

*The Week Between*

By Clara D. Thompson

So, it was Easter night, that first Easter night. The disciples, a group of Jesus' followers that likely, according to scholars, included both men and women, and certainly more than just the "original twelve," they are all huddled together in a locked room like a bunch of frightened children. Though a few have reported having seen the Risen Lord earlier in the day, all of them are likely in a state of both utter confusion and near paralyzing fear. After all, how is it possible that Jesus, their friend, their master, and their Lord, the one whom they saw hanging dead on a cross just a couple of days before, how is it even remotely possible that he is now alive again? And yet, the women tell the tale with conviction and with believing hearts.

We find this group of emotionally battered followers of Jesus locked inside a house, locked inside because of their fear. After all, what if those who crucified their Lord come after his followers next? Would they be considered guilty by association with Jesus? Are the disciples safe from what may still be angry and bitter crowds? Listening nervously for every step on the stair and for every knock at the door, lest the emissaries of the Sanhedrin should come and arrest them too, this group of men and women who have been following Jesus huddled together in fear and trepidation. Suddenly and to their amazement and wonder, in their very midst the Risen Christ appears among them, and he didn't even use the doorway. "Peace be with you," Jesus says to them, and he shows them his hands and his side ... he shows them the marks of his crucifixion. It was then that the disciples caught on quickly, and the Gospel writer tells us that the disciples "rejoiced when they saw the Lord." Jesus again speaks to them offering peace, and he breathes on them and invites them to receive the Holy Spirit.

Pretty amazing, isn't it? If you and I had been there, I suspect we'd have been pretty excited about it. We'd make sure that all of the disciples, all of the men and women and children who had been following Jesus over the past three years, heard about it. Well, as the story goes, Thomas, one of the original twelve disciples, missed out on Easter night. We don't know where he was, but for whatever reason Thomas wasn't with the others when Jesus made his first appearance to the gathered disciples. And when Thomas does hear the reports of his colleagues, he finds it utterly unbelievable. "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" (John 20:25), thus gaining the nickname Doubting Thomas.

The Biblical account in the Gospel According to John then jumps like a leapfrog all the way over to the next Sunday ... "A week later (Jesus') disciples were again in the house" (John 20:26a). Let's pause here for a minute. Have you ever wondered what happened during that week between? During the curiously "silent" week between that first Easter night when Jesus made his original appearance before the disciples (when

Thomas wasn't there) and the next week when Jesus appeared again, this time with Thomas being present? Before we hop like an Easter Bunny ahead a full week, let's imagine together what must have happened during that week between the two Sundays, particularly with regards to Thomas and how he, the one who doubted, was likely treated by the others who had witnessed the resurrection of Jesus with their very eyes.

Well, we know that Thomas was clearly still welcome the following Sunday, so the earliest disciples must not have shunned him during that week just because he didn't believe what they were trying to tell him. He was not, apparently kicked out of the group. He was still welcome, even with his unbelief. Even though he didn't believe exactly what the others believed, exactly what the majority believed; even though he questioned the resurrection – the very foundation of the Christian faith! – he was still apparently welcomed by the other disciples. He was still included in the community, even with his doubts.

Hmmm ... that ought to teach us something. That ought to remind us that all should be welcome in the community – even here at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Madison, WI – they ought to be welcome whether they believe exactly the same as others or not. My friends, what is left out of this Biblical story, but what can be deduced by faithful speculation, teaches us a great deal about acceptance, and hospitality, and kindness, and generosity of spirit. It says to me, and perhaps it will say to you, that when someone is going through a time of doubt, or when someone just flat out doesn't believe just the way you or I do, that doesn't mean that we emotionally or physically or spiritually cast them aside. Golly, I've gone through periods of doubt in my life, and sometimes they are more than fleeting. Perhaps you have gone through those challenging and dark times also. Well, fortunately, God in Christ, and the Church when it is at its very best, keeps the welcome mat out in clear sight. We keep the door wide open; we remain that open and faithful and welcoming community. And we do so, without badgering the one who sees things differently. I am guessing that the disciples who had met the Risen Lord on that first Easter night, who had received the peace of the Lord, likely talked with Thomas about what they had seen and heard, but they did so without *harassing* him or trying to badger him into believing as they did. It appears that those who had seen the Risen Lord accepted Thomas even with his doubts, included him, remained his friend, even though they didn't agree on a matter as critical as the resurrection of the Lord. They included him and, apparently, he wanted to be included – even with his doubts.

Kristin Johnston Largen writes in *Feasting on the Gospels* and with regards to the peace which Jesus offers to the gathered disciples on that first Easter night, and she says, "Jesus' peace is the sort that brings back into the fold the outcast and the marginalized." She then goes on to push it still further when she writes that Jesus' peace turns upside down the societal conventions of first and last, blessed and cursed, rich and poor. Jesus' peace invites the lion to see the lamb as neighbor and friend, the Jew to speak with the Samaritan, and the prostitute to dine with the Pharisee. Such actions," she writes, "show, to those with eyes to see, a new way of being in the world, a vision inspired by the inbreaking of the kingdom of God present in Jesus' very existence." (*Feasting on the Gospels, John, Vol. 2, page 322*) That's what it means to

be the Church. That's what it means to Body of Christ. That's what it means to be a disciple of the Risen Lord. To welcome all into community.

Another thing that I find interesting about this scripturally "silent" week between the two Sundays, is that Jesus apparently gave Thomas some space as well. Jesus didn't show up in Thomas' living room on Monday morning and say, "Come on Tom, it's me. Don't you believe now?" Thomas was given time, time by the disciples, and time by Jesus, to work through his disbelief, to live with his doubt, to struggle with his need for some kind of "proof," all the while remaining a part of the community, still within the circle of Jesus' followers, still a disciple.

And then, I suspect when Jesus felt that Thomas might be ready, Jesus appeared again. "A week later (Jesus') disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them ... 'Peace be with you,'" he said (20:26). Peace, even for Thomas. Peace, even to the one who doubted. And upon seeing the Risen Lord himself, and without needing to touch Jesus, though he was offered the opportunity, Thomas then made that great proclamation of faith, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Jesus said on that first Easter night, "Peace be with you." And then he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21) My friends, the good news of Easter is not simply an assurance that God has conquered death, it is also a call to action. As Elizabeth Johnson writes, "It is always also a statement about mission. Jesus' resurrection implicates us in mission by drawing us into the orbit of God's love for the world and empowering us by the Spirit to love as God loves." (*Feasting on the Gospels, John, Vol 2*, p. 322) Brothers and sisters in Christ, you and I are called to love and to welcome, and to love all and to welcome all, regardless of their theological leanings, political opinions, personal views on any of the myriad of issues that are debated in the newspaper or around your dining room table. We are called to love and to welcome, without exception. So how will you live this coming week, this week between the Sundays? How will you be a witness to the Risen Lord? "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe" ... even through us. Yes Lord, even through us. Amen.