Jewish-Christians were afraid of Jews because they cast them out for the sake of their own security.

Fear. Locked up fear.

And yet, Jesus appeared among them, in spite of locked doors, in spite of the more impossible-making fact: *he'd been dead*. He appeared among them and said to them, "Peace be with you," in spite of the fact that peace was nowhere to be found. And why should it be? He'd been killed. He'd been killed, unjustly, and terrifyingly, the strange fruit of a harsh union, Temple and empire, religion and politics.

And now he was back.

And now he was apparently beyond death, such that now it seems perhaps nothing could touch him. So now was his moment. Now he could *act*, have his revenge. "Let's do this!"

And yet such was his charge: "Peace be with you."

And he showed them his hands and his side, and as the disciples rejoiced, he said it again: "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you." This was no mere greeting: "Peace, man." This was no mere wishing them well: "May you find peace." This was a commissioning. This was a command: "Peace be with you. As God sent me, so I send you."

And then he breathed on them, as God breathed into humankind in the beginning, a new beginning, a new birth with all attending new possibilities; and he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," this presence that, according to John, could only, or could at least best, be transmitted one to another, an intimate gift, a mutual presence. It's not like it was remembered according to Luke, in his book of Acts. There the gift of the Holy Spirit is remembered as coming upon all the disciples at once, and not just the infamous twelve but all of them, numbering around 120 people, all lit up as if by tongues of flame descended and with great sound. Not so here, though. Here we see

something far more intimate, one-to-one, a mutual presence of God to each of the twelve, though now eleven, the disciples.

Oh, except for Thomas, so ten, because Thomas apparently was out—the only one of the disciples not locked away in fear, the only one of the disciples on that third evening after the crucifixion not hiding out in the upper room.

And what he was doing we don't know. Maybe he was getting food and water to sustain the disciples during their indefinite stay behind those bolted doors. Or maybe he was sending word to loved ones that they were alright, though hidden away yet safe, not missing, not dead. Or it might have been that he was like the dove was to Noah and all the creatures on the ark—sent forth to find out if the violent sea had settled back into something calm and safe and pacific.

Imagine him coming through the door.

He'd have had to knock, of course, and even to call out to those hidden inside, raising his voice so they could hear that it really was him and so was safe for them to unlock the doors.

Imagine him walking in the room.

He'd have had food, perhaps, and water and maybe milk for his friends, and maybe also assurance that the city had settled back into the usual cautious calm.

Imagine him as his friends told him, excitedly, “We have seen the Lord,” that favorite phrase of the Gospel of John, one that indicates not simply seeing but undergoing a change in perception, a seeing life where there'd seemed but death or a seeing possibility where there'd only seemed a hard stop, all of which might have increased the sting for Thomas to have been out.

Imagine him using language now that he wouldn't have learned in youth group.

Or imagine him simply saying what the story remembers him to have said, whether bitterly or matter-of-factly, like he really knew himself and how he operated, or knew what it takes to come to faith, that is a sort of seeing, a real encounter with what's really real, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

And we shame him for this.

Or some of us do.

But you know who didn't?

It was a week later, which is to say the evening of *this* day, the Sunday after Resurrection Day, the second Sunday of Eastertide as we would call it these days, that Jesus came again to the house where again the disciples were gathered behind shut doors, if not this time locked. And

again he stood among them, again charged them, “Peace be with you,” and then he considered Thomas, Thomas who was there this time, turned to him, countenanced his face, met him there, and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side,” offering Thomas exactly what he’d asked for, exactly what he’d said he needed to come to sight, indeed to transformed sight, to come to belief which in this gospel is to come to trust.

Because that’s how this gospel remembers Jesus to have been, this gospel, John, which features a lot of significance but not much actually happening. This gospel, John, boils down to a series of encounters between Jesus and one other person, whether John the Witness or Andrew the disciple or Nicodemus the Pharisee or the woman at the well, whether the man born blind or Lazarus in his own tomb or Mary in the garden or Thomas in the upper room, the locked-up-tight room, one after another, each transformed by the encounter, each made to see, to trust. Yes, Jesus feeds a whole crowd of but meager provision. And yes, he teaches and prays to a roomful of people, the twelve disciples on the last night of his life as a man in the world. But mostly Jesus comes close to one other person, meets them where they are, whether in blindness or in isolation and disrepute or in a tomb already filled with the stench of death, and gives them what they need to see, to trust, and to believe.

If Christ did that, you might wonder whether Christians should also give that a try?

A ministry of hospitality, let’s call it. An openness to an encounter with some other, an encounter which might have you as Christ or might have you as receiving Christ. Sometimes we will have the breath of life to offer another, sometimes we will need such breath breathed into us, sometimes it will be an even exchange, a little of each or a fullness of both.

See?

What?

You’re worried about Joanne? You’re hoping the service trip worked its magic, brought her to safety and maybe even salvation? Or you’re worried she came to some tragic end? Well, the story is on-going. It’s not over yet. But *I* trust that she, like us all, is in for a happy ending.

Thanks be to God.