

**Texts: Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 150; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31**

**Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Now what?**

**Or in the words of Garrison Keillor, “Do I really believe all this stuff? And if so, why do I live this way?”**

**Last week, Easter Sunday, the church was full and we sang Alleluia for the first time in 40 days, and we shouted “Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!” This week, the tomb is still empty and we are still singing Alleluia, but maybe with a bit less enthusiasm, because a week has gone by and the Easter crowd is gone and there is still evil and death, and maybe we are beginning to feel a bit like those disciples – hiding behind locked doors out of fear. We are fearful.**

**More than once recently I’ve had a conversation in which someone says, “Oh, it’s so nice to live in Chadron, where it is comfortable and nice and we don’t have to confront any of the really bad stuff that’s going on “out there” in the rest of the world. I understand that sentiment, because I’ve lived in places where you drive or walk past homeless people to get to work, or where there is gang violence, or you feel uncomfortable in a certain part of town because most of the people who live there don’t look like you.**

**It’s evening on that first day of the week. The disciples – those who were left – have locked themselves inside the house. John the gospel writer says that it’s “for fear of the Jews” – which really means fear of the religious leaders who had accused Jesus of blasphemy and then had convinced the Roman authorities to put him to death. It’s easy to imagine what the disciples might have been afraid of. They were known to be part of Jesus’ entourage, his band of followers. And I’ll bet their fear had to do with what they**

**imagined might happen to each of them – that they might be the next to be nailed to a cross.**

**When you don't know what's going to happen, you have a tendency to spin out scenarios, right? And let's face it, a lot of the time our imaginations take us to the negative – to our fear. "What if?" we ask. What if there's an accident? What if my investments go down instead of up? What if I've taken the wrong job? What if I get sick? What if I fail?**

**I think that is exactly what the disciples were doing – spinning out "what-if's." And that is exactly the moment when Jesus came to stand among them. Interestingly, he doesn't tell them not to be afraid. So often in the Bible, the first words out of Gods' mouth or an angel's mouth are these: Fear not. But that's not what Jesus says. Instead, he says, "Peace be with you." It's not that there is nothing to be afraid of. It's not that there won't be conflict. But in speaking words of peace to the disciples, Jesus gives the fullness of God's desire for them, and for us. Jesus gives to those disciples, and to you, disciples, God's promise of abundant life, transforming love, and undying hope that carries us beyond fear.**

**And then Jesus does something more -- he breathes on them. Take just a moment to breathe in...and breathe out. Breathing means that you are alive. The dead do not breathe. That breath, that Jesus-breath takes us back to the very beginning of life itself; back to the moment in Genesis when God the Creator breathed life into the nostrils of Adam, the earthling that God had formed out of the dust of the ground. That Jesus-breath takes each of us back to the very beginning of our own life, the moment when we were born and cried out our own very first breath. In that moment, the crucified and risen Jesus is**

**creating a new humanity, breathing life into a new community, speaking a word of peace that takes fear and transforms it into rejoicing.**

**Because – the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is fear.**

**So let's talk about Thomas. He wasn't there with the others on that first night in that locked house. We have no idea where he was – maybe he drew the short stick and was out buying food, or checking around to see where the Romans were. Whatever the reason, he missed out on seeing Jesus that first night. And all he wanted, all he was really asking for, was to have the same experience that the others had been given. Thomas has been saddled with being a “doubter” for all these centuries, and it doesn't seem to me to be a fair assessment.**

**Some Christians will tell you that to have faith means that you cannot have questions. You must have an unquestioning faith. Really? You can never ask for an explanation or express confusion? You can never express uncertainty? Over and over in the Gospel stories we find that the disciples themselves are not always so sure of who it is they are following. John the Gospel writer tells us that there were many who quit following Jesus because his teachings were so difficult. Peter even pulls Jesus aside and argues with him when Jesus tell him that he is headed to crucifixion and death. No one heard the news of the empty tomb that morning and responded with: “Oh, yeah, Jesus told us this would happen and we believed him.”**

**I believe it's the other way around: doubt is the pathway to faith. You are allowed to question and investigate and wonder and discuss. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is fear.**

**Thomas wanted proof. I think his brazen request comes out of his own fear: What if it's not true? What if they are telling me a lie? Or more sadly, What if I have been left out because I'm not worthy enough for Jesus to show himself to me?**

**Jesus does show himself to Thomas. Jesus invites him to touch and investigate and verify. And Thomas responds to Jesus' invitation by calling him "my Lord and my God." Thomas is the first person in the entire gospel of John to declare that Jesus is God. Thomas is the one who is willing to admit his doubt and fear, the one who opens himself up to Jesus' answer, the one who finally confesses his faith in the risen Christ.**

**So back to the question I asked at the very beginning of this sermon – "Christ is risen – now what? Do I really believe all this stuff?"**

**Jesus has a word for those of us who come to faith slowly and reluctantly. He calls us "Blessed." Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Up until Thomas, people came to believe when they met Jesus in person. But from that moment onward, hearing the story would have to do. For all these centuries, the story of Jesus has been told out loud to someone who listened, and then told and listened to again. After a while, it was written down, and then it was read. The story would spread, did spread, has spread, continues to spread by word of mouth. "These signs are written," says John the gospel writer, "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God..."**

**It's ok to wrestle with uncertainty. It's ok to name your doubts and misgivings. It's ok to realize that the Easter story raises more questions than it answers. Today and every time we gather, Jesus comes among us here and does the exact same thing he did in that locked house: he speaks words of peace and breathes the breath of the Holy Spirit. Right**

**here, right now, Jesus the crucified and risen One is creating in you a new humanity,  
breathing life into this community, speaking a word of peace that takes all of our fear and  
transforms it into rejoicing.**

**Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!**