

May 1, 2022
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The Beauty of the Church – Seeing God in One Another
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 20:19-31

New Revised Standard Version

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked 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.

Jesus' first words to the fearful, flawed, confused, doubting followers were "Peace be with you." "Peace be with you." Jesus blessed them, he reassured them. It makes me think of preacher William Sloane Coffin's words that there is always more mercy in God than sin in us. "Peace be with you." God's mercy is more powerful than any of the ways that we fall short.

We are in the season of Easter. It's not just one day in the church, but a season of fifty days from Easter until Pentecost when God's breath of new life is poured out again. For these fifty days of Easter we are going to be talking about the beauty of the church. The word on the front of your bulletin says *ekklesia* because it's important to learn some Greek! In the New Testament, the word *ekklesia* is usually translated as church. Acts says that Barnabas and Saul met with the church (*ekklesia*) in Antioch. The roots of the word *ekklesia* come from the *agora*, an open space that was a meeting ground for different activities of Greek citizens. It was the meeting of the people, the gathering of those summoned, the called-out assembly or congregation. We gather today as people of faith, summoned to worship God and to support one another as we live as followers of Christ.

The beauty of the church is we help each other to believe and we believe for each other when it is hard to believe. We need one another to remind us that when God seems far away, we only need to look at one another and see that God lives within us. I always have thought of this story about Thomas as one about belief. Thomas didn't believe until he saw Jesus with his own eyes and felt Jesus with his own hands, but Thomas was only asking for what the others had already received. He needed Jesus' concrete presence before he could trust Jesus' words of peace.

Did you know that to say "Jesus" in sign language you take the middle finger of your dominant hand and touch the inside of the palm on the opposite hand and then do it again with the middle finger of the nondominant hand touching the inside of the other palm? This means that in American Sign Language every time you say Jesus, you remember his wounds. Thomas said, "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." It was an honest request that was fulfilled a week later.

I love Thomas because he refused to keep his struggle about belief to himself. He gave words to his reservations and to his fear. Thomas stepped out in courage, in the midst of his

community of faith, and said if he was going to believe Jesus is raised from the dead, then he needed to touch and feel the resurrection. Jesus didn't judge him or blame him. Jesus met him exactly where he was and blessed him. When Jesus did that, Thomas cried out with a confession of faith, "My Lord, and my God." Thomas knew resurrection hope in that moment, and it all started with Jesus' words, "Peace be with you."

What do you think would be different about your life and our world if those Easter words of "Peace be with you" defined you and defined us? What could our life and our world be like if the most important thing we believed about ourselves was not our guilt, not our fear, not our doubts, not our accomplishments and successes, but that we are God's beloved? What could happen in us and to us if we took Jesus' words of "Peace be with you" and remembered them every single morning and every single evening? "Peace be with you."

The last two weeks have brought a lot of change for myself and for Greenland Hills. I am someone who doesn't like change so I have been saying Jesus' words a lot. "Peace be with you." When we live a life filled with Jesus' peace, we are more at peace. When we live a life filled with Jesus' peace, we live as instruments of God's peace. When the new pastor at Greenland Hills was announced this past Tuesday, I breathed in God's peace because Rev. Andrew Fiser was at the top of my list of hopefuls to be your next pastor. In fact, I am such a fan that I asked him to preach for me last October when I was at a spiritual renewal retreat called The Journey with New Church. "Peace be with you."

Jesus' words of peace are central to who we are as Christians, but they are also part of the struggle of living as Easter people because our world isn't filled with a lot of peace. We are people who say that new life is possible because of Easter even when we have received a cancer diagnosis, or our spouse has said they want a divorce, or we have been interviewing for job after job after job. The beauty of the church is we help one another to have faith and peace and hope. We offer one another a shoulder to cry on, we pray for one another, we listen, we encourage, we give hugs. We see God in one another. Writer Anne Lamott says "Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns."¹ We are called to stand beside one another until some light returns.

It can be a struggle to remember the message of Easter when we go back to our Good Friday world of pain and fear. I hope we will remember the first thing the risen Christ said to his friends, the friends who had betrayed him, denied him, abandoned him, and doubted him, "Peace be with you." Jesus offered no blame, no shame, he only offered peace. Just as Jesus did for Thomas, he meets us where we are and offers us peace.

My prayer for all of us today is that we will allow Jesus' promise of peace to be our center, our primary definition of ourselves. Thanks be to God, Amen.

¹ *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith.*