

**Sermon:** I Am Because We Are (B) Easter 2

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We are Easter people. Out of the ashes, we are marked by the sign of the cross on Ash Wednesday. We journey forty days in the love and lament of Lent. We join the crowds in a parade where palm branches are waving in unbridled anticipation of a new king - one who will oust the empire and bring justice... and then, as Easter people, we march right into Holy Week. We share in the last supper on Maundy Thursday, strip the altar, read about the stations of the cross on Good Friday and live into the last thirty-nine hours of Jesus' life music with a moving testimony of music and with deep, deep grief. We are Easter people.

We linger on Holy Saturday - that in-between space - and we wonder what it must have been like for those who took his limp body, badly beaten and bloodied, down from the cross. We try to visualize his lifeless body wrapped in a shroud - perhaps fastened at each end and then placed on a cold slab of stone in a cave. Yes, we are Easter people. And on that glorious day of Resurrection we come in the darkness, find the tomb empty and sing Alleluia at the top of our lungs. Bells are ringing, the altar is dressed in white and spring flowers dot every corner of the sanctuary. And we exclaim: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Yes!

We are Easter people!

Easter... is a time of grief and lament. Easter also ushers us into great joy, hope and celebration. The church is renewed as the resurrected Jesus fills the air with a radically different form of love. A form of love which draws people - people like the women who discover first hand the the tomb is empty; the men who are huddled together and experience the breath of life; and the one who doubts - into community and the body of Christ. And this is good news, right? Right?

I mean Easter absorbs the joy and triumph of the resurrection, but...but...as we learn today in John's gospel, Easter also absorbs fear and disbelief. You see, Easter is both joy and jubilation as well as paralyzing fear and anxiety and doubt. It would be easier if Easter were only the trumpet blasts and Alleluias. Because we know how to live into that. Or, it might even be easier if Easter were only fear and disbelief. We know how to live into that, too. But Easter is all of this, it holds all of it. The contradictory emotions, the joy and the fear ... and it shapes how we live out our lives as the body of Christ. And we...are...Easter...people, aren't we?

Are not the ups and downs of human frailty, poured out through the blood and body of Christ all part of the Pascal mystery. Are we, too, a part of the suffering love of Christ. And I believe that is what makes Thomas' response to news of the resurrection so authentic in this week's gospel text. I think it makes the disciples' fear and isolation so real and perhaps, maybe mine too. I believe the gospel narrative today reminds us that all is not well with the world, even in light of the fact that Jesus is risen.

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.*

Fear for the disciples due to their association with Jesus, could put their lives in jeopardy, too. This would make anyone a bit anxious after all, death on a cross was the worst way to die. But they were just hours from seeing the resurrected Christ! How could such a joy-filled experience become so anxiety-ridden and fearful? Because, you see, they are Easter people, too. People living with joy and triumph, fear and anxiety. But when; Jesus miraculously enters the room where fear and grief have rendered the disciples powerless, he utters these words,

"Peace be with you." "Peace be with you." And he "breathes" the breath of life into them. Peace be with you...

Peace is what a parent wants when the kids are home all week on spring break and the weather is cold and rainy and the kids have more energy than they know what to do with, and she yells, "I need some peace and quiet!" But what the parent really needs is a little down time to catch their breath. And peace is what people want who are anxiously waiting for results of their lab tests, their biopsies and what a long-term prognosis will look like. But what they really mean is good health or things to go back the way they were before the nightmare began. And peace is what a nation wants when heated rhetoric threatens unity and creates anxiety and fear for the future looks uncertain.

Consequently, the peace Jesus offers his disciples (and us), doesn't remove their turmoil and angst and fear. The peace that Jesus is offering to those who experienced the resurrection first-hand (and perhaps us), is what the ancient Hebrews called Shalom. Shalom...meaning wholeness, completeness; an implication of ceaseless, unending sense of being. In other words, peace...in the midst of the storms of life. Jesus...is offering Easter. He doesn't simply tell the disciples that everything will be ok. He doesn't tell them that the Roman

soldiers and Jewish leaders were no longer in hot pursuit of them anymore. And he doesn't suggest that they retreat to the countryside, isolate and settle into a quiet lifestyle. And he doesn't say that life in community with him would be easy.

You see, in our gospel reading today, we get John's Jesus where truth and inclusivity lend themselves to an identity... the disciples identity, our identity, and the identities of faith communities around the world...it is the identity we have as Easter people. People like the joyous and fearful disciples and people like Thomas. The one whose honest skepticism, bold doubt and vulnerability invite us into a new reality, a new way of living out the resurrection story in community. Thomas reminds us of the intimate honesty which keeps faith communities in relationship to the wounds of the resurrected Christ...and to each other. (teacher story?)

You know, after the resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples, all but Thomas. (but note where the disciples are after they initially hear of the empty tomb from the women -they too had their doubts.) And Thomas wasn't there with the others when Jesus first appears. But Thomas was persistent in his doubt. And he keeps coming back and when he finally shows up and Jesus is there, he steps into his own vulnerability and asks to put his hand in Christ's side - not because it is some bizarre or morbid probe: but it is a union, and a reminder of the kind of love that is reflected in the resurrection and the incarnation of Christ.

Thomas dares to ask the questions, to express his vulnerability in the midst of his peers and he dares to venture into the woundedness of the resurrection. Into the ruined hands of a risen Jesus and into the ranks of all who would come after him. You? Me? People who would at times struggle, to live into the resurrection life when doubt and despair are present.

You know, I think perhaps its what the writers of I John and Acts are getting at today, that the unpeaceful, unwanted feeling many of us experience when facing the realities in life... are best done in community. In the suffering love that unites us and makes us whole. When our doubts and fears and yes, our brokenness and sin, is shared, then the community is connected to the Easter story. Trust in the resurrected Christ puts us in intimate connection with the source of life itself. I am...because we are.

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the*

*apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.*

This is not easy stuff. Caring for one another and sharing stories of our own brokenness, grief and fear IS what constitutes life in Christ. Abundant life in Christ. Forgiveness, grace and vulnerability are all part of touching the wounds of Christ. Living into the Easter story is hard. And that is exactly why we are called to do it, together. And I don't know about you, but I think Thomas gets a bad rap in the story today. I, personally, would like to eliminate the adjective associated with his name, his identity of "doubting" Thomas. Because I'm not so sure I didn't experience some of the same doubt as Thomas did one week after I proclaimed "Alleluia, Christ is Risen, He is Risen indeed!" The war in Gaza and the atrocities humankind inflicts on one another make me wonder how to live out the Easter story. When children are starving and their sullen eyes are void of life, it makes me wonder how to live out the Easter story. When floods and earthquakes, broken bridges and war and leave people without homes, livelihoods and life itself. I wonder how to live into the Easter story. And when people live into the injustices that society has placed upon them - it makes me wonder how to live out the Easter story.

But then, I am reminded of our commonality - the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Brian McClaren says we all live into un-peaceful, uneasy, unwanted feelings when faced with the realities of today's world. But the church is God's solidarity with humanity. It is our identity.

We ARE Easter people. Amen