

## IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ON THE JOURNEY

Acts 5:27-32

Ps 118:14-29

Rev 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

***Pray: Father in Heaven, it's good to be in your care and keeping. We praise you for that! Sometimes though, on the journey of life, stuff happens that stops us in our tracks...Forgive our fears, our lack of trust. Guard us from sinking in the mire of negative thinking and a lack of joy. We ask now that your Holy Spirit, who is not limited to time and space as we are, will work in our hearts and minds as we listen to your Word. Renew our commitment to you and your mission, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.***

Aloha everyone! How are we doing as we head into the Easter season of the church? Joyful? Excited at what God is doing? Here in Hawaii many are still concerned with the spreading of the virus. After two years of the struggle, are you anxious? Fearful? Depressed? Mourning what used to be? I wish we had time to hear from every one of you as to what you're dealing with right now...

I hope, too, that the text lessons for today can be an encouragement to all. So let's start by delving into the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John, where we'll look at what the disciples were dealing with after they had witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. I think the big question in their lives was probably something like, **"Now what??" and "Who was Jesus - for real kine...?"**

**We find them afraid.** They had gathered at some location and had locked all the doors. After all, the Jewish leaders had just had Jesus crucified. The disciples had been his followers. Surely the people that had had Jesus put away would have the same hatred of his followers.

Also, a few days ago **they had witnessed the gruesome death of Jesus.** I don't know about you, but I feel like death always hurts. Even beautiful deaths where a person seems to slip quietly away to be with the Lord without pain, even those kinds of deaths leave people with grief and change. Think of what it must have been like for the disciples to see Jesus having been tortured, whipped, bleeding, in excruciating pain, slowly suffocating. They had stood by, watching things quickly spiral out of control.

And sure, there had been some reports since then of an empty tomb. The body of Jesus was gone, some had claimed. Mary Magdalene had reported seeing angels in the tomb, and then had reported seeing Jesus, whom she at first thought was a gardener.

But that was a woman talking, right?! A bundle of emotions! Why wouldn't Jesus show himself to "da guys" first?

Maybe, too, they were also struggling with some fear, some **doubts**, that they had gotten it wrong concerning Jesus. These guys had devoted their lives to him. They had left their homes and jobs to follow him. He had been their teacher for three years. They had trusted him. They had really believed that God was working in and through Jesus in a unique way. But look how that had worked out! I'm sure they were still finding it hard to shake the haunting memories of the shame, the humiliation, the horrific things Jesus had to endure. And then he died. He died.

So not only were the disciples having to work through the grief associated with the physical death of Jesus, but they were probably also **grieving the death of hope** that had been building through their relationship with him. I bet all of them were doubting - in some way or another - that God could work good from the way things had ended for Jesus.

I can imagine them thinking, "And here we thought this relationship was different from all other relationships! We're used to human relationships that break or end or dissolve, whether we're at fault or not. We're used to relationships ending sadly or badly. But we really thought this one was different..."

Or maybe they were stuck on the big "Why" question: "Jesus, why did you let that happen?! Why didn't you fight?! We were witnesses in the past of you fighting demonic forces and winning! But this time, you were like a lamb led to the slaughter. Why?"

Added to all that messiness was the possibility that they were dealing with some personal shame. Just when Jesus could have used their support, they had melted away, they had disappeared in the crowds.

Looking at our text, what happened next? We're told Jesus came and appeared right in the middle of them! And what did he say? Did he have "shame on you"s to deliver? Did he scold them? Did he express disappointment in them?

His message was, **"Peace be with you."**

Is there any message they needed more? I don't think so. This greeting of peace in the Hebrew is the word **shalom**. It means all of this and more:

"May you become more and more aware of how much God loves you, because God is for you and will come to your aid.

May you have the good that you need for your relationships with God and with those here on earth, because you were created for such relationships.

May healing come to any place in your life where something is wounded.

May you have the wisdom from God to recognize what is good, what is beautiful, what is true.

May your life pour out in blessing to others wherever you go, in this life or the next.

May you cease from worrying and rest in God's promises no matter how turbulent the times get.

And may you finally face the great enemy, death, without fear, knowing you share in Christ's victory over it."

Then Jesus showed them his hands and his side. Jesus showed them his wounds. Why? I think that's what the disciples needed right then, to know that this truly was Jesus, who had gone through what they saw him go through, but had been raised from the dead.

How did the disciples respond? As the truth sank in, they were overjoyed, exuberant, ecstatic! Peace and joy are signs that faith is present, that faith is growing.

Remember some of the promises concerning peace and joy that Jesus had given before he left them?

**John 14:27** Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

**John 15:9-11** "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Promises made. Promises kept.

Then, after blessing them with peace, Jesus gave them the answer to their question of **"Now what???"** He said to his disciples, *"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."* They'd been given a mission. As commentator Frederick Bruner describes it: The special mission of the Church is to give Jesus to others in such a way that they may believe that he really is Risen and Lord, and, with that simple trust, that they can receive, with and in Jesus, the free forgiveness of sins, the free gift of the Holy Spirit, and the free privilege of passing Jesus and his forgiveness on to others.

Then our gospel text says Jesus breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit. I like how The Voice translation of the Bible says it: "Welcome the Holy Spirit of the Living God!" They had now received a free gift of power, enabling them to live transformed lives of shalom and to fulfill the mission. They had what they needed for the next chapter of their journey of faith.

At least one of the disciples was missing in that first meeting on Resurrection Day behind locked doors. It was Thomas. When the disciples told him they had seen the Lord, what was his reaction? *"If I don't see in his hands the marks of the nails, and put my finger into the place where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I'll never believe."* He wanted science, right? he wanted proof.

A week later, (like today - a week after Easter) as the disciples had gathered, Thomas being with them this time, Jesus once again came through locked doors and stood right in the middle of them. Again he greeted them with "Peace to you!"

Why peace? He wanted them to know it was him, Jesus, one and the same. Isn't that comforting about resurrection life? They could recognize the Lord that they love.

Peace, because it was good that in some ways he was very different now. He was not limited to locked doors. Now, in him, life is not limiting and death is no longer final, forever.

Peace, because Jesus is still the patient, kind, understanding Jesus - who is not put off by honest questions. Who honors where a person is at in their belief or unbelief and works to draw people to believe in him, no matter what it takes.

Peace, because they are filled with a power from God that is not something they have to drum up on their own. The Holy Spirit will be their strength, their comfort, their guide. The Holy Spirit will help them do what they could not do on their own.

And then he turned right to Thomas, inviting him to touch his hands, his side, and he encouraged Thomas to stop being unbelieving! Believe!

There's a wonderful painting called ***The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*** that fits with our text today. It was painted by the Italian Baroque master Caravaggio, c. 1601–1602, and is housed in a museum, in Germany.

It's a very realistic painting, and in a way - it's kind of gross, showing Jesus lifting up his tunic with one hand and taking the hand of Thomas with the other - guiding Thomas' hand to the wound in his side. It looks like Thomas sticks his finger in the chest wound and kind of probes around, while a couple of the other disciples have circled around and are watching intently.

Our text doesn't say that Thomas did that, but he **was** invited to. We're simply told that Thomas' answer to the invitation was, "My Lord, and my God!"

Was Jesus offended by doubts? No way. Jesus reached out to Thomas to give him what he needed to overcome those doubts. And Thomas, overwhelmed it seems, gave a confession that seemed to pour out from his soul.

Then Jesus even gave a special blessing to us, to the ensuing generations who wouldn't have a chance to see him, hear him, touch him in person. He said our faith has special worth in his eyes.

The Acts text is a picture of what disciples look like who have their important questions answered: Who was Jesus, for real kine, and now what?

To get the full context of the situation, I think it helps to start from verse 17 of chapter five. The Chief Priest and the sect of Sadducees were extremely jealous of the mounting numbers of people that were following and being ministered to by the apostles. So they had the apostles arrested and put in jail.

During the night, however, an angel of God opened the jailhouse door and led them out, directing them to go to the Temple and tell people the full message of this new life. So they did that. The apostles went at daybreak to the Temple and began to teach the people.

When the religious leaders asked for the apostles to appear before them, officers were sent to the jail to get them, but no apostles were found, even though the jail was locked up tight. What was going on? Then someone reported that the men who had been in jail were now at the Temple, teaching people.

The leaders had them brought back before the High Council. They said, *"We gave you strict orders not to teach about Jesus, yet you are filling Jerusalem with this teaching."*

And who answers them? Peter, the guy who had not so long ago been so afraid when a servant girl asked him if he had been associated with Jesus - that he lied and denied it. This changed man, Peter, now has a boldness that wasn't in him before. It must be that Holy Spirit power.

Now he doesn't hesitate to stand up to the most powerful religious leaders in the nation and tell them, *"We must obey God rather than men!"*

Now self-preservation is not the highest priority. He's on a mission. His "now what" question has been answered. God has things for him to do.

And now he's ready to risk his life on the answer to "who is this Jesus, for real kine?" This former fisherman witnesses that God raised Jesus from the dead and has exalted him at his right hand as Prince and Savior, so that Jesus might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to the people of Israel, and that the Holy Spirit will corroborate every detail.

Remember the early Christians didn't have creeds yet stating what they believed. But this similar message has already been shared in Acts 2, 3 and 4. When we were in Chapter 10 last week with the story of Peter and Cornelius, Peter shared it again. It's like the beginning stages of the early Christians trying to explain the Trinity, no simple task.

In the first chapter of Revelation, we're introduced to John of Patmos, a pastor writing around 95 A.D. to seven churches. John is concerned that the Christians he is mentoring learn more and more of what it means to live lives of worship, especially since life post resurrection of Jesus was holding many challenges for them. They were being persecuted for their faith. Sometimes it felt like evil was winning. John believes that as the people begin to see more and more of who God is and what God is doing - they respond - maybe with praise, maybe thanksgiving, maybe lament, all of which are acts of worship.

In the opening of his letter, the prologue, it is thought by many that he uses a liturgy already in existence. Note the beautiful description of who God is, for real kine: it's the God **who is, who was and who is to come**. Chew on that for awhile. When isn't God there for us? And then the description of Jesus: **the faithful witness**, who lived and shared in ways that helped people get to know his Heavenly Father better; **the firstborn from the dead**, a way of saying he's the first of many that will follow in being raised; **the ruler of the kings of the earth**: he's in ultimately in charge of everyone; he's cleaned us up and given us a purpose for living - to serve God. And he's coming, he's on his way, and when he arrives he will be recognized even by those who mocked and killed him. Don't give up, churches! Get to know the one who's on the throne.

And finally, this is the third Sunday we have looked at Psalm 118. Why? It's considered an Easter psalm, a resurrection psalm. Verse 17 says "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord."

It also moves back and forth from praise to petition, like we do in our relationship with God. We may experience a saving or release from bondage at some point in time, but right around the corner there are more challenges for which we need God's steadfast love and continued saving help. This psalm reminds us that God continues to act today, with his saving grace. This is the day the Lord has made. We will be glad and rejoice in it. God has work for us to do, in answer to our "now what" question! And may we continue to learn what a great God we have as revealed in Jesus!