

A sermon preached on 2 Easter, April 24, 2022  
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by the Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Acts 5:27-32. Psalm 118:14-29. Revelation 1:4-8. John 20: 9-31

Last Sunday we gathered with joy and gratitude to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

During this week, that Easter joy was challenged by our daily lives. Covid is on the rise again in our area. When will Covid stop impacting our lives? We watched the escalation of the war in Ukraine. We and the whole world are wondering...when will this war end? What negative impact will there continue to be for the whole world from this horrific war? Probably we all had other experiences this week that clashed with the joyful Good News of Easter.

How can we hold in our hearts deep joy and gratitude for the hope given to us in the resurrection of Christ...and at the same time... see and feel the many disturbing devastations and the unknowns which haunt our lives and the world?

Let's be honest. We often have questions, struggles, and doubts. How does Jesus respond to our doubts, our questions, fears and struggles?

Today's Gospel shows us how Jesus helped his first disciples experience the peace, joy and hope of Christ's resurrection... at the same time they were feeling overwhelmed by their fears, doubts and struggles.

John tells the Easter story a bit differently than the other Gospels. He says that on Easter evening, the disciples went into hiding, behind locked doors, because of their overwhelming fear. Even though Mary Magdalene had told the disciples that she had seen and talked with Jesus risen from the dead, they didn't believe her. They were terrified that the Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus might come to kill them also! Locked in their hiding place, they talked about their fears, their grief and confusion over all that had happened over the past few days. As they were sharing their grief and fears and confusion...Jesus walked right through the locked doors and said to his fearful and confused disciples, "Peace be with you."

The Hebrew word Jesus used, which is translated into English as peace, is shalom. Shalom is a very rich word which includes many levels of meaning. On one level, it is the common way to greet people we meet. Shalom also implies, may you be well and whole. May you have inner and outer peace and freedom from threats of war and violence. Jesus was saying to his disciples, "I'm here to breath my Holy Spirit into your lives so you can experience peace and harmony with God, with other people, with yourself, with all God's creation, right here in the midst of your fears.

What are the things you fear most at this time in your life? Many people live locked in fears and anxieties which they think about constantly but don't talk about. We often try to deal with all our thoughts and feelings alone, and without realizing it, we may lock Jesus out of our moment by moment lives.

And yet look at the hope in this story. Jesus can come right through all the locked doors of fear and anxiety in our lives and say to us: "I'm breathing my Holy Spirit of peace into you to bring you hope and wholeness in the middle of your fears."

We are living in a time of great anxiety. Jesus said our mission from God is to offer God's peace to every person we meet, just as Jesus offered his peace to his disciples. Yet we can't give God's peace to others, unless we first allow God's Spirit of peace to live in our hearts, in the middle of all our fears and anxieties.

The deep fear that paralyzed the disciples was transformed into joy and hope as they saw Jesus and received a transfusion of his Spirit of peace. When you and I experience Christ meeting us in our fears and breathing his peace into us, we can also be filled with joy and hope. Notice that the problems do not go away. The authorities could still have come to arrest and kill the disciples. But now they

were not alone. Jesus was with them. They experienced life on the other side of death, so they didn't need to fear death anymore. They found that joy and hope do not have to wait until we have no problems or worries. Joy and hope come when we recognize that Jesus is with us, in the midst of our challenges and fears.

But there was a lingering problem that first Easter night. Thomas was not there. We don't know why he was not there. All we know is that when the other disciples enthusiastically told Thomas about their experience of the risen Christ coming to talk with them and giving them his peace, Thomas was not excited. Thomas felt left out.

Thomas told his friends: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nail and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Thomas was still grieving the death and loss of Jesus. His words were not so much doubt, but more a longing prayer that he could have the same experience of Jesus that his friends had experienced. All of us have experiences which raise questions and doubts for us. Where is God in this situation? Have I been left out of God's love and blessings?

People have said to me: "I prayed, and God did not help me when I asked, so I don't believe in God anymore." Others point to negative experiences and say, "If God allowed that, I'm not going to trust God." When doubts arise, as they will for all of us, we can choose to turn away from God. Yet, if we allow our grief, our doubts and questions to turn us away from God, then we are turning away from the one who can help us most with our grief, our doubts and questions.

Look how Thomas handled his doubt. He was really praying, "Jesus, you helped my friends to trust your love and resurrection by coming to meet them in person. I need you to come to me also...let me see and touch you for myself, so I can know that you love me and that you really are risen from the dead." Thomas didn't reject Jesus. His grief and doubt led him to talk with Jesus about his fears and his desire to see Jesus himself. And Thomas kept spending time with the other disciples and bringing all his doubts and questions and desires into his conversations with them.

When you and I go through times of questions and doubts, we can follow the good example of Thomas. First, we can very honestly tell Jesus our doubts, all that we are thinking and feeling, and ask him to help us. Second, we can spend time with other spiritually alive followers of Jesus whom we feel we can trust...sharing with them our doubts, our questions, our confusions, and fears.

Like Thomas, what we each need most is to experience for ourselves and trust the presence of Jesus with us. We can't control when Jesus will come to us, just as Thomas couldn't. But Christ will come to us, in fact Jesus says that he is with us always. What we need is an awareness of his constant presence with us. Because, like our finger prints, we are each unique people, Christ comes to us in ways that are unique and appropriate to each of us. Awareness of Christ's presence might come to us in silence and solitude, through music or art or journaling, during worship, or when we are in God's creation, or through reading the Bible or a spiritual book, or when we talk with someone on the phone or over coffee or when we listen to others tell stories of their unique experience of Christ's presence and guidance in their lives.

John tells us that Jesus came to visit Thomas on the Sunday after Easter...this very Sunday. Thomas was with the other disciples, still talking about his doubts and fears when Jesus showed up again. Again, the first thing Jesus said was, "Peace be with you." Then Jesus turned to Thomas and said: "Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe/trust me."

Notice, Jesus never criticized Thomas. Jesus simply came to meet Thomas and help him with his doubts and questions. Thomas immediately recognized Jesus and responded with some of the most profound words of faith in the whole Bible: "My Lord and my God!"

It took time and patience for Thomas to experience Christ's presence and peace. It may take time for us also. Yet the story of Thomas reminds us that whatever doubts or anxieties we might be

experiencing, if we keep asking and seeking, Christ will make himself known to us, like he did with Thomas.

How might God want you and me to apply this story of Thomas in our lives this week? First, I invite you to take the Scripture insert home with you this morning and read it every day this week. God may have more insights for you as you keep reading the story of Thomas each day.

Second, let me suggest one simple way each of us can pray to receive Christ's peace and share Christ's peace with others this week.

Please close your eyes for a moment. Imagine the Risen Jesus standing in front of you, looking at you with respect and great love. Imagine the Christ breathing out on you his healing, calming Spirit of peace, as he did in today's Gospel... Now be aware of your breathing...in...and out. As you breathe in...breath in Christ's peace...as you exhale...breath out your fears. Christ's peace in...anxiety out. Christ's peace in...let go of any doubts and fears...

Christ gives us his peace so we can share his peace with others. So let's again, be aware of our breathing in and breathing out. Breath in Christ's peace...as you exhale, breath out Christ's peace on every person who worshipping here right now. Breath in Christ's peace ...and breath out Christ's peace on all the people in Wethersfield and the Greater Hartford area. Breath in Christ's peace... breath out Christ's peace on everyone who is living in Ukraine and Russia right now. Breath in Christ's peace ...and exhale Christ's peace into refugees all around the world who've had to leave their homes because of violence and war. Breath in Christ's peace...and exhale Christ's peace on all who are welcoming and caring for refugees. We could continue, but let's pause now.

This week, and for the rest of your life you can practice this kind of breath prayer. You can pray just briefly or continue for a longer period of time, whatever seems appropriate. The Risen Jesus can make a profound difference in our lives and in the world through our practice of breath prayer. We can pray this way whenever we sense fear or anxiety... and whenever we see or think of others in need of God's peace.

Let's close our eyes for another moment... so you can ask Jesus how he might be inviting you to practice this kind of breath prayer during this coming week...

O Jesus, keep breathing your Spirit of peace into our minds and hearts...and keep helping us through our prayers, words, and actions to be channels of your Spirit of peace flowing into the lives of others who are filled with fear and in need both around us, and around the world. Amen