

Are You Ready to Change the World  
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John 20:11-31 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>11</sup> Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. <sup>12</sup> She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. <sup>13</sup> The angels asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” She replied, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they’ve put him.” <sup>14</sup> As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.”

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabbouni” (which means *Teacher*). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, “Don’t hold on to me, for I haven’t yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, ‘I’m going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, “I’ve seen the Lord.” Then she told them what he said to her.

<sup>19</sup> It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” <sup>22</sup> Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.”

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn’t with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> The other disciples told him, “We’ve seen the Lord!” But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.”

<sup>26</sup> After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!” <sup>28</sup> Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus replied, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.”

<sup>30</sup> Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. <sup>31</sup> But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

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Last week we celebrated a wonderful, joyous and unusual Easter. For some it was unsettling and disappointing because so many traditions and comforts were affected.

With a sense of foreboding, some did their best to observe the holiday as best as one can when they're ill, isolated, quarantined or fearful.

Others found it enlightening – relating to that same fear and discombobulation that we know the disciples and followers of Jesus must have been feeling on Easter Sunday, two thousand years ago.

I pray that everyone found comfort and hope in the Risen Christ – the one who overcame death and in doing so opened up limitless possibilities for joy.

Today, we continue the Easter story in the gospel of John and there was a lot going on in the hours and days following Jesus crucifixion. The world was in chaos. The Roman Empire was already oppressive and stress-inducing on a regular basis, but now with the crucifixion of Jesus – what will happen? Jesus said this would happen, but now that it's happened – what? Emotions overwhelmed – uncertainty, fear and doubt prevailed.

Fear is a powerful human emotion. It shuts all kinds of doors in our lives. It shuts the door on people who are different from us, making us see them more as a threat than a friend. It shuts the door on opportunities that could lead to wonderful new chapters in our lives. Fear causes us to react to the unknown rather than see it through the eyes of God – letting in doubts that were never there before.

So often I mention context when we engage the scriptures. What was the reality THEN? What were the thoughts and attitudes about jobs, diseases, government, relationships, faith, etc. Now, perhaps more than ever, it feels like our CONTEXTS are more closely aligned than ever. Our world is in chaos. We are locked behind closed doors. When will this all end? Our emotions are overwhelming; dominated by uncertainty and fear and doubt.

That day, the disciples locked themselves in the house for fear of what Jesus' opponents might do to them. Jesus had been nailed to the cross; what hope did they have? But really, the lock on the door was unnecessary. Fear was enough to keep them locked up tight. They weren't going anywhere.

Then Jesus showed up. He didn't knock on the door. He didn't ask them if it was okay for him to come in. He just appeared – miraculously, **through** a locked and barricaded door. John tells us, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"

After that Jesus "showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." The gospel does not paint us a full picture of this event. It would be great to know more about precisely how the disciples reacted when Jesus first appeared among them, but John didn't see the need for that. Jesus appeared and that seemed to be enough.

John, however, does tell us the really important things. In what can be thought of as a prequel to Pentecost, Jesus spoke to his disciples: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then Jesus breathed on them. --- He breathed on them. How ironic that we're now experiencing a pandemic in which "breathe" is completely being reconsidered. Our mortal existence depends on breathing, yet we're putting up barriers so that your breathe won't potentially kill me and vice versa. How comforting to think of taking in such a healing, yet powerful breath, from Jesus. Breathe on me breathe of God.

Of course, we know that just a few weeks later the Holy Spirit would come in a powerful way with a sound like the rush of a violent wind on the day of Pentecost. Three thousand people came to believe that day. The disciples ministered in powerful ways, and Peter preached an amazing sermon. Would any of that have happened that day if Jesus had not appeared to the disciples on that day and breathed on them? We don't know.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and he instructed them, "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven." Jesus' crucifixion had addressed all sin for all time; it is finished. To the disciples he empowered them to share that truth with the world.

In the Greek, the words used by Jesus were Aphiemi and Krateo.

- Aphiemi = release. Let people know they are released of their sins.
- Krateo = retained/seized. If they are not released of their sins - let people know that God has retained and seized hold of them. They are God's now.

While there are many differing ideas about the exact intent and meaning of Jesus' words here about forgiving sins, what we can say with certainty is that Jesus was assuring the disciples that there was a vital place for them in his kingdom and in his ministry.

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Ten disciples were fully on board with Jesus. Judas had taken his own life, and Thomas was not in the room when Jesus appeared to the other disciples. When they told Thomas what they had seen and heard, he said, "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." "Doubting Thomas," we say. But actually, scripture does not say he doubted Jesus. He doubted the disciples who told him what

they had seen. We've all done that very thing. Someone tells us something fantastic, and we say, "I'll believe that when I see it."

A wonderful part of this account is the way Jesus addressed Thomas' reservations. He knew what Thomas was thinking. So, when he met Thomas, he said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." For the other disciples, Jesus appeared and that was enough. They then felt his breath and were empowered. And now with Thomas, who was absent in those moments, Jesus gives the reassurance of touch.

Right now for us, touch can be dangerous and deadly. We long for touch and we need touch, just as Thomas did; a familiar and reassuring touch – physical connection. Jesus lovingly welcomes Thomas into a vulnerable and raw moment. For anyone who has suffered a physical injury and been left scarred, think about that intimacy. Saying to another person "touch my wounds, place your hands on my scars."

Jesus did not scold Thomas for his unbelief and his doubts. Jesus took them seriously and showed Thomas what he needed to see. "Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered, "My Lord and my God!"

We should not be ashamed of doubts. While they can lead us away from God, once our doubts are answered (not necessarily resolved, but answered in some way that makes it possible for us to go on), we may become stronger in our faith. God is bigger and stronger than our doubts.

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Interestingly, John's next words in his gospel state that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, but John said he did not write all these down. Then he wrote, "But these things are written 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." I wonder if it occurred to John that, just as Thomas had doubts, perhaps others would have doubts as well. So John wrote his gospel in order that everyone — the doubters, the unbelievers, the scoffers, the "I don't think any of this is true" crowd, the seekers, the pessimists and the optimists, that everyone — may come to believe and have life in Jesus' name.

One thing we know for sure is that this small band of disciples, including Thomas, became agents of change for God in the world. At his ascension, Jesus told his followers, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The day of Pentecost saw the beginning of the church. The disciples went to the far corners of the world preaching and teaching. The frightened disciples became world-changers.

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Are you ready to change the world?

Thomas and the others were firsthand witnesses to the power of God at work. After seeing, touching Jesus and taking in the breathe of the Holy Spirit, their lives could never be the same again! Because of the Risen Christ, your life and my life can never be the same again either. What Jesus promised and accomplished through the cross and the resurrection, and what the Holy Spirit began on the day of Pentecost, continues to be at work in believers and in the world even today.

Despite fear, uncertainty and doubt Jesus overcame death and empowers us. Sins are forgiven. God has seized hold of all our sins (past, present and future) and removed those burdens from us. Jesus Christ is Risen.

The disciples overcame their fears and doubts to spread that message to all corners of the earth. As believers in the Risen One, we will not let uncertainty and doubt, not even a virus, keep us locked away in fear – we will be courageous and bold, sharing the good news. What God did in and through the disciples then, he does in and through us today.

AMEN