

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** John 20:19-31

*Jesus Appears to the Disciples*

<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

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

<sup>26</sup> 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."

<sup>27</sup> Then 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." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The little boy cried out over and over: "Mom, where are you?!" He was walking back and forth in the front of the store. People with shopping carts full of milk, bread, fruit, and other household items rattled past the frantic boy as they raced to wait in line for a check out spot. The boy decided to stop yelling and just look. So, he walked to the front of each aisle and peered down the long trek to see if his mother and her cart were present. He went to the first aisle and saw nothing but potato chips and an old man in an automatic shopping cart. He went to aisle two where three college kids were arguing over who would pay for the stuff in the cart, but no mom.

As he walked to the third aisle he began to wonder what had happened. He had just come from aisle three. That's where all the fruit snacks were. He was looking at them and then she was gone. He looked down the aisle and she wasn't there either. The little boy got another pain in his stomach. It felt like bees were flying in his stomach and were trying to get out. He started to cry a little more. "Mom where are you," he questioningly cried out as he looked down aisle four.

Had she left him at the store all by himself? Had she decided he was too much trouble to feed—all he had asked for was fruit snacks!? Had she left the store to head home and forgot all about him? He felt sad. He felt scared. He felt a little angry.

Just as he reached aisle five, he noticed a man in a blue vest putting cans onto a shelf. He walked silently up to the man who obviously worked at the store. Who else would be putting cans on the shelf instead of taking them off? The little boy walked up to him and just as he approached the man looked down.

"I think my mom left me at the store or got abducted by aliens or something," the boy said to the can stacking wizard of aisle five. The man looked down at the boy with one eyebrow

cocked higher than the other. The little boy started to cry a little. His mom was gone and he couldn't find her.

"Now what makes you think that?" he asked as he knelt down in the middle of pallets of canned peas.

"Well," the boy answered, "I was looking at fruit snacks and then she was gone. I asked her if we could get some and then she just was gone."

The man in the blue vest slowly got up from his kneeling position. Ever so slowly. The boy heard him grunt a little as he came to his feet. "Let's see if we can find her."

"We won't find her," the little boy said right away, "I have looked all over the world and she is just plain gone." The little boy pointed back the way he came. "She's not anywhere."

The man in the blue vest took the little boy by the hand and headed towards aisle six. There were in fact twenty aisles in this grocery store warehouse. "So, what makes you think that your mom left without you?"

"Because I don't see her"

"Has she ever accidentally left you anywhere before" the man asked.

"No."

"Has she ever been abducted by aliens before," the man asked as they passed aisle seven.

"Not that I know of."

"So why would you doubt her now? I am sure she is here and we just have to find her," the man said as he walked up to a small stand at aisle ten. He talked with a super tall man with a bushy mustache who also had on a blue vest, but had a huge button on it with all kinds of stickers. The guy also had a radio the size of a dictionary attached to his belt. After a minute, an announcement came over the store that echoed down the aisles. It sounded crackly and garbled. He thought he heard... "boy... lost... ten..."

Just as the announcement was blasting over the store, announcing to the world that his mother had left him to fend for himself with nothing but a box of fruit snacks to eat. His mother appeared with her full cart around the corner of aisle fifteen. His baby sister was bouncing up and down in the seat of the cart sucking on a bottle and sporting a different outfit than she had on when they entered the store.

"Mom!" the little boy cried out and sprinted down the four aisles to meet his mother.

"Mom I thought you left without me," the little boy said as he hugged his mom beside the cart. The man in the blue vest walked up then too.

"Honey I asked you to follow me to the bathroom so I could change your sister," his mother looked down and hugged him. "I thought you heard me. I looked around after I changed her and didn't see you. I went to the fruit snack aisle and you weren't there." His mom smiled.

"I forgot," the boy said.

"See," the man with the blue vest said, "there was no reason to doubt. Here she is and all is well."

"Honey I have never left you anywhere before, have I," his mother asked.

"No."

"Well then I hope you learned something about me today," his mother said as she looked down at her now non-frantic son.

His mom thanked the man in the blue vest as he began to walk away. The tall man with the mustache and the huge radio also got some thanks from her. "Hey mom," the little boy asked, "Can we get some fruit snacks?"

In John's Gospel, we are given a glimpse into the disciples' world on the evening of the resurrection. They were staying together in a place, and John says, "the doors were locked, for fear of the Jews." They were afraid. They were so full of fear that they were hiding. The shock of what happened to Jesus gripped them with doubt and unbelief. How could this have happened? The crucifixion of Jesus was a totally unexpected outcome of the ministry they were working on with Jesus. They had to wonder whether they, as associates of Jesus, would be hunted down and made to suffer and die just as Jesus did.

Oh, and how about that unbelievable story Mary Magdalene told them about the empty tomb, and the man, she said was Jesus, who spoke to her outside the tomb! How could that be? Everything they knew about death told them that rising from the dead is not possible. Sure, Jesus brought people back to life, which was totally amazing; but this time he was the one who died. Could he really come back to life?

Confusion about what to do next had to feel overwhelming. They gave up everything to follow Jesus, now what? They were not the same people they were before they met Jesus. He changed them, but now, what were they to do? Where would they go? Who would lead them? If you ask me, they had good reasons to feel afraid. Obviously, they knew they could not stay in hiding.

Fear, once it gets a grip on someone, can have a paralyzing effect on him or her. No doubt there are many, many things that instill fear into our being. Wars abound, although they may be occurring in distant lands, we fear it could happen here. Our fear closes doors to dialogue with potential threats and denies opportunities to build bridges that cross the divide.

But, let us not ignore the reality that this same dysfunctional behavior happens in our immediate lives. We can become prisoners to fear in our own neighborhoods because of crime. We live in a society where many feel on edge, creating inaccurate notions of suspicion towards those who are different from us. Fear feeds our ignorance and prejudices; rather than looking for real solutions to issues that hit at the heart of violence and crime. We look for quick fixes, not real lasting, heart-changing solutions.

Marriages and family structures fall apart because of fear. Financial instability, alcohol or drug abuse, infidelity, threaten the feeling of security in our relationships. We can become prisoners to our fear of illness and death. Fear of failure at some pursuit may hold us back from trying something new.

John tells us that the disciples had the door of where they were staying, locked and they were hiding in fear. What fears do you have that keep you behind locked doors in hiding?

John goes on to tell us that there is a key to unlocking that door. He tells us that Jesus, came to be among them, and said, "Peace be with you!" He said it not just once, but twice, perhaps for emphasis, or maybe because they were awestruck that he was there and he knew they needed to hear him say it again. Jesus recognized the disciples' overwhelming feelings of doubt, unbelief and fear that were a result of all that had happened that last couple of days. He knew that even the story Mary told them of having seen the risen Lord, perplexed them.

Yet, he brings to them the much-needed encouragement of peace to help overcome their fear, not only through spoken words, but also as he breathed onto them, the Holy Spirit; and he instructs them to go out into the world to continue God's mission. He spoke words about forgiveness. Perhaps reminding them of God's sovereignty, and they then are the ones called to point people to him, even those who seem so undeserving of God's love and saving grace.

But, I found myself wondering also if these words of forgiveness were also not meant to communicate that they would find freedom from their anger and fears over what happened only

as they would let God handle the judgement. Unforgiveness holds people captive to doubts and fear.

The feeling of peace is what we all long for when situations arise, when our world is rocked, when dreams are shattered, and we are gripped by fear. Peace not only brings a calmness to our being, but it gives us hope by bringing light into our darkness. It helps to bring an appropriate perspective, a sense of order to the disruption in our lives. Peace offers us direction in moving ahead with our lives. This much needed peace is ours as Christ stands with us.

Now, the text also tells us the story of Thomas. He was not present the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples. He indicated that he would not believe they had actually seen Jesus, until he had the opportunity to see Jesus and put his fingers into where the nails had been. Thomas really gets an undeserving bad rap for this. Thomas really was no different than the others; he just hadn't been with the others the first time Jesus appeared to them.

Who among us, having the foundation of our beliefs about the finality of death in this lifetime, would not have the same doubts? Honestly?

The story goes on to tell us Jesus appeared to the disciples again; and this time, Thomas was present. Jesus not only offers him the same peace he offered once again to all the disciples, he offers him the proof Thomas sought by inviting him to put his finger into the holes in his hands where the nails had once been. But Thomas didn't need that extra proof. His doubt about the risen Lord was erased when he saw Jesus. In fact, as far as we know, he was the only one that verbalized recognition that the one standing before him was Jesus.

People look to experiences to provide the proof we need to overcome our doubts and fears. Even self-confessed Christians feel this need. The felt need for proof is the only thing that will allow some people to truly believe in the risen Lord. Jesus tells us that this is backward thinking. Believing involves a stronger power, and that power is faith. With faith, we choose to believe.

We have the written word to tell us the stories and give us insight and guidance in developing our faith. The word heightens our awareness of what to look for to find Jesus in our lives. Without belief in the risen Savior, we will not avail ourselves to the experiences we seek in making Jesus more real to us.

Doubt can get in the way of our ability to believe in the risen Savior who stands with us through even the most trying of circumstances, offering us peace, thereby, paralyzing us then with fear, leaving us to hide behind locked doors. That's not living, is it? None of us wants to be paralyzed by fear that holds us back from enjoying the life God has given us. Likewise, all of us seek purpose in life, but if we are hiding behind locked doors because we are afraid of what we might encounter or because we are afraid we will fail, we never discover our purpose and feel fulfillment in life.

As Christians we know that God has given us gifts and talents to use to help point the way for others to find him. Yet our doubts and fears hinder the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to fill us to help us and guide us to use those gifts. That leaves Christians to question their worth; but it's not God who says we are worthless—it is ourselves, when filled with doubt feeding our fears, which allow then the doors to our lives to be locked, trying to keep Jesus out.

But Jesus never gives up on us. He walks into our lives, we may try not to notice; but I suspect those feelings we get that tell us we should be doing something, really are our awareness on some level of our being, that Jesus is there.

The disciples did not remain behind locked doors. They overcame their doubts. Of course, seeing the resurrected Christ helped with that, but even so, they had to overcome their

doubts in their abilities to continue the mission of spreading the Gospel, and their fear of what might happen to them. They had to choose to believe that Jesus would continue to be with them. They had to choose to believe that, like Jesus, they would have an everlasting life. Then as they believed, they experienced his peace and his guiding presence. Their faith grew stronger and the fears they might have encountered did not overwhelm them.

To know God exists, to know the resurrected Christ, to know that one is never alone, to know life does not end in with this lifetime is to first choose to believe. Are you choosing to believe, to push through any doubts you may have; or that may arise sometime down the road of your life? Choose to believe in the resurrected Christ, walk in faith, and any doors of fear will be unlocked, and you will experience the peace Christ brings to all areas of your life. Amen.<sup>1</sup>