Though the Doors are Locked
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Reebee Girash
April 19, 2020

Text:
Introduction: Today’s scripture reading is about one of several appearances by the risen Christ to his followers. This text about Doubting Thomas can be a difficult one, so before I read it, let me share these words of commentator David Lose by way of introduction:

Perhaps “Jesus isn’t speaking to Thomas nearly as much as Jesus is speaking to us...John is writing for a community of faith that, like Thomas, had never seen the resurrected Christ. Sure, they had the testimony of others, but they hadn’t seen him for themselves. And so perhaps here, right near the climax and close of the Gospel, Jesus doesn’t so much rebuke Thomas as he does bless all those who read this story and come to faith through it.”

One more comment before the reading: in the first sentence, I’ll read a different and more accurate and appropriate translation of a phrase than what you see in your bulletin.
Listen for God’s word to us in
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 [religious authorities], 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.’

24 But 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.’

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.’ 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.’

30 Now 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.

Sermon

Before I jump into my sermon today I want to mention why we changed the reading slightly. The term “for fear of the Jews” has been used along with other phrases in John’s Gospel to justify anti-semitism. It was the Roman government and certain Jewish authorities that persecuted and killed Jesus; to broaden that specific group of people to “the Jews” lends support to prejudice against our Jewish brothers and sisters. We always want to avoid and denounce anti-semitism, and in this moment in particular, we have to avoid and denounce scapegoating and prejudice. In the last few months, because the first known cases of CoVid19 were diagnosed in China, many of our neighbors of Asian descent have been scapegoated. Let’s not stand for that.

My sermon finds its outline in a poem of blessing by UCC pastor Maren Tirabassi. Let me share it with you:

The Blessing of Thomas (…or how to prove that online worship has some resurrection verification)

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29b)
Blessed are the ones, says Thomas,
to those who listen to him
this eastertide,
who don’t need a sanctuary to worship God.
Blessed are those who don’t need a choir
to hear holy music,
and who don’t need to sit in a pew
to open their hearts in prayer,
and who don’t need a stained glass window,
or a preacher or even bread and cup
to find the good news.

Blessed are those who really touch
even with gloves on,
who really smile with a mask,
who can be kind on Facetime or Zoom,
who follow a livestream to find Jesus alive.
But also blessed is the Thomas
in every one of us
who acknowledges our longing
to hold someone’s real warm hand
not just the story of a hand
that reaches out to someone else, and who wants to feel
not Jesus’ long-ago bleeding side
(we congratulate ourselves about that)
but at least to feel side by side
with other Christians
in order to be side by side with Christ.
Blessed is the Thomas in all of us, who lives with doubts and hopes,
and learns to let go of all expectations
when waiting to meet God.
Blessed are the ones, says Thomas,
to those who listen to him
this Eastertide,
who don’t need a sanctuary to worship God.
Blessed are those who don’t need a choir
to hear holy music,
and who don’t need to sit in a pew
to open their hearts in prayer,
and who don’t need a stained glass window,
or a preacher or even bread and cup
to find the good news.

I am amazed and grateful that our congregation is showing up to one another, to worship and to prayer. It is not the same, most of us would like to be in the same room with one another and hear our beautiful organ and see the choir up on the chancel -

And it is also good news that folks are joining us for worship from across the country; and that though our doors are locked and we are staying inside, we are worshipping together. We’re showing adaptability and patience and creativity - we’re offering grace and appreciation.

I think we are even discovering some things about our values as a worshipping community. This is what’s come to me in emails from a bunch of you: that we value authenticity and spontaneity, real time interaction, ritual and pattern - and praying with and for each other. Our online worship is rooted within in-person relationships, so we can connect this way when we need to. And even when we’re back in the sanctuary - we know how we can bring church to folks who can’t come in person.

Blessed are those who really touch
even with gloves on,
who really smile with a mask,

I talked this week with my friend Heather who’s a chaplain at Lahey. They are still walking the halls, meeting with nurses, standing at a safe distance from the 140 CoVid19 patients there and praying with them and praying by phone with their families. (You could email the Lahey chaplains a word of blessing - chaplain@lahey.org) I’ve talked with folks who are doctors or whose family includes nurses or respiratory therapists or PAs. I talked to a family this week who lost someone to this pandemic, but her nurse was a compassionate angel. Blessed are those who make human contact in the midst of a pandemic, though they are overwhelmed themselves. Blessed are those courageous ones who walk into hospitals day after day to offer compassion and healing.

[Bless those]
who can be kind on Facetime or Zoom,
who follow a livestream to find Jesus alive.

I give thanks this day for every one of you who have read stories to children over Zoom; who have called people you’ve never talked to before; who have colored in postcards to send to your Sunday School teachers; who have texted stressed out friends and who have walked the grounds of our church to keep it safe and who have recorded thank you videos for first responders, who have sent Sarah and Dot and Max and Elena and Diane and I supportive emails.

Bless those whose prayer life and spiritual practice have deepened in this time - and bless those of you who, in the three minutes you have to yourselves find yourself too scattered to do much more than breath deeply.

But also blessed is the Thomas
in every one of us
who acknowledges our longing
to hold someone’s real warm hand
not just the story of a hand
that reaches out to someone else,
and who wants to feel
not Jesus long-ago bleeding side
(we congratulate ourselves about that)
but at least to feel side by side
with other Christians
in order to be side by side with Christ.

On a preaching podcast this week , I heard a normally calm, and even sarcastic preacher weeping over the thought that even though the doors are locked, the risen Jesus is here, right here, in our homes, in the midst of this pandemic. We are met by Jesus who gives us peace. For those of us who are sheltering in place, or even quarantining, those of us who are missing our people, the idea that the risen Christ could appear in the midst of our isolation is a balm...in April 2020, John 20 is not about Thomas, it is about us.

Listen folks, I miss you. I am torn, as are many, between yearning to reopen everything and grab every single person I see for a tight hug - and believing that we must not endanger people by reopening everything before there are enough prevention methods and tests and treatments.

Blessed is the Thomas in all of us
who lives with doubts and hopes,
and learns to let go of all expectations
when waiting to meet God.

The gospel “can ignite hope but it does not eliminate fear.” But resurrection means that God shows up. Like Thomas, it’s hard to believe when we have heard it second hand. But God is showing up in our world, and bringing us a message of peace and courage that is ours to hold on to, through it all.

Amen.