

Still Hiding, Still Sought

John 20:19-31 ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ 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." ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ 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." ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ 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.

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Today's reading from John's Gospel is often referred to as the story of Doubting Thomas. In fact, the expression "Doubting Thomas" has come to be used widely to refer to someone who is skeptical or cynical, someone who always seems to need more data, more proof. We love Thomas. There's a bit of Thomas hiding inside every believing Christian. He's the questioner inside of each of us, the inner voice that resists easy answers to hard questions of faith, or Thomas is the one who always wants a little bit more reassurance, a bit more certainty.

Down through the centuries, we've understood Thomas' doubt in various ways. We said that he wondered how an eternal and divine being could die - and still be God. Later interpreters said he wondered how resurrection could make any logical sense. Others saw his doubt as being a dark night of the soul, a condition where in the midst of unbelief, only a tiny sprout of belief still lived in a dark corner. So, we think of this as the story of Doubting Thomas.

It's also been common to focus on the miracle of Jesus entering a locked room. It's been popular to emphasize this as yet one more proof of the divinity of Jesus. But it might not be such a good idea to make our belief in the divine nature of Jesus dependent on this story of not being bound by locked doors. Some would point out that Harry Houdini regularly showed that locked handcuffs, locked jail cells, straightjackets, and chain bound chests were no barrier to his movement. Even though locks were no barrier for Houdini, there was certainly no claim that he was divine. If we only see this as a story about the doubts that Thomas had, and the fact that locked doors were no barrier to Jesus, then we miss the major points made in this story.

This is a story about doubt. Earlier in this chapter, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on Easter morning. She found an empty tomb, but didn't see it as an indication of resurrection. Three times she declared that somebody had stolen the body of Jesus. It isn't until she recognized Jesus that she believed that he had been resurrected. Then she went and told the disciples, but they didn't seem to believe her. They huddled in fear in a locked room. Actually, doubt is common in the stories of the resurrection. In Matthew, some of the disciples doubted, even when they met Jesus on the mountain in Galilee. (Matt. 28:17) Luke tells about the disciples walking to Emmaus, leaving Jerusalem on that Easter Day, because they didn't believe the testimony of the women that Jesus was alive. (Luke 24:11,25, 37, 41) The same doubt is mentioned in Mark. (Mark 16:14) For Thomas to doubt is nothing

different than any of the other disciples. Mary Magdalene assumed grave robbers until she saw Jesus. The disciples in the locked room doubted her story until they saw Jesus. Thomas wasn't asking for anything that the others hadn't experienced. He doubted, yes, but so had they.

Doubts are not always a bad thing. People who never doubt are people who are gullible, people who will believe anything. Doubting is the early step in discerning. It is the first step in working toward deep and strong conviction. Doubt is a necessary part of the process of building a firm foundation for your faith, your trust in God. If you never question, if you never doubt, then, quite frankly, you are liable to believe almost anything. In First John 4:1 we're told, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

In the first appearance in that locked room, Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." A week later, despite having been given the Holy Spirit, and despite having been sent by Jesus, it appears that they haven't gone anywhere. They're still in a locked room. We get no indication that they've done anything during the past week. The disciples have seen Jesus, but they still don't live as a confident, released, and empowered Easter people.

Jesus walked right up to Thomas. Isn't it a bit odd, that Thomas didn't respond in shock the moment that Jesus arrived? In all probability when Jesus comes to find us in our doubt-filled moments, we, just like Thomas, may not recognize Jesus, even when he's right in front of us. Consider how Jesus approached Thomas. He said, "Peace be with you," and then he asked Thomas to put his hands into his wounds. It's an image of gore and violence. Perhaps we can recognize God's presence in those times, those moments, when peace is offered. And perhaps, when life's brutal violence is squarely recognized and faced, it's then that we can realize that we aren't alone, but have always been pursued and always been found. In different moments of our life, the way that Jesus appears to us can be in the most unlikely people. Just as we try to be the light of Christ shining in the world, just as we try to be the presence of Christ, so may others do the same for us, if we but open our eyes to see Christ among us. He may be dressed in expensive clothes - or in beggar's rags. He may come to us in the words and actions of a friend - or of a complete stranger. He can be present in the arms of someone who simply holds us as we cry in pain.

Jesus came to this quivering group of followers, despite their fear and despite their disbelief. The major point of this story is that Jesus came again and again to disciples who were scared and confused and hesitant and timid. The disciples were continuing to live in fear even in the face of the resurrection, but Jesus came anyway, and came repeatedly. Jesus didn't reprimand them. He never lectured them for hiding behind closed doors even after they had received the Holy Spirit, nor did he lecture Thomas for wanting to see and touch his risen Lord.

Jesus told Thomas, "Do not doubt, but believe." That sounds a bit like Jesus rebuked Thomas. This passage would be better translated as, "Do not be unbelieving, but believing. It's an invitation by Jesus to see and believe. This is a story of great grace. God comes to us, no matter where we might be, despite our doubts, and despite our fears. Jesus walked through a locked door to get to Thomas. Jesus was determined to reach this skeptical disciple whom nobody else seemed to be able to convince. Jesus refused to let deadbolts or chains block love from reaching one who lacked trust and belief.

A constant temptation for the church is to stay behind closed doors, to create a private and personal Christian domain. On the other side of the church doors are the public and social worlds where humans live when they leave the familiar safe nest of the church. Out there in the "real world," are economic, political, and civic worlds that occupy people for most of their waking hours. Out there in that "real world" many Christians scarcely give their faith a moment's thought. In meeting with Jesus, the disciples are commissioned to become apostles. They're sent out into the world just as God had sent Jesus. Jesus said to them, "As the father has sent me, so I send you." The question for us today is whether we believe and trust that the risen and glorified Christ sends us out as apostles beyond our

closed and locked doors. Are we still hiding in our sanctuary and in our fellowship hall? One way to hide is to ignore other people. Are we hiding from the poor, the hungry, the homeless, and others that our culture shuns? Are we hiding from those of Middle Eastern, Asian, or Hispanic descent?

How are we hiding from Christ's call to reach out with love, hospitality, and compassion to everyone around us? No matter how you are hiding, no matter who you are avoiding or ignoring, no matter how thick the walls you've erected around you, Christ is still seeking you out! Even if you are still hiding, you are still sought! You are still called to leave your comfort zone and go out into the world that surrounds us. There, you and I, each and every one of us, are called to be Christ's love to others. We are called to be the body of Christ, the church. We are called to live as citizens in the kingdom of God. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

As the Father sent Christ, so it is that Christ sends us out.
In whatever way you are hiding, open the door and step out.
Live as Easter Christians, empowered by the resurrection!