

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 26:3-4  
SECOND LESSON: John 20:19-31  
April 19, 2020

***“The Peace of God”***  
Sermon © Lisa C Farrell

These are anxious times. Death from Covid-19 is beginning to touch us all. Our first member, 98-year-old Bill Hilliard is now battling the disease. The father of one of our Nursery School teachers just passed away from it. We hear of more people day by day—not just elderly people but younger people too. And we are all experiencing the strain of being confined to home. It’s stressful to be so limited in what we do when we leave the house, to remember to wear a mask, and to keep our distance from others. And now to add to our new strange reality there are those beginning to protest the restrictions put in place to save lives, while people in the medical profession plead with them to see sense. The nurses, doctors and thousands of medical support staff working 12-hour shifts with inadequate protection have seen entirely too much death. They have tried to save the lives of co-workers and failed. They know the danger is real. Those working in essential services have also lost friends and coworkers to this disease. But the collapsing economy puts another kind of pressure on us and presents another level of fear. We are caught between fear and fear. Anxiety is pandemic right now, just like Covid-19.

The disciples knew fear. They knew what it was like to have their lives ripped apart and turned upside down. They found themselves in a tailspin, unsure of the future, not even sure how to get through the day. On the evening of the first day of the week—Easter Sunday—ten of the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders. Thomas was not with them. Thomas, whose faith and commitment had been so intense that he had been willing to die for Jesus, had withdrawn from the others. He was in a very dark place. That Easter Sunday night Jesus came and stood among the ten. He showed them his hands and feet to reassure them it really was him. At the same time this physical body of Jesus was different from the one he had before, because he apparently just turned up in a room with locked doors. But as confused as they were the disciples were also overjoyed. Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

We don’t know the difference between this giving of the Holy Spirit and the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, although this was a limited group in a private setting and on Pentecost the Spirit came upon a large group of the

faithful in a very public way. In both instances the Holy Spirit was given as part of a commissioning. The disciples were being sent by Jesus into the world.

Jesus breathed peace into a traumatized group of people. He breathed peace into them. God's peace is more than the absence of conflict. It is the presence of wholeness.

It was a week later that Thomas was with the others gathered in the same room. The doors were locked, but this time there is no mention of fear. The disciples had told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, but Thomas was so deeply wounded he refused to believe. He said, Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Some have suggested that instead of calling him "doubting Thomas" we should really be calling him "conditional Thomas." Thomas said he will believe IF certain conditions are met. How many of us have approached faith in the same way? *IF I find historical proof these events really happened . . . IF God gives me a sign . . . IF my loved one is healed . . . IF I get this job . . . IF I have a near death experience and see heaven, then I will believe. Then I will commit.* Such a cosmic role reversal puts us above God. The moment our faith is based on our getting our demands met it stops being faith.

The crucifixion had broken Thomas' heart. When the risen Christ did stand before him proof was not needed. Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop being unbelieving and believe." Some of our English translations are a bit misleading. The word "doubt" is not actually used. This word is stronger than "doubt." It is unbelief, a total lack of faith. Thomas had lost his faith. But in the presence of Jesus Thomas had no need to touch Jesus' hands and side. Instead he fell to his knees and cried, "My Lord and my God!"

The prophet Isaiah wrote, "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you." But such trust is not easy. Thomas couldn't do it. Before Jesus appeared among them the disciples were terrified. And many of us are afraid right now. We are not, like the first disciples, in fear of our lives from the authorities, but we do live in fear of another enemy, a virus too small to be seen by the naked eye. In a very short period of time the world as we know it has been turned upside down. Businesses are closed. The economy is in a crisis. We just spent Easter Sunday without seeing our families. All of the things we took for granted have stopped, while politicians around the world play the blame game. How can we experience God's peace in such a time as this?

Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into the disciples. As Christians we believe the Holy Spirit dwells within us, but if we're honest, it doesn't always feel that way. And that's because being filled with the Spirit is a **continuous** process.

Ephesians 5:18 urges us to be filled with the Spirit. On the face of it that doesn't tell us much. The true message is found in the grammar that doesn't show up in English. The "be filled" has the meaning of continuous ongoing filling. It's be being filled, be constantly filled, keep being filled. If I water a plant I can't just do it once. The plant will die if I do that. I have to continue to

water it on a regular basis. It's not summer yet, but most of us have seen lawns wither and turn into dry stubble when there is little rain. We have to water it to keep it alive. We human beings are like living plants in need of water. Being filled once and only once does not work. Just as our bodies need food, water and sleep, our spirits must be nurtured and strengthened by the Holy Spirit every day.

How do we do this? We set time apart to be still before God and ask God to fill us. We stop distracting ourselves with unnecessary things long enough to be still and receive. It's not complicated. It's just very hard for us to do this. One of the reasons stay at home orders are so difficult for many people is because we fill our lives with noise in order to avoid being in our own presence. When we stop running, unresolved conflicts rise to the surface. When we stand still, guilt for past failures comes back to haunt us. When we sit in stillness we are faced with our own inadequacy. And that is precisely why we need to do so, because only then can God meet us at our point of need. It is the Spirit who assures us that we are forgiven. It is the Spirit who heals and strengthens. It is the Spirit who gives us grace for today and bright hope for tomorrow. It is the Spirit who brings us the peace of God.

As difficult as this time is, we can receive much good from it as our lives become simpler. God says, "Be still, and know that I am God." This week let us all make a point of doing just that—to be still, and to be filled. Amen.

Isaiah 26:3-4

- 3** You will keep in perfect peace  
those whose minds are steadfast,  
because they trust in you.  
**4** Trust in the Lord forever,  
for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.

John 20:19-31

**19** On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" **20** After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

**21** Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." **22** And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

**24** Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. **25** So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

**26** A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" **27** Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

**28** Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

**29** Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

**30** Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. **31** But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.