

How precious for us that our Lord came to Thomas, who needed to see so long ago, and that the gospel-writer saw fit to record the event for Christians who would follow! For us. Thomas was made-to-order for us these days, for we have learned too well not to believe what people tell us. There are several things in the passages today which may help us in our walk as "Easter People," people who believe that Jesus is alive, well, and at work in this world.

"You are my witnesses.. Peace I give to you.. Take it into the world, for I send you as my father sent me." This is the task of Easter people. This is the possibility - by God's grace - of every one who will risk following Jesus Christ.

"Peace be with you." Jesus offered his disciples peace. He could, because he lived beyond death, beyond misunderstanding and anger, beyond violence. He had passed through them all. Enemies of peace had done their worst to him. They had made cowards and liars of his followers. They had humiliated Jesus on city streets, and mocked and spat upon him. They had assaulted his flesh and robbed him of life. But their war against him had finally failed. On the first day of the week, that Easter Sunday, he met his disciples and offered them peace. No longer could his words be silenced. No longer could his peace be taken away.

Imagine for a moment a scene of peace. Shalom, well-being. Perhaps it is the warmth of sun as you doze in a boat on a tranquil lake. Or a sleeping baby in a crib...a cat napping in a window sill... Perhaps a landscape without people; a field of grain moving gently in the breeze... water catching the light of the sun... PEACE... Nothing pressing, no deadlines, no headlines, no phone calls, no traffic... PEACE.

The disciples were given peace, Jesus' peace. Peace to share with others in Christ's name. This did not mean that their situations changed. In fact, the locks remained on the door, they still met in secret, and they yet had to face all kinds of persecution and death. But they had peace. A deep peace that can withstand even such things as business failures and inflation and murders and politics and grief and cancer... They had assurance that nothing in life could ever separate them from God. They also had a mission for the rest of their lives: The mission of carrying on Christ's work for others, of greeting the rest of the world in Christ's name.

So we sit here this week after Easter. Do we have peace? Do we know that God is God and that God has chosen us to be God's witnesses? Do we believe that we have a mission? ... Thomas wasn't sure about things - whether he could believe, whether he really had a mission - until after the Lord came to touch him personally. Maybe we're not so different.

Good news, folks! We may not have been there that Easter evening, or when Jesus later appeared to Thomas. We may not have even had a breathtaking experience where we could cry out: "My Lord and my God!" But we do have a Lord who has made sure that we have Thomas' story... We do have a Lord who knew that people years later would feel left out... We have a Lord who said that the ones who SAW and believed were blessed, but that the ones who dared

believing *without* seeing were really blessed.

Sometimes we may want to cry out: Okay God, if this Easter stuff is true and you are really here, touch me, or let me touch you. Give me the peace. Awaken me with a real sense of mission, of your presence. Make me able to believe that even in the midst of trials and the everyday drudgery of my life you are with me.

Whatever our lives, whatever the timing in our lives, you and I are called to be witnesses, witnesses to the work begun way back when God called Abraham and Moses...when God delivered his people out of Egypt; witnesses to the truth of God's work as seen in Jesus' life; witnesses to the work God is YET carrying out in the very midst of this un-peaceful world.

Sometimes we are a doubting Thomas church - perhaps not so much doubting that Jesus was raised from the dead - we attested to that fact last Sunday, Easter, with many hallelujahs - but doubting that we have really been given the power which was Jesus; the power that was given to the disciples, the church, so that they too, we too, would be able to heal, to forgive sins, to speak the word of judgment and hope. We doubt that we have actually been given power and responsibility, to feed people; and to stand up for what is just and right according to the scriptures. We seem to doubt that we have work to do, to doubt that we really ARE called by God to be "Easter People."

Jesus told his followers: "You are my witnesses.. Peace I give to you.. Take it into the world, for I send you as my father sent me." This is the task of Easter people. This is the possibility - by God's grace - of every one who would risk following Jesus Christ. This is our commission.

Now, a story: A pastor told about how his congregation struggled, in the 1980's, to relate to their neighborhood. Years before, their neighborhood had been a lively center of activity. But as time passed, most of the members of the congregation had moved to the suburbs, leaving their church as a neo-Gothic island in the middle of a decaying part of town. The fashionable apartment building next to the church, quite impressive in the 1930's, was now a run-down, cheap hotel for drifters.

After two major burglaries, the church was forced to buy an expensive alarm system. No longer was the door to the church office open to anyone who came in off the street. Now, weekday visitors had to press a button next to the front door, state their name and business over an intercom, and await admission. The greatest concern after church meetings or services was to make certain that all of the doors were locked and the alarm system armed.

One evening, at the congregation's usual monthly council meeting, after the usual business had been discussed, a member named Mary said, "On the way in tonight, coming from the parking lot, I dropped my wallet. I didn't realize it until a young man came up to me and handed it to me just as I was entering the church. He was poorly dressed and looked really thin. Of course, I thanked him profusely for returning my wallet. He asked me what sort of church we are, what denomination, and I told him. We had a short talk there on the steps and in the course of our

conversation he told me that he now lives at the hotel at the corner. He can't stay with his family any more, he said, because he is sick. I'm pretty sure that he has AIDS. The hotel is full of those unfortunate young men. And here we sit as a church with our doors locked tight. Isn't there anything we can do for them?"

There was silence in the meeting room. Someone finally said, "Well, I don't really think there is much we can do for them." Someone else added, "They probably wouldn't feel very comfortable at our services."

Mary said nothing else and the meeting ended. After the meeting, though, out in the parking lot, Sue Smith said to Mary, "I was proud of you tonight. You really touched my heart. I think we ought to take this matter up with our Bible study group on Wednesday."

So they did. The women at the Wednesday Bible study prayed and asked God to lead them in the path of service to the men in the hotel. Soon, the women started visiting in the hotel. Within a few weeks, they had moved their Wednesday Bible study into the dilapidated lobby of the hotel, offering refreshments, inviting the residents to join them. That led to their 'Lunch with the Lord,' a regular Friday free lunch of soup and sandwiches at the church for the men. A year later, at least a dozen of the men attended worship, often sitting with some of the women from the Bible study group.

The once tired, frightened church felt a breeze blowing, the breath of the risen Lord opening the congregation to new work, new mission, and new faith. There was new life where there had been dull existence. Faith puts death in its proper place; faith lets LIFE open the doors to reach out in love to others. The people became Easter People, people who believe in and SERVE a risen, living Lord! (Source unknown; found in one of my old sermons)

We shared Psalm 91, where we declared God to be our refuge and our fortress, in whom we trust. In this Psalm comes God's promise: "When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, ...I will show them my salvation."

May God's Holy Spirit reach us wherever we are locked tight or closed up in fear. May he touch our doubts, and lead us to faith. May we discover anew that we are Easter People, and ever proclaim through our living that Jesus is our risen Lord! Amen.