

Welcome

Reading: John 20:19-31

19When 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." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So 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."

26A 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." 27Then 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." 28Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

29Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But 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.

Let us pray!

“Sensation and Perception”

As I was meditating on our Gospel story I heard the news about how our government is planning to “reopen” our country after the Coronavirus pandemic. There will be three phases of reopening America. These three phases could start as soon as May, if the numbers of hospitalizations and deaths continue to go in the “right direction”. The three phases of re-opening our country, reminded me of the three scenes that we have in our Gospel reading.

These three scenes show the process of how the Good News spreads, how God uses us in this work, and how Jesus opens up the hearts of those who don’t believe.

Let’s look at the first scene in John. The Resurrected Master, Jesus, appears to his disciples. In the first scene, he greets them twice with the words: “Peace be with you!” He then sends them out into the world to spread the Good News. Jesus doesn’t send them out to work alone, without PPE (personal protective equipment). Jesus empowers the disciples to spread peace. He does this by introducing them to the source of His power. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide them. As a result, the disciples rejoice in the presence of Jesus and start talking about the resurrection.

In the second scene the disciples tell Thomas about the Good News of Easter. They tell him that Jesus is risen from the dead. Thomas seems to be a rational human being. He doesn't believe everything people say. Like most materialists, Thomas doesn't believe what his friends say. He wants physical proof. When the disciples tell him about their experience with the risen Christ, Thomas says: “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.”

Our friend, Thomas, forgets that if you see the mark of the nails and you put your fingers in the wounds, you don’t have to believe! You used your senses to experience an object in space. His sentence basically means: “I cannot believe. I only have faith in what I can perceive with the five senses.”

The third scene is simple. Jesus knows that Thomas has trouble believing the Good News of his resurrection. So Jesus simply appears to Thomas and convinces him of the truth. These three scenes show how Jesus works through us, his modern day disciples to gradually bring awareness of the Good News to everyone, even agnostic materialists.

First, we ourselves have to experience the Good News, like the disciples in our story saw Jesus. We have to meet Jesus. At some point in our lives, we have to become conscious of God's presence and give our lives to Jesus. We have to have a moment of faith. When I was about 16 years old, attending a summer camp in Hungary, I consciously decided that I wanted to follow Jesus. Don't get me wrong. I grew up in church. I was baptized as a baby. I attended Sunday School.

I grew up believing in God. Actually, I don't remember a time when I didn't believe in God or I didn't like church. But, as we grow older, we need a minister, or a spiritual sponsor to introduce us to the life of the Spirit. We need someone to teach us how to pray and express devotion toward God daily. So, when I was sixteen, our minister asked us if we wanted to follow Jesus, and that was all I needed to give my life to God completely. It started a new journey which led me to the seminary and ultimately to be your spiritual guide here at Shiloh UCC.

So, first, we must have a relationship with Jesus. Then, in the second phase, after we have confirmed the power of the Spirit, Jesus sends us out to tell others about that relationship. The second phase is natural. If you discover the Spirit within, you will not be able to keep it to yourself. Your whole life will change. When that happens we must talk about God's love and how that love has changed us. The Spirit becomes so real for us, that we are compelled to share this joy and peace.

However, not everyone will listen. Just like Thomas in our Gospel text, some people will say "I won't believe in God unless you give me some proof." Others will want to debate science, philosophy, and religion with you. Some people are so busy talking that they will never listen with their whole heart. And that's OK.

But a few people will respond. Those who God intended you to meet will open up, and bloom into beautiful souls. Some people will drink in your words and be transformed. Some people will be drawn to you, and not be able to explain why. Your words will resonate with their experience and they will be saved. The Holy Spirit will guide your whole experience.

When these souls connect with your ministry to them, their whole life will change. For this reason, even though it is difficult, Christians must share their faith experiences. It is not easy to do this. But we are a priesthood of all believers. We are all called by God to love in this way. Even if you are shy, you can be empowered by the Holy Spirit to spread the love of God.

I had a good friend in high school who had a hard time believing. She knew I believed in God so we talked about faith a lot. She also enjoyed making fun of me because I decided to go to seminary. She was one of my best friends, so I didn't take her teasing seriously. I just kept telling her about my faith and how she should give her life to Jesus. At the time, I might have been driving her a little crazy with my persistence.

One day she decided to test my faith and slapped me in the face to see if I would give her my other cheek. The stakes were too high. Her soul was on the line, so I just took it, and turned my face to give her my other cheek. To my surprise, she hit that cheek too. I don't think she expected me to react that way. She was very annoyed with me, but for some strange reason we still stayed friends. We studied together for exams and we both had pretty good grades.

After high school we both went on to college. I started seminary right after high school, and she moved to another city to become a teacher. Years later, at a time when we weren't in contact with each other, she called me on the phone to tell me that she gave her life to Jesus. I was ecstatic. She knew I would be happy, and she was right. Her call filled my soul with warmth. This happened about 20 years ago. Even after all this time, we are still good friends. We keep in touch through e-mail and Facebook. She still goes to church and she still has strong faith in God.

This is where our third point comes in. When you can't convince someone about God's existence, when people just can't believe in Jesus, you don't have to worry about them. Just remember what happened to Thomas. When no one else could convince him, there was one person who could give him faith: Jesus.

We don't have the power to give people faith. All we can do is talk about our faith. This is our mission as Christians. At the same time, we don't have to worry about the results. God takes care of the rest. Jesus can convince even the most persistent atheist.

For years and years my good friend in high school listened to me talk about God and just laughed at me. I believe that God started working in her heart way back then. Naturally, I didn't see any of that. I thought she was one of those people who if they walked into church the roof would cave in. ☐ Jesus didn't agree with me. With God, there are no hopeless cases. Thomas wasn't a hopeless case. I wasn't a hopeless case. And you are not a hopeless case either.

Jesus always sees what's in our heart, just like he knew exactly what was in Thomas' heart. But the true hero of our story is not Thomas, it's Jesus. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is patient with his disciples. He doesn't get upset with Thomas. Jesus doesn't tell him; "don't you remember what I told you while we were together?" Jesus simply pays him another visit. He patiently teaches even the one who cannot believe.

Jesus knows that Thomas is a smart man, who doesn't believe easily. Thomas needs a personal experience through his senses to know that what the other disciples said was true. Like my friend, Thomas just needed a little more time to get with the program.

In our Gospel story it's Easter day, it's the day of resurrection. Everything has just happened this morning. The angel or angels just talked with the women. No one can be sure of the truth, except if they had seen Jesus. The story continues in the afternoon. Similarly to last week's Easter story when we heard "Do not be afraid" twice, today we hear the repetition of "Peace be with you." "Shalom Aleichem" is normally an everyday greeting, but in this text it has a deeper meaning. We know this because of Jesus persistent repetition in the text.

If you look at the beginning of the story, we learn that the disciples were behind closed doors, "for fear of the Jews." It's important to look at this expression closer, so we don't think that there is anti-Semitic expression here. In the Gospel of John, the expression "the Jews" is a label for the religious and political leaders in Israel who opposed Jesus.

Ironically, we are all behind closed doors as we deal with the Coronavirus. We may be afraid of our political leaders, but it is more likely that we are afraid of the virus, and its implications for daily life.

So what Jesus says to the disciples is timely for us in modern life. The disciples were terrified that they could get crucified for following Jesus. And we are afraid we could die just for getting food at the market, or gathering at church. Right now, more than ever, we need to hear Jesus say, "Peace be with You." This greeting must have calmed their fears and made them feel safe in the presence of God.

Like the disciples huddling together in the upper room, we are hiding together locked up in our homes. These days we are terrified of an invisible enemy, a tiny little virus that can kill whoever is weak. We need the peace, the "shalom" which doesn't just mean the lack of war, but it also means well being, tranquility, wholeness, and security. We want to feel safe and secure in God's presence.

The good news is that no matter what the circumstances may be, we are safe. We can relax and have faith. We can trust and believe. Remember, there are many things in this world that cannot be proved or verified by the senses. But those intangible expressions of life are the same exact things that make our life beautiful and meaningful: things like hope, faith, love, kindness, joy, and peace.

When the world seems unreliable and anxiety fills our heart, the only sure thing is the peace we find in God. Today we are blessed, for we believe in spite of the fear of the virus. Our faith may get weak sometimes, but God understands our weaknesses.

We cannot see God, touch God, or hear God with our physical ears. God is not a sense object. But we can sense God's inspiration and presence when we pay attention to the space in which sense objects appear. Jesus says: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

In this last beatitude of the Gospels, Jesus points out the obvious: we are blessed when we have faith, despite what we see. No matter what the news on the TV says, our hope and peace is in the risen Christ. So we are blessed when we are able to take a leap of faith, even though the situation in front of us is terrifying.

Jesus says that we are blessed, when we trust God. We are blessed when we have faith, even though our physical eyes may not be able to see Christ yet. We are blessed when we come to church (or listen to a service on the Internet), for we can be in God's presence. We are blessed, for Christ offers healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, joy, and peace to all of us.

Scary viruses come and go, but God is forever. America will reopen eventually, no matter what the doomsday prophets preach. The world is not coming to an end. We will get through this scary time together, because we trust God. Our lives may change because of this virus, but life will go on because God's love is forever. God grants us eternal life, and no lifeless virus can touch the infinite.

Christ's message is real. The Gospel is true. Do you know how I know? It has changed my life. And God still changes people's lives every day. God heals relationships. God calms anxiety and worry. Right now God is teaching us how to appreciate and love each other with more intensity and joy. God can do anything! We just need to listen. We just need to follow. God can even get us through the Coronavirus. Like Thomas, we just have to stop doubting, and believe. :) Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Let us pray! Resurrected Christ, in your presence we find peace. With your help we are brave. In you we find joy. Our fears and doubts vanish when your Holy Spirit inspires us. Your resurrection fills our souls with everlasting hope.

Today help us to believe without seeing, and know your comfort without knowing the future. Open our spiritual eyes that we may see the work of your hand in our lives. Open our hearts that we may feel your presence everywhere we go.

Today we bring our hopes and our tears to you. Heal our country and the whole world. Refresh our spirits and take away our fears. At this time we also intercede for others. We ask you to be with those who are in hospitals, nursing homes, or confined to their own homes. We pray for the people who are grieving a loss. We pray for everyone affected by the Coronavirus outbreak. Be with those generous souls who are selflessly sacrificing for others. We pray all this in the name of our resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Lords' Prayer

Hymn # "Peace I Leave with You, My Friends"

Benediction: Go in peace and may the peace of God go with you! Amen.