

Easter 2, Year A
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
April 16, 2023
Acts 2:14a, 22-32
Psalm 16
1 Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

Forgiveness and Resurrection

Was Thomas really a doubter?

He's taken some pretty big hits across the centuries.

In my experience, the folks who are keen to call Thomas a doubter and contrast his position with one of so-called "faith" are usually the same folks who want us to believe what they say just because they've said it. The same ones who want us to memorize pat answers to life's most pressing and urgent questions and live from surfacy, sacchariny sorts of platitudes.

Was Thomas really a doubter?

I don't think so. I think Thomas was a skeptic, in the literal sense of the word. *Skepsis* in Greek literally means "investigation." Before there was a school of philosophy known as the Skeptics, and before the word *skeptic* in English came to have at least a slightly cheeky connotation, *skeptic* meant and means "inquirer."

And isn't that what we are supposed to be—we who would follow Jesus—inquirers, investigators, explorers of God's grace and peace?

Isn't the ongoing invitation to be constantly seeking and inquiring and desiring more and deeper understanding and compassion for ourselves and for the whole world?

Isn't the work of discipleship really the work of lifelong discernment of how the resurrection isn't an event in the past but a present and living and future reality?

And why wasn't Thomas with the rest of them when the resurrected Jesus appears in their midst behind locked doors on the evening of the day of the Resurrection? Where was he? Was he out looking for Jesus? Was he the only one who believed

Mary Magdalene and set out, even though fearful, to encounter the risen Christ outdoors on his way as she had?

Thomas just wants to experience what the rest of the core group of male disciples have. His theme song is “God Bless the Child That’s Got Its Own.”

He has to wait a week. And then he gets what he is seeking, what he is inquiring after. And to his credit, when Jesus is visible to him, he immediately recognizes him: “My Lord and my God.” He has to wait a week to experience what the others already have.

We have a lot in common with Thomas. And we have a lot in common with the folks Peter is writing to in his letter: the exiles of the Diaspora all over the Mediterranean world who although they, and we, have not seen the resurrected Jesus in the same form as Peter and the eleven and the Marys and other disciples did before his ascension, nevertheless put our trust in him, inquire of him, love him, rely on him and the living reality of his resurrection.

Easter is not an event that happened once two thousand years ago. Rather, Easter, Resurrection, is a present and ongoing and future reality in which we live and by which and through which we endure all the changes and chances of this life in relationship with the God the Creator who raised Jesus the Christ from the dead through the power of the Holy Spirit.

I want to back up in the gospel for today from John’s twentieth chapter to a part that rarely gets airtime.

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” These words are remarkable. On the evening of his Resurrection Day, Jesus appears to the eleven disciples remaining who were gathered behind locked doors. They are gathered behind locked doors. He comes and says, “Peace be with you.” He lets them see him, experience him. He says again, “Peace be with you,” followed by, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you.” Then he breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.

In a few more weeks on the Day of Pentecost the most famous descent of the Holy Spirit will be what we celebrate. But as we heard on Good Friday, when Jesus dies, the best translation is, “He gave over the Spirit,” making that moment on Good Friday a moment of death and resurrection and Pentecost all at once. That’s the

first one. Today is the second one: He breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit”: breath and spirit are one and the same in this case.

But this part: *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* Does it sound like the Lord’s Prayer to you? *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

The power of the Resurrection—ongoing, lifegiving, present, and future—empowers us to be people of life and people of forgiveness. In this Easter season, is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone whose forgiveness you need to ask for?

People of the Resurrection, people of forgiveness—forgiveness as a gateway to Resurrection.

Five years ago, at this time, my Mom was in her home hospice time. On April 7, 2018, we began staying with her 24/7 until her death on May 20 of that year. My relationship with my Mom was complex. Can you relate?

As she entered her time of home hospice, different members of the hospice staff came by to introduce themselves to her and to us. And one of them in their first visit brought us a card that had the four things your loved one needs to hear, your loved one in hospice care.

These are formulated in different ways by different people, but on the card we received, these are the four messages they were telling us our Mom needed to receive from us:

Thank you.

I love you.

I forgive you.

I release you.

I did some hard work in those weeks of Mom’s hospice time, and so did she. I sat with her for hours and hours and hours, often right beside her, very often holding her hand.

It wasn't hard to say to my Mom, "Thank you." I wouldn't be me without her. She gave me so many things, she gave us so many things. And she's continuing to give those to us because she instilled them in us.

"I love you" was not hard. It was a complicated and complex relationship, but loving her was not hard. She was quite lovable and fun and frustrating and a lot of other things too, but very clearly we loved her. It was not hard for me to say, "I love you."

And she had been suffering for a long time, and I knew she was ready to cross over. So, it wasn't that hard for me to say, "I release you." And say, "Don't worry about us. You've done a good job. We'll be all right. We'll miss you like crazy, but we'll be all right. It's OK to go. I release you."

But that other one, "I forgive you": that took some work.

I needed to forgive my Mom, and she needed to forgive me. There's a lot of different stuff and a lot of ways to say it, but, basically, we needed to forgive one another for not being other people. Which is to say, part of accepting one another for who we are is forgiving one another for not being somebody else.

Days and days. Nights and nights. Tucked her every night; prayed the same prayers every night. Hours and hours in each other's company. And not too long before she died, with my head in her lap like when I was a little kid and her stroking my hair, she said, "All is forgiven. All is forgiven. All is forgiven." She released me, and she released herself.

Is there somebody's forgiveness you need to ask? Is there somebody you need to forgive? Forgiveness is one of the gateways into the resurrected life. God help us forgive as we are forgiven. God help us walk in the light of Christ's resurrection every single day.