

The story of Thomas is always the assigned lectionary text for the Second Sunday of Easter. Year in and year out, this is the Gospel text that is read, unless your pastor decides to go rogue. Year in and year out, we hear this text right on the heels of Easter Sunday, often still reeling with the joyful Alleluias after the Lenten drought, and remembering the beauty of flowers, the cuteness of kids in their Easter outfits, and the time spent with loved ones.

And it's because we hear this story when we are often still in that rosy glow that I think we're prone to miss the real anxiety and worry that's going on here when the story opens.

This text begins the evening of Easter. It's been less than twenty-four hours since the women went to the tomb and found it empty. It's been less than twenty-four hours since the angel reported that Jesus wasn't there because he was risen.

And what do the disciples do? Are they out proclaiming the resurrection? Are they rejoicing in the streets? Are they going back to their lives before? They're not doing *any* of that! They are locked in a room because they are terrified. If they heard the reports from the women, they either didn't believe them or they didn't think it mattered. They are sure that Jesus was killed and so it's only a matter of time before those religious leaders will come for them.

It is a highly stressful and anxious time. They are scared. They've been through a heck of a week and don't know what to think. They don't know what's coming next or what they should do. Every path forward seems fraught.

It's in the midst of all this uncertainty that Jesus arrives and says, "Peace be with you."

Isn't that remarkable? Jesus simply comes to them and says, "Peace."

He isn't barking orders or reprimanding them for not doing more. He doesn't ask why they're hiding or what they're afraid of. He doesn't rebuke them. He could have. After all, they didn't seem to remember much of what he'd been trying to teach them, they've ignored the words of the women who reported back earlier that morning.

No, Jesus comes back to them with a soothing word of peace and, of course, his presence among them.

As I read this familiar story in preparation for this sermon, I called to mind all the ways in which *we* are living in a similar moment.

No, we are not living within days of Christ's crucifixion and within hours of his resurrection...but we are living in a high stress, high anxiety, high uncertainty time that has left us with many of the emotions I think the disciples were feeling that day: grief, worry, cautious optimism tempered with a cynical skepticism, and more anxiety.

We have dealt with, and continue to deal with, deep political divisions, tensions and fights for justice, a new, highly covered war in Europe, global supply chain challenges, increased frequency and severity of weather events, oh, and did I mention the global pandemic which *maybe, hopefully, fingers crossed*, we're moving out of but who really even knows anymore?

Who *wouldn't* be extra stressed and anxious?

And as much as individuals are prone to these emotions, we can't ignore that the church itself, as a institution, as the body of Christ, as a group of those same individuals, experiences them too.

It happens all the time, but there has been an uptick in the past year of articles about the decline of the church or a shift in Christianity or whether or not we'll get back to "normal" or "what we had before." Oddly enough, none of these articles seem to have much helpful advice about how to be the hands and feet of God active in the world, but they are really good about making you worry about numbers and metrics and finding the perfect program that will fix everything.

Because the truth is, the Church is not great at responding to this stress and anxiety. It tends to respond in one of two ways. On the one hand, it is prone to wringing its hands in despair, shrugging its shoulders and saying, "Oh well. All is doomed. The Church is dying and so is Christianity and so is every bit of faith in Jesus Christ." On the other hand, it almost equally prone to putting its finger in its ears, pretending like *nothing* has changed and that everything is still the same and so doing things the way they've always been done, but *better*, will solve any and all problems.

The approaches actually almost feed off each other and they are both problematic.

If we can't pull ourselves out of the doom scrolling and downward spiraling long enough see what God might be up to, we'll miss it.

And we'll likewise miss it if we're so focused on what we've always done that we have tunnel vision on the highway, not seeing that God went ahead and put in an offramp that leads to some pretty great ministry.

So it makes me wonder, as I read about these disciples on the evening of the resurrection: What would it mean if the Church took this moment and embraced it, embraced Jesus coming among us and offering peace in our anxiety and our stress, offering respite and refocus on what's really important and what really matters?

Because I think that's what we need now, as we're hopefully on the backend of COVID-19—I think we need to refresh and refocus on the ministries that Jesus has explicitly called us to: offering good news to the poor, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, and proclaiming God's good news to a world crying out for justice and mercy.

That refocusing is really what Jesus was giving the disciples so many generations ago. The brief words recorded here by the evangelist are echoes, almost a reprise of what Jesus says in his farewell at the last supper. If you remember the highlights, Jesus reminds them to love one another as he has loved them. He tells them to wash one another's feet, to forgive each other, and keep the commandments, and to remember that his peace will remain with them.

And so here, on Easter, not only is Jesus once again offering them peace, but he is reminding them what is really important: it's not a violent overthrow of the Romans; it's not revenge against the religious leaders who plotted against Jesus; it's not going right back to the lives they had before; it's not even a mass conversion effort—it's peace and forgiveness, love and blessing.

As we move forward into this uncertain, unknown future, still experiencing stress and anxiety and worries about what comes next, I wonder what our ministry could look like with this refocus. What would it look like if, coming out, we focused—not on the numbers—but on what God is calling us to do?

It might look like trying some new things because we see energy emerging, even if we're not sure anyone will actually show up the first or second time we give it a shot. It might look like continuing with a historic ministry in a new way because it still serves a vital and important purpose. It might look like extending more grace than we're used to because we know we're all a little more tender and fragile with these prolonged weights on our shoulders. It might look like stepping up and stepping out in new ways to be those living examples of Christ's love in our community. It might look like valuing each person we come into contact with for the simple fact that they are a fellow human being and not for the butts they can put in our pews or the bucks they can put in our offering plate.

It *might* look like any number of things—but it *will* reflect the face of God.

Amen.