

## **On The Loose**

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

April 11, 2010; Tim Devine

St. Paul's United Church of Christ; Seattle, Washington

By the time of the reading that we heard from the New Testament Book of Acts, where Peter makes the statement, "*We must obey God rather than any human authority,*" the disciples and apostles have undergone a profound change. It is a post-Pentecost world. Dramatic events have unfolded. Answers have been given. The Holy Spirit has equipped them with courage and stamina – a far cry from the pre- and post-Crucifixion world of betrayal and denial.

And it is also in contrast to the reading that we heard from the Gospel of John: that story of our mainline Protestant patron saint – if we had such a thing – doubting Thomas.

The setting of the Biblical passage from the Gospel of John is somewhere behind locked doors. These people are depleted and devastated. Some have spoken of a resurrection, but they aren't sure to believe it. They are no different than Thomas. They haven't seen anything, so they are holding judgment.

They are all probably overwhelmed. They have witnessed a public execution. They are afraid of the Roman occupiers, as well as the powerful religious authorities, and are literally in hiding with no plan about what to do next. Their hope, their vision, and their purpose have all vanished just like Jesus.

And in the middle of it all there is Mary Magdalene. She says she has seen Jesus, that she has talked with him, and that he is alive! Do they dare believe this to be true? And for me is this the Mary Magdalene of the Gnostic Gospels – lifted up as a prominent if not THE prominent disciple, not the Mary Magdalene of the later church – spoken of in hushed tones as a prostitute befriended by Jesus.

And then Jesus appears to them with the words "*Peace be with you.*"

And this, too, might be another surprise. We live in a vengeful world – full of getting even. Are these the words that the disciples are expecting to hear? Might more honest and real words be something like, "Well, thanks a lot Peter, when the going got rough, you bailed." But Jesus doesn't go there.

Jesus might be understandably angry with them for abandoning him, in Peter's case for even denying him those famous three times. But that's not what happened. There were no recriminations, no anger, no condemnation, no judgment, not even an understandable expression of disappointment and hurt. Instead, the first words Jesus offered were both greeting and gift: "*Peace be with you.*"

So Jesus appears before this terrified and dis-spirited group, breathing spirit. It is John's gentle Pentecost – spirit and breath without the Book of Acts tongues of fire and dramatic understanding of all of the languages of the known world.

It is simple and very much in keeping with the tune and words from our Children's Time:

*Peace be with you. Peace be with you.  
Trust in me. Trust in me.  
I will always love you. I will always love you.  
Jesus said. Jesus said.*

But the story then shifts to Thomas – doubting Thomas, who isn't there for the big event. And he doesn't seem to get any credit for being the one person who is actually out in the world and not hiding behind locked doors. But as the story continues, Jesus trumps Thomas and Thomas is not allowed to continue on in his self-absorbed gloom. There is a second appearance of Jesus to the disciples and Thomas is present. He gets to participate and is transformed by the experience. Jesus specifically addresses what Thomas has needed. And because of this – in fact he almost has no choice – Thomas believes.

And that, I think, is another reason why we resonate with, or maybe even envy doubting Thomas. He gets that personal appearance. All of his doubts are specifically addressed. And that is what is so true and so difficult with Jesus' words in today's Gospel passage: "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" Blessed indeed, for it is much harder.

I am also comforted by the fact that Thomas was still included as part of the group of disciples a week later when the second appearance of Jesus occurs. Group dynamics would have surely made it uncomfortable for them in a situation where one doubts and the other ten hold a different opinion. Think of the popularity of the one lone voice of opposition on a deadlocked jury. The fact that Thomas was still included is enormously instructive for me. There is still a place at the table for the minority view. In this earlier model of a faith community there is a place at the table – period.

The disciples were overwhelmed, but now they are moving into becoming something else. The upcoming Pentecost will bring a more dramatic image of the Holy Spirit and will push them into becoming a movement and eventually a church. By the time of today's reading from the Book of Acts, the disciples have moved from being in hiding, to being active agents of change in an often unappreciative world. This is nothing short of transformation. They have moved from living in fear to living in love.

The late William Sloane Coffin is attributed to have said, "*As I see it, the primary religious task these days is to try to think straight... You can't think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. If your heart's a stone, you can't have decent thoughts – either about personal relations or about international ones. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.*"

Love trumping fear, for me, is far more important than any creed or dogma or set of beliefs. Love trumping fear allows for hope and possibility in a Good Friday world.

Too often either the world tells us or we tell ourselves that we need to have our beliefs all set and understood. But I would submit that belief is an ongoing journey. Some days it is there and some days it is not. Rather than seeing that as a failure or a lapse in moral character of religious faith, I believe that our strength in our relationship to God – and to Jesus – comes from its movement. If I simply recite a creed and say that I believe in it, then I haven't wrestled with it in a deep or meaningful way that I can then share with any authenticity. That may or may not be true for others, but this is what I need to do in living out my path – and it is simply one of many paths – to truth.

Today is never the final word. In the Christian story there is always the promise of Jesus ahead of us. We cannot put him in a box or a tomb. He will not be domesticated to fit our needs or desires. He is on the loose! His is a strange power that engages in a suffering that meets us where we all are in our deepest complexities and shadows, and stays one step ahead of us, shedding light and hope on each of our journeys or pathways.

When we allow ourselves to be ruled by love and not be ruled by fear, God can transform our despair, our discouragement, our lack of vision, and our dead spirits into fresh and unforeseen possibilities. Our church school curriculum recalls an old Easter poem that underscores this ever-present possibility of transformation by saying:

*A crown of thorns becomes a crown of glory.  
A cup of wine becomes a promise fulfilled.  
Some broken bread becomes the feast of life.  
The cross of crucifixion becomes a symbol of new life.  
The oils of embalming become the anointing of a Savior.  
A tombstone at sunrise becomes the door of resurrection.  
The dark of night becomes everlasting light.  
A crucified Savior becomes the living Word.*

So then today IS never the final word. God is still loving. God is still forgiving. God is still speaking. And we are all welcome at the table – believers, seekers, and doubters. For in this passage Jesus doesn't criticize or condemn, he isn't vengeful – he isn't any of those things that characterize our “get even” world.

What does he say? “*Peace be with you.*”

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.

### **Acts 5:27-32**

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

### **John 20:19-31**

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, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.