

## ***My Lord and My God!***

**John 20: 19-31**

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A few years ago, my family experienced a significant crisis. Time seemed to slow down. Do you know that feeling? When something terrible or frightening happens, it is as if there is a slow motion video replay, but it is actually happening in real time. I remember only having the ability to manage to get through each minute, each hour, as it came. My ability to function beyond those short periods of time simply was not possible. I was in a state of overwhelm, as is often the case when there is some kind of difficult situation, tragedy or trauma. I recently read an article which described how we are experiencing communal trauma right now, in the midst of this global pandemic. A wise person in my life shared with me the importance of being disciplined about spending time with God during such a time, even when I did not feel like it. She proffered that it was most important in times of chaos to connect to God's peaceful presence for restoration. I believe today's gospel lesson is illustrative of this wisdom.

Our story opens "when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week." This is to say, on the evening of the day Mary Magdalene discovered the stone rolled away from Jesus' tomb and Peter discovered Jesus' body missing. The first Easter. The disciples are described as being gathered inside the house with locked doors for fear of the Jews. John does not use a great deal of detail in this account, but we can open our imagination to what may be going on here. We are more than 2,000 years removed from this event, we have heard the story so many times, we have the advantage of all of the time, history and tradition of interpretation to conclude that those disciples, especially Thomas, have completely missed something seemingly so obvious to us. It is like watching a movie where the characters are making a bad choice and we yell at the screen, "don't do it!" as if they can hear and will be changed by our perspective. So it is that I invite us to set aside the layers of time, history and tradition of interpretation, and put ourselves in the story for a bit this morning.

Let us imagine the perspective of the disciples, gathered inside the house. Just three days prior the man they had given everything up to follow for three years was given over to the officials. The one who had betrayed Jesus had been their friend. Next, Jesus was arrested and had three trials. The Roman governor, Pilate, did not find Jesus guilty of anything, yet he allowed the Jewish leaders to have him brutally beaten and crucified. After that, their friend Judas hanged himself.

Any one of those events would have been enough for the disciples to be traumatized. They were not only dealing with the trauma of those events, but also totally confused and bewildered by the fact that his body had gone missing. On top of all of that, they were still in Jerusalem knowing that so many people recognized them as being friends and followers of Jesus. No doubt, they were afraid for their own lives.

John's gospel tells us they are locked inside the house for fear of the Jews. Human response to fear is often fight, flight or freeze. They are barricaded in a closed room, paralyzed by this warranted fear of the authorities, having just witnessed the extreme violence and oppression of a crucifixion and knowing that there is every reason for them to be next. They live in a violent society. Now, John's telling of the story continues... Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

What a beautiful image this conjures. In response to fear, Jesus bestows peace. Peace... anxiety's antidote. This is not the first time Jesus offers peace. It likely causes the disciples to recall the words of comfort Jesus spoke about twice at the last supper. First: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (14:27) Second: "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (16:33)

This is also not the last time Jesus offers such a blessing. He will say it a second time (v. 21) in this paragraph and a third time in the next, "Peace be with you" (20:26) The word peace, or shalom, is a significant one in Hebrew. It is used as a greeting, but carries a much more significant meaning, which we will explore shortly.

Next, Jesus quickly shows them his hands and his side so as to remove any doubt about who he is. He does not hesitate. Instead, he immediately offers an invitation: *touch, see, believe*. John writes, "Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." From fear to rejoicing, just like that. The power of God's peaceful presence can bring that kind of life-giving change about! Peace, which can mean the absence of conflict, but really it is about experiencing something much better in its place. It is about achieving a state of completeness, wholeness and well-being. So, in the context of this story, it is intended to be a blessing that one would be made completely well and whole again. That is a powerful blessing!

We learn that one of the disciples, Thomas, is not with the others during this experience. So they tell him, "We have seen the Lord." His response has earned him the non-scriptural moniker "Doubting Thomas" ...in perpetuity ...poor guy. The others had the benefit of Jesus automatically offering for them to touch and see that it was him. Thomas says he would like to have the benefit of the same evidence his friends were privy to. We learn that a week later, the group is again in the house. This time, Thomas is with them when Jesus came and stood among them. What did Jesus say? "Peace be with you!" Jesus simultaneously invites Thomas to *touch, see, believe*, just as he had done with the other disciples. Jesus says, "Do not doubt, but believe." John's storytelling does not reveal whether Thomas actually accepted Jesus' offer, but it does tell us what Thomas said, "My Lord and My God!" which a former professor of mine identifies as "one of the strongest declarations of faith in all of the New Testament."<sup>1</sup>

How interesting that Thomas makes this declaration! Much like his friends seven days earlier who rejoiced when they saw the Lord... Thomas rejoices as well, right away! For him also, God's life-giving, powerful, peaceful presence elicited rejoicing – in the midst of a stressful situation.

Peace is a rich, biblical concept. The word for peace in Hebrew is shalom and in Greek it is Eirene. In fact, along with truth and justice, peace is among the most hallowed Jewish values. Shalom acknowledges that life is complex: full of moving parts, situations, and relationships. When any of these are out of alignment, or missing, one's shalom breaks down. Life is no longer whole, and it needs to be restored.

There are many examples in the Old Testament of shalom. For example, *shalom* refers to the perfect stone, one with a whole shape and no cracks, or a completed stone wall with no gaps and no missing bricks (Joshua 8:31). Job 5:24 explains that you will know your tents are *shalom* when nothing is missing. *Shalom* can refer to a person's well-being: like when David visited his brothers on the battlefield and inquired about their *shalom*. Solomon brings *shalom* to the unfinished temple when

he completes it (1 Kings 9:25). In Exodus we learned that when an animal damages your neighbor's field, you "shalom" them by giving them a complete repayment for their loss. You take what is missing and restore it to wholeness. The concept of *shalom* can also apply to human relationships. To reconcile and heal a broken relationship, is to bring *shalom* (Proverbs 16:7). When rival kingdoms made *shalom*, it didn't just mean that they stopped fighting, it also meant they started working together for each other's benefit. This state of *shalom* is what Israel's kings were called to cultivate. The prophet Isaiah (9:5-6) promised a "Prince of Peace" would be born to us. Zechariah prophesied that Jesus would "guide our feet in the way of peace" (Luke 1:79). The angels heralded God's peace at Jesus' birth (Luke 2:13-14).

It fascinates me that the first words the Risen Christ said were "Peace be with you." The disciples first and then Thomas responded immediately to Jesus' blessing of peace with a return to wholeness, rejoicing in Jesus' presence. Jesus breathed on them and said "receive the Holy Spirit" (v. 23) and talked about the power he shared with them for restoration, "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them" (v. 22-23). Jesus calls his disciples to create life-giving peace through him.

It is through Jesus' brokenness that he restored wholeness to the disciples. Jesus then calls his disciples to create peace, as he breathes his life – the life through the Holy Spirit – onto his believers. After all, true peace is taking what is broken and restoring it. In our lives, in our relationships and in our world. That is resurrection power!

How might we live into that resurrection power, that *shalom* today? Perhaps we can think about the Apostle Paul's encouragement to the church in Ephesus to "retain unity through the bond of peace – through humility, patience and bearing with one another in love" (Eph. 2:14-15). Or perhaps we can think of the song we often sing at Christmastime "let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." But how do we do that ...especially in a time such as this, a time of pandemic and the resulting chaos which surrounds us right now?

Perhaps we can equip ourselves, as my wise mentor advised me, by spending time with God, even when we don't feel like it. After all, it is most important in times of chaos to connect to God's restorative, life-giving and peaceful presence. When we intentionally do this regularly whether through worship, prayer, meditation, being in nature, or whatever creates that connection, we might experience *shalom*, a return to wholeness. As our well-being is restored within (letting peace begin with us) we can bring our best selves, our whole selves, to the world. May it be so, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> (Copenhaver, 2010)