
¹⁹ It was the evening of the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Jesus came and stood among them. He told them, “Peace be with you.” John 20:19-20

He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Have you ever felt like you were misunderstood? When we come to the holy Gospel for this day, we hear of one who is often described as ‘doubting Thomas’.

Every year on this second Sunday of Easter, we read of what occurred one week after the first Easter: Jesus’ appearance to Thomas. Unfortunately, he is often remembered as “Doubting Thomas” although God’s Word never calls him by that name. It is true that God said to Thomas ‘Stop doubting and believe’. But it is also true to say that all the other disciples at that time had their doubts.

Doubting is really not as unusual as we might think! In fact, on that first Easter Sunday evening, there were 10 “doubters” in that upper room (and many more if we were there!) and at least one “doubter” outside! Early that morning, the women had told all of them that the tomb was empty. Not believing the women, Peter and John ran to the tomb and also found it empty. The two disciples walking to Emmaus, after talking with Jesus and finally having their “eyes opened” (Luke 24:31), had returned to Jerusalem and had told these disciples all that had happened to them; and still it wasn’t until Jesus appeared to them that the 10 disciples began to “get the big picture!”

Doubts and fears. This is the story of life for most people. Some of the most famous, and most successful people, have often been filled with fear and doubt. Perhaps that’s what led them to be as creative and successful as they are. Maybe, in the exercise of their intellect and talents, they also remembered what it means to be human. But amidst all the fears that assail us, the Easter message is repeated: “Peace be with you.”

“Don’t be afraid.” This is repeated many times in the Bible: for from the beginning of time (Adam after sinning, telling God, “I heard You in the Garden and I was afraid...” Genesis 3:10) to the revelation God gave to John, in Revelation 1 (the last book of the Bible) John writes: “When I saw Him (the exalted Jesus), I fell at His feet as though dead. Then He placed His right hand on me and said, ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead and behold I am alive forever and ever!...” (v.17-18).

This is also in the Easter Gospel accounts – the women coming to the tomb early because the disciples were hiding for fear of the Jews; the Roman guards when the angel came down from heaven and rolled back the stone and sat on it, “... were so afraid that they shook and became like dead men.” (Matthew 28:4); the women who came to the tomb; when they saw and heard the angel, Mark records for us, “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8) In today’s Gospel reading, Easter evening, “the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews...” John 20:19, and a week later, when Thomas was with them, “the doors were (still) locked...” (v.26) There are hundreds of examples in the Scriptures where an angel of God, and even God Himself, says, “Don’t be afraid.”

Amidst all the fears that assail us, the Easter message is repeated: “Peace be with you.” On the evening of that first Easter, the disciples were together behind locked doors full of fear. “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’” (John 20:19) Notice that this was both an absolution and a promise. These are words of absolution because these were the very guilty disciples who had forsaken Jesus during His arrest, trial and death. Knowing this, these words, “Peace be with you!” are a great blessing in that only Jesus can give; the real peace that drives out fear. He had said to His disciples already on Maundy Thursday, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you. Not as the world gives, do I give unto you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:1)

Note that Jesus’ gift of peace did not immediately change their circumstances. Their situation had not changed but Jesus gave them peace and faith to overcome their fears.

The true peace of the Christian life is not the absence of troubles (we won’t have that until we are in heaven!) Jesus tells us, “These things I have spoken to you that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have troubles, but take heart, I have overcome the world!” (John 16:33)

On that first Easter evening, the fear-full disciples, having received from Jesus the absolution and blessing of peace, “were over-joyed when they saw the Lord.” (v.20) Because of Jesus’ presence with them, they had moved from fear to peace and faith!

The difference between seeing and believing is really the difference between history and faith. Contrary to what many people may think, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is not a matter of faith; it is a matter of history. Either Jesus rose from the dead or He did not, regardless of what you or I may believe. It is not a question that can be decided on the basis of how many people believe it, nor is it something that can be real for those who believe it but only myth for those who don’t.

The reason why Jesus chose to appear to His disciples after His resurrection was to establish the fact that He was indeed risen from the dead. He not only appeared to them; He interacted with them, speaking with them in the same familiar terms as He had done for several years prior to His death. He invited them to handle His wounds and He ate in their presence so that they would know that He was not a ghost or a hallucination. "See My hands and My feet," He told them. "that is I Myself. Touch Me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. And while they still disbelieved it for joy and were marvelling, He said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and He took it and ate before them (Luke 24:39-43). What they saw was not a figment of their imagination--not some illusion that was created out of what they wanted to believe. It was the risen Christ Himself. He is risen indeed! And that is history.

Faith, on the other hand, is something altogether different than history. Faith is not the mere acceptance of certain things as being historical fact; faith is what we trust in and hope for on the basis of the historical facts that we believe to be true. It is possible for a person to believe all of the historical facts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and still not have faith because that person could believe all of those things to be historically true, yet deny that they have anything at all to do with him or her. When we say that we believe in the slain and risen Christ, we are saying a lot more than that we believe that Jesus was killed and rose again; we are saying that we believe that He was "delivered up for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25).

Genuine faith in Jesus Christ is of its very nature a living thing--a growing thing. Like love, it is more than just an emotional feeling; it is a commitment that matures as it withstands the various trials and temptations of life.

Faith in Christ, trusting in Christ, that's why believers are blessed. If you believe in Jesus, you can say with the writer of the book of Hebrews, in chapter 11, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11). There is still a lot we don't see, that's true. There is still a lot to hope for. But because Jesus came to this world--the Son of God in the flesh, because Jesus conquered all temptation and fear, because He overcame death, you have real, lasting hope in Him right now.

You may not see the answer to your challenge at the moment, but you can be assured and convinced of God's continued help and strength. In fact, you may never see struggles completely come to an end this side of heaven, but the Spirit of God will carry you through and you will receive the blessing of relief and restoration, if not now, in eternity. In the final two verses of Hebrews 11, the Bible states that many who have gone before us didn't receive what was promised in this life. But by faith they were blessed eternally.

That's why Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed" (John 20:29). You're blessed when you believe in Jesus, period. You're blessed when you trust in Him.

Doubt happens for a variety of reasons. You hear about something that is contrary to your experience and everything you know, and so naturally you're going to doubt. Whenever you encounter something outside of your range of experience, you are going to have doubt. It's natural. We're wired to see patterns, and when there is a break in the pattern, our minds automatically wonder, "Is that right? Did I see that correctly? Are you sure?"

Jesus knows how to deal with your doubts and your unbelief. That's the message from the Gospel. Jesus knew what Thomas needed to believe – His wounds and His words. He knows what you need too. He's given you the signs in your Baptism, in His Supper, in His Word. John has graciously recorded the signs that He did so that you might continue to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing, have life in His name.

The act of believing in John's Gospel is never a noun, but always a verb. Believing is an action word, and believing in Jesus means to be in relationship with Him. You and I are in relationship with Jesus. In today's Gospel, we learn that God comes to us in His Son Jesus Christ. He comforts us with His peace. He takes away our fear. He gives us His forgiveness. He gives us all of this purely out of divine love for us all.

As we gather today, we have faith in Jesus' promise. We have faith in what God has done. And in that faith, we have hope and peace in this world. In these challenging days, may the Holy Spirit keep our eyes open, beyond our doubts and our fears. Jesus blesses us with his presence, and surrounds us with his love. Though we at times struggle with doubt, Jesus is always faithful. Take strength from Him, so that you too can exclaim with Thomas, your faith with the words, "My Lord, my God!" Amen.