

Series: The Words of Jesus—Post Resurrection

Today: Peace be with you

Text: John 24:19-31

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

As we continue our series on the Words of Jesus in the weeks which followed his resurrection, we come to the story of Thomas. In our colloquial expressions, we add an adjective in front of his name. We call him *Doubting Thomas*, and we use that expression for all people who question the reality of something we know to be the truth. However, I wonder if that is really fair to Thomas.

Thomas consistently has the courage to say what others might have been thinking but did not have the courage to speak in the Gospel of John. In the 11th chapter of John, Thomas was the one who tried to warn the disciples that Jesus was going to be killed if he went to see Lazarus. In the 14th chapter of John, when Jesus was trying to teach the disciples about what death would be like, it was Thomas who was honest by saying that he did not understand. Jesus said to them, “You know the way to the place where I am going...” Thomas said to him, “*Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*” Earlier in John 20 we are told that Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus appears after his crucifixion. The disciples try to tell Thomas that they have seen the Risen Christ, but Thomas speaks for anyone who has trouble with the story: “*Unless I see him with my own eyes and touch him with my own hands, I will not believe.*” (John 20:25) So is it possible that Thomas was not so much a doubter as he was a realist. He needed proof, and he wasn’t going to accept something as huge as the resurrection on hearsay evidence.

At our Early Word Bible Study we had fun trying to imagine the personality type of Thomas. Many of us had taken the Meyers Briggs Personality Type Indicator which is a test you can take on line. Some companies use it to help their personnel understand that not everyone sees the world through the same set of lenses. The four areas it measures are: 1) where we focus our attention; 2) the way we take in information; 3) the way we make decisions; and 4) the way we deal with the outer world.

For example, if you take the test and you find that you are an E, it means you are an extrovert and you focus your attention on other people. You get your energy for life from your contact with other people. If you discover you are an I, it means you are more introverted and the greatest focus of your attention is on yourself and what you think and feel. You get more energy from being alone. They are letters which help us to understand our personalities. I am an ENFP—Extroverted, Intuitive, Feeling and Perceptive. My wife is an INFJ—Introverted, Intuitive, Feeling, and Judging or needing to have a plan well articulated. Our biggest conflicts in marriage have come when my need to be with people, my Extroversion, and her need for more time alone, her Introversion, or my big picture analysis and her need for careful planning collide with one another.

We decided that Thomas was probably an ISTJ. He was one who preferred being alone rather than with others. He processed information based on what he could see—he needed evidence. He made his decisions and organized his life rationally like most scientists or successful business people. He organized his outer world based on a well defined system and when that system didn't the information he had, it kept him from processing what the disciples were saying to him.

Our text says that Thomas was not with the other disciples when he made the first appearance we talked about last week. We don't know where he was, but if you accept the Meyers Briggs analysis I have just given you, in all likelihood he had gone off to be alone when Jesus finally died on that first Good Friday. He thought he needed time apart to reflect on the meaning of the death of Jesus, and because he needed that time apart, he was not with the others when Jesus came to the other disciples.

A few weeks ago at Brightside Baptist Church I suggested that the way Jesus dealt with Thomas was to encourage him to accept him right where he was; lean into those doubts--to touch his hands and place his finger in the wound in his side. And finally, he invited him to no longer doubt but to believe. I am not going to repeat that sermon here for the sake of those who were with me.

However, what I want us to focus on for just a few moments is the greeting he gave to Thomas. It is the same greeting he gave to the disciples, and the greeting he used often in these post resurrection appearances. He says, "*Peace be with you.*" The Hebrew word he uses is *Shalom*. We have seen that word many times, haven't we? ***Strong's Concordance (7965)*** – *suggests that the Hebrew word Shalom means completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, and harmony; the absence of agitation or discord.*

Why would Jesus give such a greeting? The obvious answer is that the disciples were scared when they saw Jesus. They didn't know what to expect, but seeing a dead man walking was clearly not in their frame of reference. However, in applying this greeting to Thomas, I would suggest that why Jesus greeted him the way he did was a direct result of him being alone. He was not at peace with himself. He was not whole, or tranquil, or in harmony with God or

with his fellow disciples. Jesus knew precisely what Thomas needed. He needed to be restored to the community of faith. He needed to find joy in his life again. He needed *Shalom*.

In her book, *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about her decision to leave the parish ministry and become a college professor. There were two key spiritual questions she had to answer before she could make that change: 1) What is killing me right now; and 2) what is saving me right now? Those are questions worth asking as we take stock of our own lives, aren't they? 1) What is killing me right now; and 2) what is saving me right now?

What was killing Thomas was his need for certainty; his sense of isolation from God; and his isolation from the other disciples--his. Jesus invites him to reconnect with God and with his brothers in Christ and to experience completeness, wholeness, peace; shalom.

My colleague, Bill Worley, the Pastor of First Reformed Church down the street, spent a year in Iraq as a Marine Chaplain. He told me the other day that his primary job during his year's tour of duty was to identify those who were isolating themselves from their unit and to bring them back into the group again, and then to find out what was wrong in the unit that allowed someone to become isolated as they were. Bill said, "*Marine's lives depended on members of each unit feeling the support of one another and the sense that they had each other's backs.*"

Jesus knew that Thomas needed a way back into the fellowship, and he was willing to offer him what he needed: tangible evidence of his resurrection. If you are one of those who find yourself in Thomas's place right now, listen to the words of Jesus: *Shalom. Peace be with you. Trust me. I am the real deal.*

One of my favorite songs which has helped me reconnect with God is done by a little known artist named Shaina Noll. It is called *You Can Relax Now*, and it goes like this:

You can relax now. Come on and open your eyes. Breathe deeply now. I am with you. Oh my sweet, sweet child, who do you think you are? You are the child of God, and that will never change. You had a dream. You misunderstood. You thought you were separate, but now you hear my voice and you can relax now. Come on and open your eyes. Breathe deeply now. I am with you. You are the love of my life. You are my one creation. You are eternity, and that will never change.

Shalom! Peace be with you. With those words, Jesus reconnects Thomas to God and to his brothers and sisters in Christ. He helps him believe again, and he wants to do the same for you.