

Psalm 133; John 20: 19-31 *Thanks to Thomas*

A Song of Ascents.

How very good and pleasant it is  
 when kindred live together in unity!  
 It is like the precious oil on the head,  
 running down upon the beard,  
 on the beard of Aaron,  
 running down over the collar of his robes.  
 It is like the dew of Hermon,  
 which falls on the mountains of Zion.  
 For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Using the language of familial ties, “kindred,” this Psalm extols the beauty of the unity of the whole people of God as one family. Mt. Hermon was a mountain that was famous for its abundance of dew, and it was in the north, when the people of Israel were divided into the northern and the southern kingdoms.

Mt. Zion, God’s place, was in the south. Imagine the dew of Mt. Hermon in the north falling on Mt. Zion, God’s holy mountain in the south. (The best I can do is the abundant snow in the mountains of La Cueva falling gently here in the valley.) The people who had been divided and apart are brought together, as God’s family to live together in unity. It is this unity that God desires and on this community of God’s household God bestows the blessing of “life forevermore.”

That deep desire of God was not lost on Jesus, who was a Son after his Father’s own heart. So, God sent Jesus into the world divided against itself and against its Creator, that the world might come to know how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity and so to enjoy the blessing of “life forevermore.”

In the Gospel, we are reminded that while Jesus was still with the disciples, he told many things to them that were to come, though they didn’t understand then what Jesus was talking about. Jesus spoke of hard things, like the destruction of the Temple, by which he meant his body, and that he would be betrayed and killed, and even the persecution and hostility the disciples would suffer for following Jesus, carrying their own cross.

But above and beyond all that, Jesus talked about how he would, when he is taken up from this earth, draw all people to himself. Do you remember Jesus saying that? He said that when his soul was troubled because of what was about to happen to him, betrayal and death,

because Jesus never forgot why God sent him to the world: to redeem the world, that all may live together in unity and have life in him.

Now, on this Second Sunday of Easter, we are just starting to see how this would unfold; how it unfolded for the first disciples, and how it continues to unfold for you and me, shaping us as Easter people, that is, people who would come to trust Christ without having seen the resurrected Jesus. Hear now, the Gospel according to John, chapter 20: 19-31.

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 Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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.'

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.' 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.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 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.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But 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.

"When it was evening on that day," it starts. What day was that? That day was the day when early in the morning, while it was still dark Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, only to find that the stone to the tomb had been removed as was Jesus' body. She rushed to tell Peter and the other disciple that someone had taken Jesus away. They ran to the tomb and saw it was just as Mary had said; then they returned home. But not Mary, she lingered, lost in deep grief. That is when Jesus appeared to her, making himself recognizable by calling her name. Then Jesus told Mary to go tell "his brothers" the disciples, that he is ascending to his Father and their Father, his God and their God," acknowledging their familial ties; they are a family now. Mary went and told the 'brothers,' "I have seen the Lord."

So, all that had happened on that day. They heard Mary tell them that she had seen Jesus, and yet, they apparently didn't believe her, because they were huddled together in a room,

“locked up” by the fear of the authority and the power-that-be, who could come after them and take their lives, too, just as they did to Jesus.

And into that room Jesus came and stood among, bringing Peace. Peace was what Jesus had promised to give to them while Jesus was still with them. We don't know the disciples' reaction when Jesus came, but without missing a beat, without giving them a chance to express their unbelief, Jesus proceeded to show them his hands and his side, AND THEN the disciples rejoiced, when they could see it WAS the Lord.

It is as if Jesus knew that they wouldn't have believed Mary's witness that she had seen the Lord. It is as if Jesus knew that they wouldn't be able to recognize and “see” it was truly him unless they saw his wounds.

Now it was their turn to tell Thomas “We have seen the Lord,” for he was missing when this happened. And just as Mary had told them and they didn't believe, they told Thomas and Thomas wouldn't believe them. But Thomas had a chance to express his unbelief and what it would take for him to believe, because a week passed before Jesus came to them again.

This time, just as he did before, Jesus came bringing peace. And he went straight to Thomas and encouraged him to do exactly what Thomas had said he would need to do before he believed. Just as he did for the others a week before, Jesus also offered to Thomas what he needed to move from the place of unbelief to belief. We call him “Doubting Thomas,” but he and the other disciples were no different. Had it not been for Thomas articulating his inability to believe, we might have assumed that others did not struggle to believe that Jesus had been raised.

So it is Thanks to Thomas, who doubled down on his refusal to believe when others didn't acknowledge or express it, we are reminded that Jesus doesn't select as his disciples those whose faith had been tested and proven “strong enough.” Jesus comes to anyone who would follow him, and HE EMPOWERS THEM so they actually can follow him, aiding and enabling his disciples where their own faith or ability fall short. And if that's how Jesus dealt with them then, that's how Jesus would deal with us now. That's how Jesus draws all people to himself... The risen Christ, merciful and gracious, came to unlock the hearts of the disciples by removing the blinding fear, the fear of the power-that-be, the fear of losing their lives like Jesus did, the fear that prevents them from seeing Jesus for who he was, their risen Lord. By doing so, Jesus enabled them to see that in raising Jesus, God has conquered death. So, fear not.

For the disciples, Jesus' death on the cross was so definite, so final, that it sent them to the depth of sorrow and despair. And that's where Jesus meets us still, when we are paralyzed by fear and despair, by coming to us, ready and willing to do what it takes to draw us to him, showing them the wounds he sustained for our sake, so we may open our hearts and trust in his saving love and share in the "life forevermore."

And the Easter message doesn't stop there. Easter as the Resurrection Effect continues to unfold. Having removed fear from their hearts, Jesus then empowered them by breathing upon them his own breath, sending them out into the world just as God had sent him.

That empowering, comes in the form of a new life, a new creation no matter where we are in our life's journey and what conditions we may be in; we're given a life free of fear and hence open to receive peace, even, and especially when we are most fearful and despairing; that's Easter unfolding in our lives, as we, our whole being, with our frail and failing bodies, with our questioning and questionable minds, with our sighing spirit now imbued with the divine Spirit, have been given new life with purpose, and hence meaning.

In our life of faith, that unbelief, that doubting and questioning shows not in our belief in Jesus as the risen Christ, but in our belief that we are good enough, faithful enough, strong enough to do anything significant and impactful as God's emissary for this broken and fearful world.

I have a friend, around my age, who has dedicated her life to helping others. She'd established an organization to help children after a disaster. She's created programs for children to live with grief and raised millions of dollars, and her model was used by even larger organization; the impact of what she started multiplied.

She was recently diagnosed with a debilitating and progressive cognitive disease. As she watched the suffering of the children in the current war-torn corners of our world, she felt helpless and useless. What was despairing to her was her diminished ability to help and make impact... as she knew how; as her awareness of the needs of the world and her growing disability grew, her sense of her own value in the world suffered. Her journey now is to open her despairing heart and trust God is using her, even in the state that she thinks diminished.

Our awareness of the world's needs changes, our capability and ability to respond to the needs of others change; what does not change is God's intention to call anyone who would follow and empower them to make God's dream come true: to draw all people to God's family to

live together in unity. Thanks to Thomas, we know God, with the Holy Spirit, fill our lives with meaning and purpose, at every stage and in every state. Our opening our hearts to trust the risen Christ, that's our Easter ever unfolding.