

“By Faith Alone”
John 20:19-31

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Being sheltered at home is helping me read scripture in a whole new lens, bringing my new perspective to an ancient text. In the before times, whenever I read this story from the gospel John, I'd jump right to Doubting Thomas and focus on why it was that he needed so much convincing that Jesus had returned to the disciples. But this week I barely noticed Thomas. I was taken with the start of the story, with the image of the disciples locked away in their house together in the days following Jesus' death and resurrection, a resurrection they had no knowledge of, locked away and filled with fear.

Has this scene ever been more relatable? A small group gathered at home together, sequestered away from the outside world, afraid of what might come for them, afraid for their safety and their lives if they dared to unlock the doors and go outside. This is a gospel story for the moment we are living in! Here in Michigan most of us are about to start our sixth week sheltered at home. Each week feels different but I'm starting to forget why I ever spent so much time outside of my house. Each of us has developed new fears in these six weeks, whether it is for our own health and safety, the health and safety of loved ones, or fear of what is to come or how long this will last. We are a people that knows what it means to be sequestered inside, carrying fear with us.

The Good News we hear in this story is that there is no kind of door or lock that can keep out Jesus. He comes in and greets the disciples, as if they were expecting him, as if they didn't believe he was dead and separated from them forever. As if they weren't secretly also a little ashamed about the way they each abandoned him and betrayed him just days ago.

Jesus breaks down that barrier of fear and reaches the disciples, offering them words of comfort by saying, “Peace be with you,” allowing them to see his wounds, assuring the disciples that it is really him. A week later Jesus does the exact same thing, showing up once again to greet Thomas, to bring that same message of peace, and offering Thomas that same gentle proof of life that he gave to the other disciples.

What we hear in this story is that Jesus shows up after Easter morning is over, and he keeps coming back. Jesus has not left us. God has not left us. Humanity has certainly tested the limits of grace beyond our own comprehension—we have caused senseless violence and repeatedly hurt one another and the earth beyond belief—but still God remains with us. Jesus keeps coming back. Every time we gather together, it doesn't matter whether it is grand or humble, a mega-church or a mini-church, in a sanctuary or tucked away in our individual homes. Every time we pray, God's spirit is there. Every time we are filled with fear of what lies outside, we are answered by Jesus saying, “Peace be with you.”

“Peace be with you” is not a light-hearted greeting meant to be thrown around without care. When Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” he is saying “You are going to be okay. You are not alone. You are not in trouble. I am right here with you.”

If “Peace be with you” were used in geology, it would be used to describe that moment when carbon crystals, deep in the earth, are under severe pressure. They are under so much pressure with so much heat from all sides that it appears at any second they will combust into dust. And in that moment, when it seems there is no other alternative and the pressure and the heat are more than the carbon crystal can withstand—in that moment, instead of turning into dust, it turns into a diamond. It's like mother nature says, “Peace be with you. You are more than

the pressure and the heat, you are something beautiful and precious. You have peace within you.”

When it feels as if nothing good can come from us, or when we are so filled with fear we can no longer see beyond it, we are offered peace. It is a message of transformation and redemption. It is given freely, without qualifications or requirements. “Peace be with you” allows us to start over after a horrible day. It allows us to undo our mistakes—to turn something negative into something positive, to turn apathy into compassion and destruction into creation. “Peace be with you” are the words that allow us to pray that this will be the time we finally get it right. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says, knowing these words will be life renewing and soul-sustaining to anyone who hears them.

Today’s scripture ends with the disciples still at home, but that is not the end of their story. When the disciples are filled with faith in Christ who is always with them they are able to conquer their fear, go out into the world, and spread the news of God’s love with everyone they meet.

I’m not suggesting we go out into the world today. It might be a long while before we can do that, and staying put in this moment is an act of love for our neighbors as well as for ourselves. But that does not mean we cannot reach out with love to one another. We can call someone and remind them that love is stronger than fear. We can write a letter to someone letting them know they are not alone. We can send a message of encouragement and hope, so that when the time comes to go out once more, we will be strong. We will be hopeful. We will be grounded in love. We will be able to continue to share Jesus’ message in our words and actions, saying, “Peace be with you” in classrooms and boardrooms and restaurants and assisted living dining

rooms and church sanctuaries and beyond. This Eastertide season we are called to remember that love is stronger than death, love is stronger than fear, and love binds us together in the body of Christ no matter what. Peace be with you, friends. May the words of Christ comfort us and unite us in our resolve to love our neighbors, love God, and love ourselves. Amen.