

It's very easy to overlook the first half of the first verse in this passage as we focus our attention on Thomas, the Twin, the doubter. But I think it's really important that we understand the context John sets up for his second century audience, in what is this gospel writer's first post Easter appearance of the risen Christ. And if you don't mind, I'd like to read it again, and slow it down.

"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..." This first appearance happens about 12 hours after the women visit the tomb the first time. It's evening on that same day, and it's likely dark. The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked. "The house where they had met" tells me that this house is familiar. This house is a place of memory, a place of comfort, maybe even a place of strategic thinking as Jesus and his followers plotted their next move. I wonder if anyone who had known the followers of Jesus would also know this house, including anyone who would betray them – as Judas did.

It stands to reason that the disciples would have the doors locked. They were afraid. Perhaps what happened to Jesus would also happen to them. Perhaps the woman in the courtyard of the temple who rightly identified Peter as one of the followers would bring temple authorities and guards to take them away also.

It's unfortunate that the gospel of John has been so literalized that when we read "for fear of the Jews," we think this gospel writer is anti-semitic. Yes his audience was comprised of Jewish Christians at the turn of the second century. The temple had been burned to the ground by this time, Christians – Gentile and Jewish – had been kicked out of the synagogues, forcing them to create a whole new worship and community life. But second century Christians were persecuted by the same alliance between the religious authorities and the powers of empire that got Jesus killed. That's who the disciples are afraid of in this story. That's who John speaks of when he uses the word the Jews. He is referring to the powers of domination, greed and empire, modeled in the relationship between a fearful and corrupt Jewish leadership and Rome.

Friends we can not take this context too lightly. "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..."

And what is the first word the disciples hear coming from this whole new experience of Jesus? Peace. Peace be with you. This is what the writer of John's gospel wants us to notice first. Christ comes to us in our fear; when we're alone, when we're uncertain, when we're locked away, closed and unavailable because we're afraid. And Christ comes first with a word of peace. There is nothing more to be said when someone is afraid. Peace be with you. You can't make the fear go away. When you're holding a screaming child who has dragons under bed, you can't tell her it's not real. The only word is Peace. Peace be with you.

There is only one second thing you can say when someone is afraid. It's either two words or three. "Me too" OR "I get it." The risen Christ didn't have to say anything, all he had to do was show them his hands and his side where he had been nailed and stabbed. He understands the pain of the world; he understands why they might be frightened. All of a sudden they feel his compassion in a very real way, no wonder they feel like rejoicing. Compassion...it's what he modeled and they're feeling it.

Then look what the author sets up...look what happens next. "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"

All authority of GOD is being placed upon them. In a breath, in a whisper, in the power of Spirit's grace, peace comes wrapped in forgiveness. Peace will be ours when we forgive. They're afraid. They have every reason to be. The ones they're hiding from killed the one they love. And in this moment of mind numbing, paralyzing fear, with locked hearts and locked doors, the word peace comes with a call to forgive under the authority of the one who gives life. The power of Christ's peace bursts into our locked hearts with the call to forgive.

Incredible words for a troubled church as I see it today. It's interesting to me that most of the neighbors I bump into continue to see the modern church as closed and locked up – hearts and buildings set on keeping out those that don't fit the prescribed doctrine, or the right bible passage. A church, an entire faith tradition in fear?

I can still remember that Sunday in early October 2009 when I stood before you for the very first time. You had just come through a two year interim ministry period in which you named what it was you loved about this place.

And while you knew change needed to occur, you had no idea what that change would look like or what this upstart minister from the Okanagan would bring to the process. The first thing he brought was a change in the way we worship. All those songs.

There was no small amount of fear on your part. I know I don't remember feeling as nervous as I'd ever felt before. Three days after I opened my office for the first time as "the Minister," I stood in front of you to lead worship AND COMMUNION no less, standing in a long line of preachers and pastors whom you have loved, thinking, well, at least I've only rented the apartment.

And then all the changes began. And we got more and more afraid. I would check in with my close friends and say things like "what if this doesn't work? What if it does?" There was lots of angst about whether we should move the time for worship, or the choir loft, or the pulpit. Lil Spears told me of the time when she walked through the sanctuary to attend a Sunrisers meeting just as they were tearing the old pulpit down. Worried? We were freaking out?

But you know, into this midst came the same word of peace. May the peace of Christ be with you; words we offer to each other, every week, no matter where each of us is on our journey. When we first started this little moment in worship, we got a little uncomfortable looking at someone we hardly knew, right into their eyes, and saying words we have not felt before. May the peace of Christ be with you. Lots of us resisted. Lots of us didn't want to be pushed into doing something that didn't feel comfortable. But you know, more than one person has said to me in the past number of weeks; "secretly I really didn't like passing the peace, now it's the most important part of our service." We're even finding words of grace and compassion for each other, for the things we said and did in those times we were freaking out. The peace of Christ has changed us.

Thomas didn't believe such a transformation could happen to those disciples in the space of 12 hours. He wasn't there. He didn't get to watch the change that happened to the disciples when peace came in a whisper, through the power of forgiveness. And you know, there are those out there who haven't been around to see this transformation in us either. That's okay, perhaps they'll come to witness it for themselves. I believe those who walk through the doors of this place for the first time are sensing Spirit's breath, in the peace we offer one another.

When we say Christ is alive friends, that's what we're talking about. In the peace we offer one another, the power of Christ's presence comes and transforms us, especially when we're the most afraid. That's good news. Amen.