

Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, the Resurrection of the Lord, John presented us with the narrative that lies at the heart of the Gospel. Jesus, who was crucified, had been raised. We watched as Mary Magdalene, Peter, and an unnamed disciple discovered that Jesus' tomb was empty; and we witnessed the moment when Mary met her risen Lord. Her grief turned to joy and she brought us the good news that has been proclaimed throughout the ages, "I have seen the Lord." *(adapted from workingpreacher.org)*

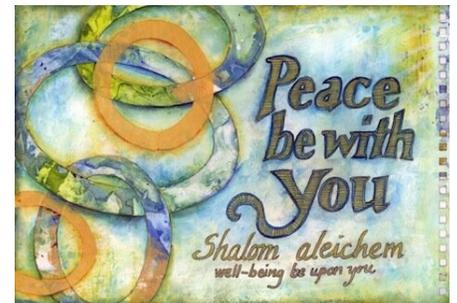
Today's Gospel reading continues with the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples.

Our Gospel story is twofold: it is a story about frightened disciples hiding behind the locked doors of the Upper Room where they had last felt safe and loved only a few nights earlier, when they had shared the Last Supper with Jesus. The locked doors were also symbolic of their fear.



Three days earlier the disciples had seen what the hatred of the Judean leaders had done to Jesus. If their hatred was so strong surely they wouldn't hesitate to do the same to them.

When Mary Magdalene went and announced to them that she had seen the Lord, the disciples didn't believe her. And not all were there; Thomas was missing.



But when Jesus appeared to them, and showed them his hands and sides they were overjoyed. His greeting of "Shalom, Peace be with you" was not only a traditional salutation, it was also a blessing. Jesus instructed them to go out into the world and carry on His ministry. He breathed on them and anointed them with the Holy Spirit, to remind them of all that He had taught them, and to guide them into continuing His mission of revealing God to the world.

Shalom: "May the peace of God's love fill you with wholeness, harmony, completeness and delight." *(adapted from goodshepherdlex.org)*

A week goes by; perhaps the disciples were beginning to doubt as they were still hiding behind closed doors. Fear and doubt. Had they really seen the Lord? When Jesus appears before them again, the disciple Thomas is with them.

And this second story told today is one of the most familiar in the New Testament: Doubting Thomas, Doubting Thomas who lived by the adage "seeing is believing" and because he was skeptical.

He didn't ask for a special revelation from Jesus; he simply asked for the same proof the other disciples had. Jesus challenged Thomas' doubt, but he did not condemn him. Rather he showed Thomas compassion and grace, knowing that Thomas really wanted to know Him, and to achieve that, he needed physical proof.

Doubt ~ Not everyone doubts, but I think many of us have experienced doubt in our faith from time to time.

Author Erica Barthalow authored a book titled *Holy Doubt*, and she states that she loves pairing those two words – holy and doubt - because they seem like they don't belong together, but the paradox of the Kingdom of God is often found in two ideas that seem incompatible: die to live, doubt in order to believe.

Doubt can be a catalyst for spiritual growth. Doubt can actually lead us into a deeper and richer faith as it did for Thomas. Doubt and faith are often partners on the journey of life .

Here are a few points to consider:

Many people think doubt is the opposite of faith, but it isn't.
Unbelief is the opposite of faith. Unbelief refers to a willful refusal to believe, while doubt refers to inner uncertainty.

Many people think doubt is unforgivable, but it isn't. God doesn't condemn us when we question him. God is big enough to handle all our doubts and all our questions.

Many people think struggling with God means we lack faith, but that's not true.
Struggling with God is a sure sign that we truly have faith. If we never struggle, our faith will never grow. (*keepbelieving.com*)

Frederick Buechner expresses doubt this way in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*:
"Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

Some of the world's most devout believers had something in common: from time to time, they were plagued by doubt – Martin Luther, reformer and father of Protestantism, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and even Pope Francis.

Pope Francis has spoken openly about the role of doubt in faith, that it is an essential part of faith. "Who among us – everybody, everybody! - who among us has not experienced insecurity, loss and even doubts on their journey of faith?" he told the crowd at a general audience. "Everyone! We've all experienced this, me too. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. It is part of the journey of faith; it is part of our lives." (*America, September 30, 2013*)

Thomas doubted. He wasn't satisfied with second-hand reports. Think of what he had experienced with Jesus. He had seen his master arrested, mistreated, beaten, and then crucified.



And what he had been doing while the other disciples were hiding behind closed doors?
Could he have been trying to pick up the broken pieces of his life and figuring out the future?
Is that why he wasn't with the others and he had to see Jesus for himself?

While preparing today's reflection, I came across an online sermon series called *If I Believe, Why Do I Doubt?* (keepbelieving.com) written by Rev. Ray Pritchard. He says:

"I have doubts and questions that I cannot answer every single day. *I don't know how a person can be a Christian and not have doubts from time to time.* Faith requires doubt in order to be faith. If you ever arrive at a place where all your doubts are gone and all your questions are answered, take a deep breath and relax because you've arrived in heaven."

Rev. Pritchard also suggests that above the front door of every church, we should erect a two-word sign that should be the church's message: **DOUBTERS WELCOME.**

If you have doubts, come inside.
If you have questions, come inside.
If you are uncertain, come inside.
If you are a skeptic, come inside.
If you are searching for truth, come inside.

Jesus' final words in this passage are so critical to faith: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (v 29) Jesus recognized that belief isn't easy or simple. If you struggle with doubt, He completely understands.

Shalom

Doubt sees the obstacles.
Faith sees the way. Doubt
sees the darkest night. Faith
sees the day. Doubt dreads to
take a step. Faith soars on
high. Doubt questions "Who
believes?" Faith answers "I."