

Sermon Text – Sunday, April 27, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Acts 5:27-32; 2nd Reading: Revelation 1:4-8
Scripture for Message: John 20:19-31 “Doubt & Belief”

Jesus said to them “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” The key to what he said to them is this – “as the Father has sent me.” The peace Jesus offers is not peace in the conventional sense. Jesus’ peace is not an absence of conflict, it is not tranquility – Jesus offers a peace that comes through struggle. He offers the peace of truth but with truth comes struggle. Jesus is telling his disciples that the Father sent him into the world to face struggles and he has taught them according to the Father’s will and now sends them, but they too will face struggles.

The disciples are behind locked doors, fearful of what might become of them. The locked doors indicate the disciples doubt as to the truth of what the women told them. Some doubted what they saw with their own eyes. Hearing and even believing does not necessarily dispel fear and doubt. Fear caused their doubt, and so Jesus offers peace to dispel the fear of persecution and the shalom or wholeness of God to help overcome their doubts.

Jesus breathed on them giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit – note the symbolism here. Jesus’ breath is symbolic of God’s breath entering the first created being – Adam. In that symbolic act not only is Jesus giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is also recreating his disciples, making them a new creation to carry on Jesus’ mission of forgiveness and shalom. Jesus comes to them to bring them peace, despite a locked door Jesus comes to them. A sealed tomb could not hold him and locked doors could not keep the disciples from experiencing his presence.

In John’s Gospel, Thomas gets a bad rep – we call him doubting Thomas as if that was a bad thing. Maybe we should consider him as a wise disciple. Thomas would not believe without evidence; the evidence of the marks of death. Would the others have believed if they did not see Jesus with their own eyes? Remember, they themselves did not believe the women’s account of their encounter with the risen Christ. Jesus comes to Thomas to settle his doubts and calls on Thomas to touch him. Jesus’ words “Do not doubt but believe” call Thomas to go deeper in his relationship with Christ. Jesus showed his wounds which challenges the disciples – do not doubt, what is there to fear, what is the worst that can happen?

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Jesus wounds are reminders that God has conquered death – what is there to fear. But like the disciples we sometimes fear, we sometimes have doubt, we sometimes need to hear Jesus say “Peace be with you.” No let me take that back, we always need to hear Jesus say “Peace be with you.” These scriptures remind us that even those who knew Jesus intimately had doubts, we too have doubts. What do we do with our doubts? Do our doubts cause us to stop believing?

John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus did many signs in the presence of his disciples and John writes them down so that “you may come to believe.” We don’t have the benefit of having been there but we have the ability to hear the stories and remember the promises. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed

A young college co-ed walked in to her counselor’s office and confessed that she didn’t believe in God anymore. Her dad was a Lutheran pastor and she had been spoon-fed the gospel all her life. But now, in college, she was smarter than all that; now she trusted science, now she believed in bright professors and thick textbooks and knowledge and reason; faith seemed to insult her intellect. When she got up to leave, the counselor said the only thing he should have said when she first sat down; “Jenny” he said, “God loves you, even when you don’t believe that God exists.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she said “I know he does.” Faith, it seems, comes in all sorts of shapes and degrees. Maybe that’s why you’re here today; you’ve come to see and hear the story once again. You aren’t certain that it’s true; like Jenny, you struggle to wrap your brain around it. But you’re here, Thank God.¹

What do we do with our doubts? Everyone has doubts, maybe not all the time, maybe not about the same things but there are things in our scriptures that might from time to time cause doubts. I think even the ones among us that we believe to be the most faithful and the most spiritual are people who have had a doubt or two in their lifetime.

Face it – not everything written in our scriptures make sense to our human minds. For example what did Jesus mean in verse 23 of our reading? “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Is Jesus giving the disciples the power that only God can possess?

¹ Steven Molin. “Four Truths and a Lie, Christian Globe Networks, Inc.” retrieved 4/15/25 from www.sermons.com

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What is our role regarding sin – what is the role of the church regarding sin? I think our scriptures tell us that God alone can forgive or retain sin so how are we to interpret this saying of Jesus? I don't think Jesus is giving them and us the power to pick and choose what is sin or to decide for God who is forgiven. Notice that this statement comes right after he breathes the Holy Spirit into them – with the Holy Spirit's guidance and power the disciples and followers of Christ are empowered to offer God's forgiveness to all the world and to expose sin where it exists.

In the words of Paul Simpson Duke's homiletical perspective, "To the extent that his friends refuse the mission, the sins of others remain. To the extent that his breath is breathing in [through] them the sins of the world are taken away."² Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, now empowers his followers to enact what God alone can do. They were enabled to continue what Jesus started and implemented on the cross – forgiveness for the whole world.

That is the mission of the church as well – continuing what Jesus started and helping others feel God's presence. Helping others know that doubt and belief are not incompatible and helping others find the forgiveness and grace freely offered at the cross. We cannot close and lock the doors to keep God's forgiveness and grace away from those we dismiss. We cannot pick and choose who comes to hear God's story again and again. Christ came to the disciples in spite of fear and doubt, locked doors could not keep him out. He came and offered peace and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. God will be present in this congregation, even if we try to shut God out.

The message I find in our scripture readings this morning is a message to believe even when we doubt. It is a message to carry the Gospel to others so that they might also believe even through doubts. "Obey God rather than any human authority." We have these scriptures that are written so that we may come to believe and that through believing we may have life in Jesus' name.

Remember that God loves you whether you believe or not – God is with you whether or not you feel God's presence. God's grace and forgiveness are freely available – you only need to accept the gift. These are the promises we hear from scripture, the promises that Jesus teaches. Even our shut hearts cannot keep God from loving us. There is a famous painting that references a verse from

² Paul Simpson Duke. "Homiletical Perspective: John 20:19-23" *Feasting on the Gospels: John Vol. 2*. Eds. C. Jarvis and E. Johnson. WJK. 2015. Print. 321-325.

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Revelation 3:20 “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” In the painting there is no handle on the outside of the door, Jesus is present, God is present waiting to be let in. The only way the world can let Jesus in is if we help the world “hear his voice.”

We, the church, are the body of Christ – we through the Holy Spirit are enabled to carry the word and the good news to others who need to hear it. We don’t all have to be preachers and proclaimers or prophets – we can show others the good news by how we deal with our doubts. We show others the good news by how we live our lives, how we handle life’s struggles and disappointments. What is there to fear? Christ is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. Through Christ we are able to believe despite doubts, because we doubt we seek answers and by seeking we become stronger in our faith. In that strength, we can help others come to a deeper relationship with God the Father.

On the cross Jesus cried out “My God, My God why have you forsaken me.” It seems to me that in that brief moment Jesus felt the sting of doubt brought on by the burden of our sins. I don’t think that moment of doubt brought Jesus to stop believing in himself – do you? His faith overcame doubt. Our faith in God’s promises and our remembering of what God has done for others is what leads us to a belief that can overcome our doubts. We have been given a helper for that – the Holy Spirit. In addition to the Spirit – we have these holy scriptures and the study of scripture in community with other believers helps us remember God’s promises.

Hearing these sacred stories helps us to know Jesus and the knowledge of Jesus settles our doubts and calls us to believe. “Peace be with you . . . Do not doubt but believe.”