“Come to Believe”

John 20: 19-31

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From the Pulpit
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Let us Pray: Ever living God, in the quietness of these moments, breathe your Holy Spirit into the words that are read and proclaimed like you breathed your Spirit into the disciples of long ago. Open us to the power of the risen Christ in this place, in our lives and in the world. Amen.


When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So 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.'

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

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

What were you doing last Sunday evening? It was a glorious day. The weather was nice, maybe you were out for an
evening stroll, finishing yard work, or enjoying a ball game or the company of family and friends. Maybe you were traveling back from Easter dinner.

According to the Gospel of John, the disciples spent that first Easter evening, indoors, huddled together in a locked room. It’s the biggest and most important day in the history of the Christian faith—the day the world learned that God raised Jesus from the dead. These events were known to Peter, the disciple whom Jesus loved, Mary and they have shared this news with others. And they all respond to this amazing, wonderful, unimaginable good news by spending the evening in a locked room for they were afraid. Christ is risen---let’s go inside and lock the door.

I know you were hoping for a more rousing story on the Sunday after Easter. I had hoped for a more rousing story, too. You did return, however, to hear how the rest of the Easter story goes, didn’t you?....Well, here you have it. The Disciples spent the evening of Easter---locked in a room.

They had good reason for staying inside. They were known compatriots; associates of Jesus who had followed him all
over the region. They were with him in the garden. They witnessed his arrest, trial, sentence and the crucifixion. Would they be next? That’s reason to be fearful. They knew all about crosses and consequences…..and understandably, they locked the doors.

When we feel threatened and on guard the natural thing to do is to hunker down and lock the doors, to become focused on our own security rather than the risky mission to which we are called. Jesus had given instructions to his friends. Now that he was not with them, they were afraid.

What’s a little harder to understand today is how Jesus managed to get through the locked door. In our story this morning, Jesus managed to get through a door, not once, but twice. He doesn’t knock. He doesn’t read the doorbell. He isn’t expected. He hasn’t been invited. One minute he isn’t there. The next minute he is. Jesus is sneaky.

The first time Jesus came and stood among them, he offers them his peace, offers the images of his hands and his side, offers himself. The disciples were amazed and they received the breath of the Holy Spirit. Out of there joy in seeing their friend once again they wanted to share the news. So they tell Thomas when he returns.
Thomas wasn’t there when Jesus snuck into the locked room the first time. I suppose he was out at the store buying groceries for his distraught friends (Buchanan), or he went out to clear his head, get some fresh air, away from the melancholy tone of the room (Buechner). Maybe he went to return a call or text message so the telephone ring wouldn’t disrupt the somber mood. Either way...he wasn’t there when the Jesus showed up. So when he returned and heard what had just happened to the disciples he wanted proof of Jesus.

But I am not convinced that Thomas was a doubter, as many would like to classify him. I don’t want to name him Doubting Thomas. Thomas wants what the others had, an experience of the risen Christ. Mary had it. The disciples had it. Why not Thomas?

The word Jesus uses when he tells Thomas “do not doubt” is, in Greek, *apistos*, the word for unbelief. Jesus doesn’t say “do not doubt, instead he says “do not be unbelieving.”¹ Do not be unbelieving.

In the 1st century, believing was about relationship. It was about coming together to hear the stories and to learn

¹ Karoline Lewis, SermonBrainwave @workingpreacher.org, 2015.
together the teachings of Jesus. It would take a certain togetherness to make it through the trying times after Jesus death and carry his message forward. Together in community, the disciples learned to pray, learned to be in mission in the world, learned to stay together, even when Jesus said, “he was going on before them.” Believing was about relationship. This was Thomas’ meeting. It was Thomas’ turn to encounter the risen Christ and establish that relationship again, just like the others.

So a week later, when Thomas was with the disciples in the house…Jesus shows up again. Again the doors were shut…and again, Jesus just came and stood among them, offering peace, offering the images of his hands and his side, offering himself. Jesus says to Thomas, “put your finger here. Reach out your hand here…Do not be unbelieving.”

Jesus’ followers reacted to the Resurrection not with simple faith, but with “fear,” “terror,” “disbelief,” and, even, “doubt.” Those are the very words that pepper all the accounts of the Resurrection in the Gospels. Those same words fall on our hearts at certain times in our lives. How is it that we come to believe? What makes us doubt?
The eminently quotable Presbyterian minister and novelist, Frederick Buechner, put the point this way: “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep.” Then he adds (I like his metaphor), “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” (“Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”)

At the very least, belief and doubt are not opposites. They are “intimately related responses in those who are actually paying attention to the amazing acts of God among us.” There are many who would suggest that doubt is not exactly the opposite of faith, indeed suggesting that doubt may be – most ironically – a part of faith. Asking awkward questions – even those big questions that cross into doubt – is a back-and-forth dialogue that is, oddly enough, a part of believing. Church is the one place where doubts have the reasonable chance of being honored and those who struggle with difficult questions of life and faith are given loving support. Here doubt is welcome. Hard questions are listened to and pondered.
Hopefully, First Church will always be a church where doubts can be brought to church and where those who search for answers to difficult questions find a loving, supportive community of open-minded and open-hearted people. What you come to believe and what I come to believe can be a dialogue. It can be a place of interesting questioning and embracing. A place where relationships are built. They sustain us. They sustain communities of faith through generations. Believing is about relationships. The promise of this text this 2nd Sunday of Eastertide is that Jesus cannot be stopped by any locked doors on our homes or in our hearts. Jesus comes to us as he came to the first disciples, right in the midst of our fear, pain, doubt, and confusion. He comes speaking peace, breathing into our anxious lives the breath of the Holy Spirit.

What is more important is that Jesus keeps showing up in the lives of his friends. In the word, in the waters of baptism, in the bread and wine, Jesus shows up. Jesus came to the disciples when their guard was down. He was sneaky about it, no knock, no doorbell, he just shows up. He, too, shows up in our lives when we least expect him. When our guard is down. When we desperately need to be broken into…there Jesus is. When he knows we will resist, he’ll show up. When our fears get the best of us, when we reach
for something to hold onto through difficult times, Jesus shows up. Jesus will keep showing up.

The other part of the same Easter message is that Jesus sent the disciples out of the locked room and into the world. Thank goodness the disciples finally left the locked room. They went out of the doors and into the world to proclaim the Good News of their friend, the risen one. We know they encountered lots of questions, lots of doubts, but they kept telling the story of the one who knew them best.

Jesus keeps sending us out of our safe, locked rooms, into a world that, so desperately needs his gifts of life and peace.² The One who wants to know us, the one who sends us out to be his hands and his feet on earth, he’ll keep showing up.

I am so glad you showed up the Sunday after Easter. I think this passage rings of a really good Easter story, because there is no place that we can go that can stop the Risen Christ from reaching us. Not a lock on the door. Not the depth of despair, not the most remote place on earth, not the busyness of our lives, not the doubt on our human hearts.

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No place. Nothing can stop the risen Christ from entering the room…and entering our lives, building the relationships where our faith can rest.

Christ Is Risen….He is Risen Indeed.

Thanks Be to God.

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