

Hello, I'm Pastor Tera Kossow, Director for Evangelical Mission for the Western North Dakota Synod. I bring you greetings from Bishop Craig Schweitzer, and our synod staff, and all the people we are connected to in the Body of Christ here in Western North Dakota, the country, and the world, where today, the second Sunday of Easter, all across the globe people will hear the same reading.

Our gospel today comes from the 20th chapter of the gospel of John starting with the 19th verse. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

¹⁹When 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." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Jesus and Thomas

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin^[a]), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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."

²⁶A 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." ²⁷Then 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." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The Purpose of This Book

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may continue^[b] to believe that Jesus is the Messiah,^[c] the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Alleluia, Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Each year, the Sunday after Easter gives us the same Gospel reading. You can call it “doubting Thomas” or “believing Thomas” or “why isn’t everyone freaking out every time Jesus shows up.” However you look at it, people who thought long and hard about what texts we would encounter each year of the three-year cycle of readings, which is called the lectionary, decided the we needed to hear this each year instead of every three.

Jesus appears to the disciples with greetings and messages, showing his hands and side, engaging with the Thomas, and addressing his followers. The Gospel concludes with a statement of its purpose, but we will get to that a bit later.

Jesus appears to the locked-in disciples, who are inside because they are afraid of the Jewish authorities. Being a known follower of the executed Jesus, confessing that this Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God who saves us, was a dangerous game, and many would die for their beliefs. So we find most of the disciples locked away for their own safety.

Here’s where I have to ask: why isn’t everyone freaking out every time Jesus shows up? They are locked in this room, upstairs, and Jesus is just there. He just shows up. Poof, there’s Jesus. Maybe there’s even smoke like during a magic trick, but there is no magician. There is no trick. It isn’t an illusion or a dream or a hallucination. Jesus is really there.

Maybe they did freak out. Maybe people were always getting freaked out in stories where I would have been. Like when the angels appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus, and the angels had to say, “hey, don’t freak out, we have good news!” So here, when Jesus comes from nowhere, he says. “Peace be with you.”

Thanks Jesus, that’s helps. Especially when all we know of this conversation is what is written, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Alrighty. Jesus comes in, throws out two sentences, breathes on them, and then another two sentences. Then he’s gone.

The abrupt conversation in the story tells us we should listen up and pay attention. 1. Peace be with you. No reason to be afraid. 2. God sent me and I send you. Sitting in this locked room is not what you are supposed to be doing. 3. Deep breath... and Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on them. And 4. The big one: forgive others and don’t hold on to it. Literally to forgive any debt that someone may own you.

Did someone sin against you and you think they need to make up for it? Nope. We have it interpreted as forgiveness of sins, but it is more than that. Not only do you have to say you forgive, but you have to actually let it go. No bringing it back up in 3 years when you are mad about what that person has done, so you throw it back in their face. Forgive and let it go. Because if you don’t, you have to live with it.

And, it also has to do with that greatest commandment: to love God and love others, so that you do to others what you want them to do to and for you. That doesn't mean the person who has been found in the wrong will not have consequences. It doesn't mean there won't be pain that needs to heal. It does mean that you shouldn't let it consume you.

Now fast forward to when they all inform Thomas of what he missed. And like any rational human being, he doesn't believe them. The age-old response, "Sure. I'll believe it when I see it."

Next week, Thomas makes sure he is there. Enter Jesus, probably by the same magical means of entering as last time. Same abrupt conversation telling us to listen closely. 1. Peace be with you, Jesus says. Getting to be a normal way to great people. 2. Jesus puts out his hands and exposes his side with the spear wound, and says to Thomas, "Well, go ahead, do what you need to do to believe I'm really here. Stick your finger in this nail hole, and stick your hand in my side. Don't doubt. Believe." 4. Thomas declares, without having to prove it by touching Jesus, that Jesus is Lord; Jesus is God. The resurrection is real. And 5. Jesus tells them that those who have come to believe, and who will come to believe, will also be blessed because they believe without being able to see Christ with their own eyes.

How did people come to know about and believe in Jesus as Messiah if they didn't see him? How do people today come to know about and believe in Jesus if they can't see him? You and me.

It won't happen if we are sitting alone in our comfortable chair with our feet up, trying to escape the reality of the world. It won't happen if we are trying to force others to believe as we do. If we take what we hear in this story to heart, we can see that it begins with peaceful encounters.

Peace be with you is not just a time to shake hands and say good morning. It also means that I approach you with only peaceful intentions, wishing you the peace of Christ. When we realize we are called into the world, no matter how terrifying that might be, we realize that we absolutely cannot share God's love without engaging others face to face, which can also be terrifying. And we need to move toward these encounters praying for the peace of Christ to fill our hearts so that we can share God's love with only peaceful intentions.

It means that we move into the world, not seeing others as guilty of what someone else has said they have done or that they are stereotyped to be a certain kind of person. As much as we look at the world and judge people and entire countries of people as sinners against God and against us, they feel the same way about us. How do we break that cycle? We let go of what we have heard. We let go of how we have come to believe about them before seeing for ourselves.

We can do that because God has declared that all creation is good. And we believe that God created all people, even if they aren't Christian, so God must see them as good. We believe that Jesus dies for the entire world because that is what he says. For the world.

And we can do it because we too have the Holy Spirit breathed into us. A power that blows us this way and that way, continuously bringing faith to us and us to faith. As Martin Luther wrote in the explanation to the 3rd Article of the Creed, "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." And with that faith, we can do what we are called to do. We can follow Jesus out of the safety of our homes and our church buildings. We can look out at the world that we see in the grocery store, on the street corner, even in jails and detention centers... on the news and social media... and we can see actual human beings, created by God and loved by God and forgiven by God.

We won't always get it right, but we have Jesus who forgives us for our failings, even the failure of not trying. We won't always feel safe living love out loud in this world where it is uncomfortable to talk about who you love, but easy to talk about who you hate. Even so, we are called to this work. To live in the world, sharing the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Peace be with you. As God has sent Jesus, and as Jesus sends me, you are also sent. Go out into the world, listen closely, eyes open wide, and see the glory of God's creation in the face of every friend and every stranger. Go in peace to do this work. Believe that you are blessed to do this work, even when you can't see clearly how it can be, that this is indeed your calling by the one who lived and died and lives again.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!