

"Peace Be With You"
Year A, Second Sunday of Easter, April 27, 2014
Acts 2:14a, 22-32, John 20:19-31
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I once heard a speaker at a Christian rally talk about Peter's speech as it's mentioned in this morning's reading from Acts chapter 2. He was using this passage as proof to show that Jesus and the resurrection are historical fact. When Luke writes the book, Acts of the Apostles, he says in this passage, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know - this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." This is just part of Peter's speech, but this speaker zeroed in on those words, "as you yourselves know" and pointed out that there was no riot. Those hearing Peter would realize that he's right. The people saw God do amazing things through Jesus, they knew Jesus was killed by Roman crucifixion, and they knew Jesus didn't stay dead, but rose from the grave. No one in this passage cries "Foul!" Peter is simply telling them what they already know through their own experience. He says, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."

In the passage from John we are reading the verses that come right after Mary Magdalene experiencing the presence of the risen Christ at the tomb on that first Easter morning, and then she runs to tell the rest of the disciples all that Christ had told her. Now we read about that same day, only now it's evening. The disciples are in fear of the Jewish leaders so they are huddled together in a house and the door is locked. But Thomas, called the Twin, is not with them. Even though the doors are locked, Jesus shows up, right in their midst and speaks to them. The first thing he says is a gift. Unlike last week's joke about the young boy saying, "Ta-da" when Jesus rose from the dead, Jesus actually speaks a gift to those frightened followers. He says, "Peace be with you." Then he shows them the wounds he carries.

Peace, in Greek is Eirene (I-ray-nay) It's basically the Greek version of the Hebrew word, Shalom. Eirene means peace, a wholeness, but there is quite a broad spectrum to it's meaning. It is a noun, feminine in gender, and it can mean one, peace, quietness, rest. The Short Definition is peace, peace of mind, but this word is also used as an invocation of peace, used as a common Jewish farewell, in the Hebrew sense of the health (welfare) of an individual. In English we not only say, "See ya' later," but we also say things like, "Take care!" and this is very similar, a well-wishing gift of good thoughts towards wholeness. In fact, the Strong's definition, which is an exhaustive resource of biblical study gives this word the research number 1515 eirénē (from eirō, "to join, tie together into a whole") - properly, wholeness, i.e. when all essential parts are joined together; peace (God's gift of wholeness). (biblehub.com Strong's Greek number 1515, eirene). It can also mean a state of national tranquillity, exemption from the rage and havoc of war, peace between individuals, harmony, concord security, safety, prosperity, felicity, (because peace and harmony make

and keep things safe and prosperous); of the Messiah's peace, the way that leads to peace (salvation); of Christianity, the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatsoever sort that is. (biblestudytools.com)

As you can see, the disciples are ready for peace, not only in their fearful state as they seem to have a nation against them, but they are receiving from the Risen Christ the gift of knowing and experiencing the lack of fear, the fullness of love, fearing nothing from God, and they were not only content, they were overjoyed! As Jesus breathes on them the gift of the Holy Spirit, all essential parts are joined together and they experience a peace unlike anything the world had ever known. Not just peace as in lack of violence, the opposite of war, but peace as a deep sense of integration and harmony. They could never go back.

But Thomas is not with them, and even though they try to tell him about this amazing experience of the Risen Lord, this gift of peace, and the opportunity they had to see the scars on his hands and side, Thomas does not believe. He has more than doubt, he has dis-belief, un-belief, and this is for a reason, and it has to do with relationship and proclamation. Thomas needs to be *with* Jesus to be in relationship with him. Belief is not an intellectual ascent to an idea. He did not hear the disciples' news and decide to agree with them in his mind. He needs to experience the Risen Lord in order to be in relationship with Christ.

But it takes time. After a week, the disciples are gathered together again, and this time, Thomas is with them in that locked home. We can wonder, what is it like to wait a week? Is this your only moment to be in relationship with him? Thomas could have had a tough week. He hear's about the disciples' experience and Thomas hasn't had that for a week. During those days in between, is he hopeful and eager? Or fearful and troubled, wondering if Christ would appear again to him? I wonder if our own experience parallels this pattern. We "come to church" as if church is a place, and we worship. Then we go home and spend the next week living daily life. The next Sunday, comes another opportunity to worship and be intentional about focusing on faith and love and God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, singing songs and hearing scripture read and proclaimed, and gathering for sacraments like communion. If we miss a Sunday, or two, or more, that stretch of days in between gets even longer.

Maybe this is where John's textual variant comes in handy. There is a textual variant: In John's original ending, when it says in verse 31 that this book is written so that "you may come to believe," May come to believe can also be, "May continue to believe." May come leads us to thoughts of evangelism, conversion, and sharing the Gospel so people can Come to know Jesus. May Continue to believe leads us to a longer view of discipleship, of encouragement in the faith, especially for those 'in between times' where the presence of the Risen Lord is, perhaps, less obvious to us. In this textual variant, May Come, or May Continue, are equal, both given evidence in reliable manuscripts. We actually need both, to leave room for new conversion and sustained faith.

Ranier Maria Rilke shares a thought about coming to know Christ and continuing in the faith through hard times, living with questions that don't seem to have answers. As if she's sending us, and Thomas a letter to help him through the week, she says, "...be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love *the questions themselves* like locked

rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. Resolve to be always beginning - to be a beginner!" (Rainer Maria Rilke, Rilke's Letters on Love, quoted on Suzanne Guthrie's "At the Edge of the Enclosure" Soulwork Toward Sunday blog, <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/easter2a.html>).

As Jesus the Risen Christ comes to Thomas, inviting him to feel the wounds, the scars, the holes that God carries beyond the grave, Thomas takes his first steps at living everything. He proclaims, "My Lord and my God!" In this declaration, "My Lord, My God," Thomas is reminding us that in Jesus Christ we are given God incarnate, God in the flesh, God as part of the very creation brought into being through Christ. This proclamation in that locked room reminds us how God chooses to change the world because it's John's way of showing us that Jesus is not just another prophet, but is God in the flesh, and that God still bears the scars teaches us about how God still chooses to enter our world.

As Rolph Jacobson of Luther Seminary puts it, "God's way, Christ's way of being present in our world is to meet us in our suffering and to find us in the lowly places, not just in the high, blessed moments of life." Our suffering is transformed because not only are we living life in Christ's name, but as his breathing on the disciples, saying, "Peace be with you," shows us, we too are invited to not just hear information *about* Easter, but we are invited to *experience* a relationship with The Lord of heaven and earth, accompanied by the presence and power of the Spirit, which is in-breathed, and walks along inside of us. Easter is more than Christian belief, more than tradition, more than Bible story. Easter is an invitation to transformation through an encounter with the living God. Jesus, the Messiah, who comes to save and not condemn, gives life and wholeness that even death cannot destroy.

PEACE BE WITH YOU changes everything! Thanks be to God for Easter joy, for the Holy Spirit with us every moment, even on those in between days, and even as we sit with questions, seeking transformation and wholeness.

Thanks be to God for coming to meet us where we live. And may God be glorified now and forever. Amen.