

Sermon: Mercy that Begets New Beginnings  
Scripture: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; John 20:19-31  
Second Sunday of Easter  
Communion Sunday  
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Our first Scripture reading is from Acts 2:14a, 22-32. Peter is preaching to a crowd in Jerusalem, proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ – his life, death, and resurrection – to a crowd of non-believers. Peter’s message is one of hope, inspiring his fellow Israelites to turn to Jesus and receive salvation. Here now the Word of the Lord.

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them,

“Fellow Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— <sup>23</sup> this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. <sup>24</sup> But God raised him up, having released him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. <sup>25</sup> For David says concerning him,

‘I saw the Lord always before me,  
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;  
<sup>26</sup> therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;  
moreover, my flesh will live in hope.  
<sup>27</sup> For you will not abandon my soul to Hades  
or let your Holy One experience corruption.  
<sup>28</sup> You have made known to me the ways of life;  
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

<sup>29</sup> “Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. <sup>30</sup> Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. <sup>31</sup> Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

‘He was not abandoned to Hades,  
nor did his flesh experience corruption.’

<sup>32</sup> “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

Amen.

We continue our gospel reading from last week, John 20:19-31. After Mary Magdalene's first witness testimonies of Jesus' empty tomb and being the first person to share the news of the resurrected Jesus, we now are told about the resurrected Jesus' first encounter with his disciples, and how Jesus displays mercy with them. Here now the Lord of the Lord.

John 20:19-31

<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> 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."

<sup>26</sup> 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." <sup>27</sup> 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." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> 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."

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray. Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of faith, and we acknowledge the reality of our doubts and uncertainties. Through your Word, give us the courage to engage with these doubts, and the wisdom to discern your Truth. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I remember someone telling me that the more time you spend with God, the more likely that you will one day wrestle with God. I think what that person really meant is that the longer you live, and more choices you have made, and more knowledge we gain to rely upon ourselves in conjunction with our faith, you will come across a time when you will doubt and have a questions directed towards God. The outcome of the wrestling match has been prophesied for eons, since the creation. It comes with no surprise that you and I will lose that match. You and I will, however, not come out of it empty handed. Rather, we will come out of that encounter stronger and transformed.

In the Old Testament, Jacob, the younger twin, who stole the birthright of his older twin, Esau, through trickery, deception, and taking advantage of the circumstances (particularly when Esau was very hungry), Jacob is on his way to see him for the first time in years. In his troubled, doubtful mind of seeing if he made the right choice, he wrestles with the angel of the Lord until daybreak. For the majority of Jacob's younger years, he is known as the trickster who runs away at the first sight of trouble. Yet, during his wrestling match with God as he was doubting his actions, he comes out changed, a new. Rather than smiting him as he saw the face of God, God shows a mercy and Jacob comes out with only a limp and a blessing: a new identity, a new beginning. Jacob of the old has gone and the new has come,<sup>1</sup> as he is known as Israel, a name which God's people will carry his name until this very day. An act of mercy that transformed doubt to a new beginning.

Today's gospel Scripture tells us of another twin, Thomas, who is skeptical and doubtful. Yet, Jesus does not condemn Thomas for his doubts. Instead, he appears to Thomas and second time before the other disciples, then invites him to touch his scars, just as he had done for the other disciples. This encounter with merciful Jesus transforms Thomas' doubt into a stronger faith, and he becomes a witness to the reality of the resurrection with a renewed sense of purpose and hope.

We must reframe and reconsider what doubt is in our lives. Paul Tillich, one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century said, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith." We must be willing to engage with our doubts and questions as we walk in our faith journey with the open possibility that our own doubts can be transformed into a deeper and more authentic faith. Because when God's people embrace our doubts and seek the truth wrestling with God in the difficult moments, it is

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

there we also experience God's mercy that is greater than our doubts, that will transform us and give us the gift of new beginnings.

What makes Peter's sermon in today's Scripture from Acts so compelling and convincing to the fellow Israelites who are non-believers is this; Out of all the disciples, isn't Peter the one who doubted Christ most publicly by denying Jesus three times before he heard the rooster crow to welcome the new dawn? I know it is not written in John 20 passage, when Jesus visits the disciples for the first time behind the closed and locked doors, but can you imagine what their conversation was like? Can you imagine speechless Peter standing front of Jesus? How deep was Christ's amazing grace and mercy that covered Peter, to reclaim and continue to claim to be the Rock which Christ build his church and the gates of hell did not prevail against it?!<sup>2</sup>

Today's Scriptures illustrate the power of God's mercy to transform doubt into faith, fear into courage, and confusion into clarity. They remind us that we, as the resurrected people, have room to doubt, but that God's mercy overshadows our doubts. That God's marvelous light can pierce through any doubt or structure or a wall that we might put around our hearts to feel God's love – the pure, first-love that carries us each and every day. We can trust that God will be with us in our doubts, guiding us towards new beginning and a new way of life. Let's face it, friends. We live in a world filled with uncertainty and doubt, with social and political divisions that threaten to tear us apart. In our own individual lives, we are overwhelmed with many things which we are juggling, and it is sometimes hard to figure out what to believe or what to believe in.

In those times, let us return to our faith. Let us return to God who loves us. God and God's grace and mercy is always with us. Whenever we feel the burdens that are too heavy, we can turn to God in prayer, trusting that God will guide us through the storms of life, if not calm the storm outright. Let us take comfort in the knowledge that, just as God transformed doubt into faith for Peter, the disciples, and Thomas, God can and will transform our doubts into a deeper and more profound faith that begets new beginnings. So let us continue to look to the cross. Let us lay our burdens at the foot of the cross. And remember what the cross symbolizes; that our God who transformed death and overcame it, and made it become the symbol of love and hope for the world.

May the mercy and peace of Christ be with all of us this morning and for all our spiritual journeys ahead. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:18