

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**April 15, 2012**  
**John 20:19-31**

**“How shall we live in a post-Easter world?”**

*Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.  
Fill the hearts of your faithful,  
and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.*

Think of a dumb or embarrassing thing you have done sometime during your lifetime, or a dumb or embarrassing thing you have done recently. Think of something you said or did that turned out to be maybe not your smartest comment or finest hour. Now think about being known for that one moment for 2,000 years.

Poor Thomas, that’s what happened to him.

Thomas said something that maybe he later regretted, maybe it just fell out of his mouth—you know how that happens. But his one unfortunate comment stuck, he was labeled “Doubting Thomas,” his whole life was reduced to his one moment, and he’s been maligned for 2,000 years.

Thomas was probably a fine disciple...he was probably beloved. He was known as the Twin, and he was probably faithful and loyal. Prior to his Doubting Thomas moment, he appears in the Gospels saying reasonable and helpful things....for example when Lazarus is raised from the dead (John 11:16) and when Jesus talks about God’s house having many dwelling places (John 14:5). Thomas was present, involved, and devoted to Jesus during Jesus’ lifetime.

But when Jesus dies, rises again, and appears to his disciples, Thomas runs into trouble. In today’s reading from the Gospel of John—this is post-Easter, post-resurrection—the disciples are hiding in a house, afraid and cowering behind locked doors and Jesus appears to them. But Thomas is not there. And I say: good for him. Maybe Thomas, unafraid, is out in the world ministering to people—helping, healing, serving. We are told that the disciples are gathered in a house in a locked room, they are hiding. Maybe Thomas is out carrying on his ministry.

Jesus comes to the frightened disciples, stands among them and says “Peace be with you.” Because Thomas is not there, the disciples later tell him, “We have seen the Lord.” But Thomas scoffs, I don’t think so, Jesus died.

*Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger  
in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.*

I think that is an honest and understandable response to being told that the disciples have just conversed with Jesus who they all know had died. I think Thomas is honorable and has been unfairly criticized for millennia.

It seems to me that we should not be so hard on Thomas because doubt is part of belief. In my experience, doubt is actually an important and inevitable part of belief. I think we run into trouble when we are too sure of ourselves, our beliefs and our convictions about God and the Bible. I think we can grow strident and rigid when we suppress our doubts and don't give them voice, when we don't investigate and discuss our doubts.

A healthy dose of doubt and questioning tempers our certainty about this wonderful and mysterious thing we call faith. Anyone on a serious and committed spiritual journey has had moments of doubt (maybe days, maybe weeks, maybe years, ask Mother Theresa).

I have said it before and I will say it again...in the choice between certainty and reverence, always choose reverence. Let's be awed and inspired by the mystery of God and the unanswered questions in our faith. Let's honor and explore our doubt. We need not hide or deny our periods of doubt, I think our faith has cycles and seasons and doubt is a part of the journey.

I have always loved Doubting Thomas and prefer just to call him Thomas because I think he has been unfairly labeled and scapegoated. Thomas is now a stereotype figure representing disbelief and faltering faith. But I don't agree. I think Thomas was probably deeply faithful, but he, like all of us, had doubts too. Bless his maligned heart. In one passing moment he expressed doubt, and then he was pigeon-holed for 2,000 years. I guess that old adage is true...you can spend a lifetime building a good reputation, but lose it in a minute.

Today's passage, known as the "Doubting Thomas" story in the Gospel of John, is one of my favorite Biblical stories...but not because of what Thomas says and does, but because of what Jesus says and does.

For me, the "Doubting Thomas" story does not reveal much startling insight if you only consider Thomas. But there are many lessons and profound insights if you focus on Jesus.

Thomas responds to the resurrection in a completely reasonable way...What? He's here? Prove it, show me.

What is moving in this story is what our Jesus says and does when he returns, meets, and talks to his beloved companions. When this story is told featuring Thomas we can say ho-hum, a moment of doubt, what else is new? But look closely at what Jesus says and does in this post-resurrection appearance and we have guidance about how we are to live in this post-Easter world.

To begin with Jesus comes to his cowering disciples hiding in a house behind locked doors and does not choose to lecture them about being so timid. He also does not lecture them about how profoundly they failed him at the end of his life...one betrayed him, one denied him, and they all fled during his hour of need. The disciples were lousy companions when he needed them most, but he does not scold, he does not admonish, he does not preach about courage and loyalty. Jesus appears and says, "Peace be with you." He blesses them. And then immediately he shows them his wounds.

Jesus blesses this enormously disappointing, motley crew, and then he shows them his scars. Jesus chooses to be kind and vulnerable.

The Bible says the disciples rejoice when they recognize Jesus and then he says a second time, "*Peace be with you.*" And he goes on..."*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" Jesus blesses them again, and then transforms them from disciples (those who follow) into apostles (those who are sent).

Jesus knows that this rag-tag group of 11 is lost and overwhelmed; he knows they are confused and afraid. He knows that it will be a huge challenge for them to carry on his work, tell his story, continue the struggle. But Jesus also knows that although human beings are limited, frightened, self-serving and flawed, we are also somehow simultaneously trust-worthy, brave, generous and faithful. Jesus believes in those disciples, and by treating them with love and dignity he is going to strengthen them and draw forth the goodness and courage within them. "*Peace be with you,*" he says with hope and love. "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*"

[May you be blessed, and as I was empowered by God to do good work in the world, so I empower you and send you in my name to transform this broken world and help usher in the kingdom of God. As God sent me, so I send you.] Jesus does not have a lot of reason to trust and believe in these guys but he does.

The Doubting Thomas story tells us a great deal about Jesus. After Jesus has told the disciples he is sending them into the world, he does two remarkable things...

The first is that he breathes on them saying, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*"

This is so intimate, so much like God breathing life into Adam, so close and loving. It's like parents with newborns...we hold them, smell them, breathe on them and with them and envelope them in our love.

Jesus breathes on the disciples...he gives the very essence of his own life to them, his breath, and says, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*"

And second, following that dramatic moment when Jesus could give the disciples any last commandment, any specific order, any final directive, note what he chooses to say...

*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;  
if you retrain the sins of any, they are retained.*

At this heightened and tender moment, Jesus chooses to talk about what?

Forgiveness. Jesus, who should be disappointed in and angry with his disciples for deserting him when he was tortured and killed speaks to them at this moment about forgiveness.

And more than that...Jesus is modeling with his actions what he is talking about with his words. He is modeling his forgiveness of his imperfect disciples by coming to them as they hide behind a locked door, blessing them, and breathing on them. Jesus is modeling the forgiveness he wants them to emulate, he is inspiring them to forgive others in their ministry in his name.

The popular author and remarkable theologian Anne Lamott defines forgiveness and "choosing not to hit back." Jesus chooses not to hit back. And he wants his disciples not to hit back.

Jesus comes in love to his disciples and instead of saying "You bums, you really let me down!" He says, "Peace be with you, look at my wounds, and let's talk about forgiveness."

Jesus' words about forgiveness in the **New Revised Standard Version** of the Bible are....

*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;  
if you retrain the sins of any, they are retained.*

Now listen to the same passage in **The Message**, the Bible in Contemporary Language...

*If you forgive someone's sins, they are gone for good.  
If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?*

Jesus' post-resurrection appearance in famous "Doubting Thomas" story gives us clear instructions about how we are to live in the post-Easter world. Jesus' words and behaviors make it very clear...I think these are the lessons...

First remember, it is not Jesus who labels Thomas, it is the world that gives him the nickname "Doubting Thomas." Jesus would never have us be known for millennia by one moment of doubt or unbelieving. Jesus is expansive and loving. To Jesus we are best known for our kindest, bravest and strongest moments—that is how he sees us.

Another lesson in this misnamed "Doubting Thomas" story is that Jesus believes in us with all our gifts and all our flaws. We are small, frightened and timid. We turn away, betray, deny, run and hide. But Jesus loves us just the same, believes in us just the same, and he is ready and willing to send imperfect people like us into the world in his name to create the kingdom of God. Jesus trusts and loves us despite our fears, doubts and flaws.

We also learn from this famous story how much our Jesus values forgiveness. He will not hit back. And he wants us to not hit back. Forgiveness is one of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry and one of the clear messages of the resurrection. Jesus could have been angry in his post-resurrection appearances and scolded and corrected. But he comes in love and speaks of forgiveness. And his words match his behavior.

"Peace be with you," he says when he appears. And "...let me show you my wounds."

The mislabeled "Doubting Thomas" story is full of lessons for us in the post-Easter world. Lessons we can employ as we strive to be apostles sent to create the kingdom of God on earth.

And I think it's time we redeem poor Thomas. We don't call Peter, Peter the Denier, we don't call Andrew, James or John the Deserters. Why malign poor old Thomas all these years?

I keep thinking about the book our Church Book Group read this month called Bread of Angels by Stephanie Saldana. The author lives in Syria for one year and writes about her remarkable friendships and experiences.

Saldana explains that in Syria the tradition is that you call your son, daughter or even a dear friend your own name, suggesting that you are so close to them that you can no longer tell the difference between them and yourself. Saldana tells of befriending an Armenian neighbor who fusses over her like she was family. In time, the Armenian who she calls “Grandfather” starts to call her “Grandfather” right back, as if she is a part of him.

In that spirit, with that Middle Eastern tradition in mind, I find myself thinking about Doubting Thomas, who had doubts just like the rest of us, who gave them voice, just like the rest of us, who was labeled for eternity by that one moment of question and doubt.

If Thomas were here, maybe I would take his hand and call him “Andrea.” And maybe he would take my hand, and call me “Thomas.”

Amen.