Poor Thomas…poor, skeptical Thomas. You know – I feel for him…I feel for this doubting disciple. If we read through the Gospel of John, we see that Thomas really was a faithful follower: He rallied his fellow disciples to follow Jesus to Lazarus’ tomb, saying, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”¹ He listened to Jesus’ teachings, asking questions so that he might understand more fully² He walked with Jesus to Jerusalem, the way of the cross. After all this, the only thing we remember about Thomas are his words: “Unless I see the mark of the nails, I will not believe.” His legacy has been reduced to a phrase we use for the skeptics among us: “Oh, you’re just being a Doubting Thomas.”

Every year – if we follow the schedule of readings outlined by the church – we come to this passage on the second Sunday of Easter. Every year we return to this doubting disciple and recite the words Jesus speaks to him: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” It is easy to focus on this reprimand and to make Thomas an object lesson. But in singling him out in this way, we lose sight of the rest of the story…

When the risen Christ comes to Thomas, he has already appeared twice to his followers. The Gospel of John tells of his appearance to Mary Magdalene in the garden. Jesus comes to her as she weeps by the empty tomb, wondering where the body of her Lord has been taken. Christ calls her by name, and sends her forth to announce what she has seen. That very evening Jesus visits his disciples. As our text tells us, the group was huddled fearfully behind locked doors. But Jesus comes and stands among them. “Peace be with you,” he says, and goes on to show them his hands and his side.

We might wonder what the disciples are doing behind those locked doors. They have heard of Christ’s resurrection already; Mary Magdalene has come to them – most likely out of breath and overflowing with excitement – to announce that she has seen the Lord. Why are they not out in the world sharing this news? Do they not believe Mary? Or is it simply that belief has not overcome fear? Granted, it is a dangerous world outside those walls. Their teacher has just been crucified, after all. So they lock themselves in a house, for fear of the authorities.

When Jesus appears to his followers that evening, he gives them a task. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” With these words, he commissions the community of faith to continue his work in the world. Christ breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples and empowers them for this ministry.
In this moment, Jesus recreates these people huddled behind locked doors. He transforms them from those who follow to those who are sent. They are no longer disciples of Jesus of Nazareth; they are apostles – they are the ones sent into the world on behalf of Christ!

For the Gospel of John, this is what it means to live as people who have encountered the risen Lord. The resurrection does not bring new life for Jesus alone, but new life for the entire community of faith.

So why are they still in the house a week later? Seven days have passed! Why do they again huddle behind locked doors?

We already know the answer to this question. We know why the disciples cower in a locked room because we – too – live in an anxious time. As one colleague writes, “Fear hangs in the air like an April storm cloud.” And this cloud grows darker and more ominous each time we turn on the News. Fear is all around us: it’s driving our political campaigns and policy decisions…it’s fanning suspicion and stifling compassion. In times like these, it’s tempting to gravitate toward those like us and cling to what seems safe. It’s tempting to act like those first disciples, who huddle behind locked doors to wait out the storm.

But – just like those first disciples – we are called to something different.

A week after his first appearance, Jesus returns to that locked room, and finds the disciples – including Thomas – in the place he had left them. “Peace be with you,” he says again. And then he offers to Thomas that which he requested. “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Thomas did believe…And tradition tells us that he went into the world. Some say he sailed as far as India to proclaim the good news of a crucified and risen Lord. Christians in that land remember him for planting churches along India’s coast, for performing miracles, for baptizing thousands into the faith. Tradition tells us that this doubting disciple embraced his identity as an apostle of the Risen Lord and went to share the good news.

So – despite the fearfulness of those first disciples – the witness that began with Mary Magdalene running from the empty tomb spread throughout the world. The same story that Mary and Thomas told is what brings us together today. It’s the story of God’s love for us – love that is stronger than fear and death, love that can transform lives and heal this world. It’s the story we are sent to tell, because we too have met the Risen Lord.

Like Thomas, we have met Christ when we’ve needed to reach out and touch him; and like Mary, weeping outside the tomb, we have found him in the least likely places. Perhaps you’ve met Christ at the hospital, in the doctors who nursed your child back to health. Or, in the friend who cried with you when you learned your cancer had returned. Perhaps you’ve met Christ in the little boy you met through Family Promise, who plopped down beside you at THE dinner table. Or, in the hospice nurse who gives coffee and compassion in equal measure. Or, in the beggar, hungry for acknowledgement and for bread. Perhaps you’ve met Christ at this font and this table, and in the community gathered in this place.

We too have met the Risen Christ, and we have confessed, “My Lord, and My God!” So now, it’s our turn to throw open the doors and share this story with the world. Sometimes this work is full of risk; it’s easier to huddle behind closed doors with our friends and fellow disciples. But that’s not what faith requires of us.

There is a congregation in the city of Salvador, Brazil that I worshipped with while I was there for a seminary travel course. The church is nestled in one of the city’s poorer neighborhoods; just outside its walls are rows and rows of crowded, brick houses, built into the hillside. This congregation hasn’t always been there. When it began
forty years ago, the community worshipped in a middle-class neighborhood across town. But God called them to do something different – to throw open the doors, and share the Gospel story in a community desperate for good news.

When they first moved to this neighborhood, things were not always easy. Sometimes church members would come out of worship to find their cars had been broken into and vandalized. Once a woman in the congregation was robbed outside the church. But they did not turn back in fear. They continued to reach out to this community, and – eventually – they came to know their neighbors and gain their trust.

Over time this church found ways to share the good news. The congregation started a health clinic to meet their neighbors’ medical needs. They began offering vocational training, so adults could learn new skills and support their families. When I visited, they had recently turned the parking lot into a soccer pitch for neighborhood children; some of whom we had the joy of meeting. This church is making a difference in its community; they have thrown open the doors to do Christ’s work in the world.

Of course, you already know something about this. You already know something about throwing open the doors. Because you’ve been part of telling this story, too. Some of you make soup for Code Purple, or bring cans to stock our local food pantries. Some of you write letters to our representatives, advocating for those at the margins, and some of you write checks to support Mission Co-Workers serving around the world. Some of you volunteer with Friendship House, and some of you mentor students in need. You have seen that this work is full of risk; you know it is easier to huddle behind closed doors. But you also know that faith requires more, and you have said ‘yes’ to doing Christ’s work in the world.

Sisters and Brothers, the story that began with Mary Magdalene running from the empty tomb has spread throughout the world. And we are called to be part of that story. We are called to bear witness through our proclamation and our service, because we have met the Risen Lord.

He has breathed the Holy Spirit upon us and empowered us do his work. So throw open the doors. Embrace your identity as a resurrection people and go – do Christ’s work in the world.

NOTES

1. John 11:16
2. John 14:5
3. Rev. Christopher Keating, “Fear rages on, but Easter is still here.”

**Great Prayer ~ Communion ~ Thomas R. Stout**

O God, we offer to you now these petitions:

Help us to receive the peace of Christ in our own lives, and so become messengers of his love and forgiveness.

(silence)

Restore wholeness to those who need to experience your healing love.
(silence)

Make your church, O Christ, an instrument of mercy justice and peace for all people.

(silence)

For those who are fearful, anxious, or filled with sorrow.

(silence)

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Now, in one voice we pray the prayer of Jesus:

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be they name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.” Amen.