

“Easter in Community”

Psalm 133; John 20:19-31 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might let go of our fears
and fall over the edge of joy into your arms of grace and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Everybody knows a Thomas, right? I don't even mean the doubting part. I'm actually talking about the not-doubting part. Because Thomas, as he's described here, seems to be a person with very little self-doubt. He's all in on whatever it is he's in on at the moment. When he's declaring that he won't believe until he sticks his finger in the holes in Jesus' hands, he does it with gusto. No way, not me, never gonna do it. He may be doubting, but he's doing it with conviction. But then, a week later, when faced with Jesus and his offer to stick that finger in, he responds with equal passion in the opposite direction. “My Lord and my God!” he exclaims, without having actually touched anything, as far as we know.

We all know someone like this. You might even be a person like this. And what I love about that is how it makes this shaky community so real. We don't get a lot of detail about the disciples, but the brief glimpses we have show us people acting like real people, with real people personalities and quirks and bad habits. So we get some sense of the zeal with which Thomas approaches life, but there's a lot we don't know. For instance, how did he relate to this story once it was over? Did he try to deny that he had ever doubted? Was he so convinced of Jesus' risen presence and divinity at that point

that he simply couldn't remember ever having doubted it? Or was he self-aware enough to recognize the humor in having come to belief with the same fervor with which he had refused to believe? Is this a man who says to himself "Here I go again!" on a regular basis, or someone who will get testy every time the other disciples bring up his previous rejection of their claims?

We don't know and we can't know, and it's okay. We don't need to know. The community of disciples knew, and probably some of them realized it could have just as easily been them, if circumstances had called them away from the gathering that first Sunday night. The important thing is whether we know it about ourselves and the other people in our own community.

Our psalm talks about how wonderful it is when kindred live in unity, and today I want to talk about what it means to live Easter in community. Because that's really the only way we can live Easter; it's how it works. The story of Thomas only works because of what comes before and after it, showing how the community he was part of and the community he helped give birth to carried him through his week of disbelief.

So let's look at the first part of this story to see how that community worked. First of all, we need to note that whenever it was after that first Sunday night that the disciples told Thomas about what had happened, they didn't kick him out because he didn't believe them. Belief was not a barrier to belonging. That can seem counter to the way Christian communities have structured themselves throughout a lot of history, so let's think about why. I'm guessing it has something to do with what Jesus did when he

arrived, namely the delivery of the Holy Spirit. When Christian communities are truly breathing together of the Spirit of God, we do not need to enforce doctrinal requirements that aim for uniformity rather than fostering unity. What are the other hallmarks of this community that the story hints at?

If you want, pull your Bible back out and follow along as I name the characteristics of true Christian community that are suggested in this story. First of all, the community is one of courage. They were locked in out of fear, but Jesus breaks through fears and transforms them into courage. Then, the first and best thing: peace. “Peace be with you,” he said, and our hearts instinctually respond, “and also with you!” Courage, peace, and then what? He showed them his hands and side. This is a community that doesn’t expect to not suffer; indeed, they were called into solidarity with all who are suffering, into compassion. But it is also a community of healing. Healing does not mean our suffering never happened; it means we come out on the other side, stronger and wiser. After healing, we see the conviction Thomas would later have emerge among the disciples who were present, and it makes itself known in the form of rejoicing. A Christian community is one of conviction and joy.

This is a turning point, where the purpose of Christian community shifts from its impact on us internally toward how it directs our behavior toward others. Because the first thing that peace Jesus gave the disciples – through the power of the Holy Spirit – the first thing that peace makes possible is forgiveness. Jesus tells them what will happen if they forgive, and he tells them what will happen if they don’t forgive. Some

have used this passage to imply that we've been given the power of judgment, the authority to decide who is forgiven and who isn't. But there is another way to read it. I see Jesus telling them to be aware of the power of forgiveness itself, and the equal importance of being aware of the dangerous consequences of not forgiving. If you were to not forgive someone, he warns, they will be trapped. I don't think he's clarifying a choice so much as warning about the consequences of the wrong choice. Christian communities are communities of mercy, of forgiveness and liberation. We are not communities created to trap and contain people in structures of penalty and indebtedness. Our forgiveness is a gift we were freely given, one that we are called to freely share.

And now we are back where we started, with those disciples sharing what happened to them with Thomas. Because it's not just the forgiveness that we are called to share. It's the courage and the peace and the healing and the joy. It is conviction we are called to share, but not in a way that forces belief upon anyone. It's the kind of conviction that is shared by sharing courage and peace and compassion and joy. Because many people who need to be part of our community will, like Thomas, need to experience all that themselves in order to join in the conviction. And not just people who haven't joined the community yet, but us too. Because we all have Thomas moments, don't we? Part of why Christianity happens within communities is that we all have moments when we need the conviction of the community to carry us forward. We all have moments of fear or dis-ease, moments when we can't see the possibility of

healing, moments when joy and compassion have run dry. We pool our conviction of the truth and living presence of these things together into our community, so that when we need to draw upon that well, it is here for us.

And this, of course, brings us to the last part of the story. John, in a manner very different than Mark used last week though with a similar goal, inserts an invitation into the end of his gospel. These last two verses are an explicit entry point for us. We are invited in. I wrote all this down for you, he says, so that you can enter into this community of peace and joy and mercy. I'm telling you all this so that you'll have the courage to believe healing is possible.

I know many of us have some difficulty with the word "believe," especially when it is used like a magic trick to instantaneously fix all your problems. But the word is rooted in the word for love. It is most deeply a call to our hearts. What are you going to give your heart to? John is showing us that a Christian community is one of abundant life. We are being invited to give our hearts to courage and peace and healing and joy and forgiveness – life in Jesus' name. We're being invited to do it together. Whether you can't remember a time you weren't part of a church or whether you can barely believe you're here now, you're being asked to give your heart to life together in Jesus' name, the Easter life, lived in community. Jesus has shown us what that community needs to look like. He has gifted us the Holy Spirit to make it possible. Will we open our eyes and our hearts? Will we open our arms to share this joy? I pray that it will be so. Hallelujah and Amen.