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**“...Jesus came and stood in their midst  
and said to them, “Peace be with you.”**

**(John 20:19)**

Today’s readings, and the gospel in particular, invite us to consider the intersecting notions of community, experience, faith, and time.

When we join the disciples, it is the evening of Easter Sunday, the same day that Mary Magdalene witnessed the risen Christ (John 20:1-18), and presumably just before sundown. The last time we were gathered with the disciples was during Jesus’ supper with them, when he washed their feet. Since then there have been numerous shifts between the inside and the outside: inside the high priest’s courtyard, to outside where Peter denies Jesus; inside Pilate’s residence, to outside where Jesus’ accusers are; inside the tomb where Jesus is laid, to outside in the garden, where Mary Magdalene comes to recognize him as the day breaks. In today’s gospel passage, we are once more inside, but rather than the interior being a place of safety and comfort, we hear that the doors are locked and those inside are fearful. Jesus, who earlier asserted, “I am the gate for the sheep” (John 10:7), is absent, and Mary’s announcement “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18), seems to pale in comparison to the lurking external danger, reinforced by the fact that it is growing dark. As we join in worship from our living rooms and home offices, in isolation to try to avoid a virulent illness, we can appreciate the disciples’ instinct to shelter in place, as well as their anxiety.

When Jesus comes and stands in their midst, the first thing he says is “Peace be with you”. Careful listeners will have noticed that he next shows them his hands and his side and “then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20). This sequence of an offer of peace, observation of his wounds, and then the recognition of the Lord, is important for understanding the most famous person in this passage: Thomas. First, a bit of context: the evangelist has a habit of narrating an event and then telling us something important. For example, in chapter five, Jesus heals a man who takes up his mat and walks, and then we find out it is the sabbath. Likewise, in chapter nine, Jesus heals the blind man, and then, we learn again it is another sabbath.



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So it is that here in chapter 20, Jesus commissions his disciples as ones who are sent, he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them, and gives them the authority to forgive sins, and then we learn that Thomas was not present for this moment (20:21-24). This is a strange thing. Where was Thomas? In conversation with my Dad we mused on this: did Thomas have to work? Was he the one designated to venture out to get groceries or supplies? Did he have parents or family to attend to? None of this is stated. What is stated is that when Thomas returns, the other disciples declare “We have seen the Lord” (just as Mary Magdalene had said to them), and Thomas, very honestly and simply says, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” (20:25).

This year I was amazed and slightly horrified to discover that my second year undergraduates were born in the year 2000. In order to sound like I know what I’m talking about, I have to learn some of their lingo, and often these are acronyms. One such acronym that crossed my desk this year was FOMO: Fear Of Missing Out. It describes the overwhelming feeling of having to stay on top of all the same things as your friends so that you’re not excluded or outdated. The FOMO phenomenon occurred to me when I contemplated Thomas’ response to his fellow disciples, because perhaps what he is expressing is not, in fact, doubt as he is known for, but to have the same experience as his sisters and brothers. Those who were present recognized Jesus after he had shown them his wounds. When Thomas says “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” (20:25), he expresses a hope to have the same experience that the other disciples had had in his absence. It is worth noting that at this point, those few who know Jesus has risen from the dead have all had an experience of also seeing him, and thus there is nothing to insist that true faith should exist independently of seeing.

Thomas’ statement is also profoundly self-protective. In Jesus’ execution, the disciples have been through a massive trauma, and their fear and Thomas’ wariness are understandable. Thomas voices their vulnerability, as if saying something like, “Guys, I want to believe you, I really do, but this hurts SO much, and if you’re just setting me up or trying to make me feel better, I can’t stand it. I can’t stand for it to be fake. I need to see.”



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What is particularly striking about Thomas' predicament is that he must wait a full week before he, too, encounters Jesus risen from the dead. The very next sentence indicates that it is once again Sunday, the first day of the week. We know nothing about the intervening seven days, but if we take some time to ponder this silent interval of time, our hearts must surely go out to Thomas. For seven days his sisters and brothers live in a transformed world of Easter joy that Thomas does not comprehend. How hard that must have been! How deeply we can identify with Thomas in his seven days of uncertainty, and the disconnect he must have experienced. We have all, I am sure, had moments in our lives when we struggled to understand what people were so excited about, or when friends or family were experiencing something of great joy, while our own situation was deeply depressing. In these days, I think of the families and friends separated from one another due to isolation, who are unable to share in each other's life events, be they joyful ones like birthdays, or difficult ones like funerals. Thomas, through no fault of his own, is a victim of poor timing.

But this is an odd thing. In the Gospel of John there is no such thing as poor timing -- everything is meticulous and purposeful, and we can learn as much by what is not said as by what is. We hear, "Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them." (John 20:26). Thomas was with them. The community has kept Thomas with them, and Thomas has remained with the community. I find this deeply moving and it has really stayed with me over the past few days as I prepared for this morning. Communities are so often shaped and defined by shared experiences, and yet Thomas was not excluded because he wasn't present for the big moment. This to me is evidence of deep love in the community -- the love that Jesus himself had taught them to enact. Earlier in the gospel, Jesus had said in several places that none of those given to him would be lost (6:39; 10:28; 17:12; 18:9), and so we can see that the community of disciples acts in a Christ-like way to Thomas, holding him there, and not letting him drift away despite the fact that he has not shared in their experience. I think we can take great comfort and inspiration in this as we journey through this period of isolation, when our shared experiences are limited and possibly changed for the foreseeable future. Thomas' story invites us to consider what it means to be community: how do we hold each other together? How can we support one another when religious experience might feel arid, or when the limits of Zoom have been reached? The witness of the disciples suggests that what is important is inclusion and patience.



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Jesus' first words when he comes to stand among them again are once more, "Peace be with you" (pl.), and Thomas is enveloped in this same greeting of peace. Jesus' invitation to Thomas to touch his wounds, often understood in the same spirit as satiating a demanding child, might be reimagined to be the response to Thomas' prayer. Thomas has staked his belief on seeing and touching Jesus. Jesus, committed to not losing any of those whom he has been given offers him this chance, and in response, Thomas proclaims, "My Lord and my God!" bringing the gospel, which began with the Word who was with God, full circle (Will Bankston, "An Active Reading of Scripture"). Next, the Johannine beatitude, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed", extends the arc of loving community to include subsequent generations of Christians – including all of us.

Thomas' story is more than the story of a skeptic whose faith takes a longer time to blossom. His wariness in his vulnerability teaches us about the importance of faith grounded in truth rather than faddishness. His week of waiting inspires us to perseverance in prayer, and teaches us about the vital role a community plays in patiently and lovingly carrying those who are struggling.

May we, separated by kilometres and physical distancing measures, know ourselves to be held in communion with one another. Amen.

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