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Last week in my sermon, I spoke of the “complicated” joy of that first Easter morning. There was wonder and amazement in the face of the empty tomb, but also fear and confusion. Arriving at the place of joy was a process and likely one that was different for each of Jesus’ followers.

Today’s Gospel from John tells us of that process...that journey toward joy... for the apostle, Thomas.

It’s appropriate, I think, that this story takes place in a locked room. And it’s noteworthy that it isn’t the disciples that are out looking for Jesus. But it is Jesus that seeks and finds the disciples. And a locked door won’t stand in his way. John tells us that the disciples were hiding behind those locked doors in fear. Their leader had been murdered. And now they were waiting, terrified that those powerful leaders, responsible for the death of Jesus, would send soldiers for them, too.

They had been told by Mary Magdalene that Jesus is alive ...that in fact, she saw him and spoke with him. Peter and another disciple had even witnessed themselves that the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. But still...nobody was quite sure what to believe. And so they gathered together in fear and confusion.

And then, all of a sudden, Jesus was standing before them. And the disciples rejoiced to see him.

But Thomas...Thomas, you see, wasn’t there. Perhaps he had been the only one brave enough to leave the locked room to go and get food for everyone. Or maybe he had been out looking for Jesus on his own. When he returned, the disciples told him about the visit from Jesus. They must have been rejoicing and inviting Thomas into their joy. But Thomas wasn’t quite ready. His friends had experienced Jesus for themselves. He wanted that experience, too. He needed to see and to touch and feel.

Until that moment, our story tells us, Thomas would not believe. Believe...that word comes from the Greek word, “pist.” But pist is a word with layers of meaning. Believe doesn’t really sum it up. A better translation might be to put your trust in something. Believing is something we do with our heads. But trust is something we do with our hearts. And I think that’s closer to what John meant by using that word, pist.

Without experiencing the risen Christ for himself, Thomas wasn’t ready to trust that it was really him...he wasn’t ready to celebrate and be joyful. Not until... Until the Risen Christ stood before him. Spoke his name. Offered for Thomas to touch his wounds...offered his very body to earn the trust of Thomas.

Maybe we’re frustrated that we don’t get that kind of physical encounter with Jesus to feed our trust and faith. If so, we’re not alone. The community for whom John’s Gospel was written likely never met Jesus before his crucifixion or experienced the Risen Christ in his bodily form. And so, I imagine that they, like so many of us, had stumbling blocks in their belief...in their trust. Like Thomas, they may have wanted to see and touch, not just be told, of the Risen Christ.

What do we need to trust in the Risen Christ? I don’t think that Jesus is offended when we struggle with our beliefs: when we have more questions than answers about the resurrection. I think back to an earlier exchange between Thomas and Jesus.

Jesus told the disciples he was going ahead to prepare a place for them. And that they would know the way. Thomas responded without pause, "We don't know where you're going...how can we know the way?" It seems that Thomas always wanted Jesus to be clearer, more precise. Thomas didn't want to get left behind. And Jesus never seemed to love him any less for his questions and impatience.

I am sure that Jesus understands that it may be frustrating for us that we don't get to touch and see. That we are constantly looking for signs that the Risen Christ is real. I find that I am always looking for those signs. When I tried to make logical sense, head sense, of the Risen Christ in my younger days, I couldn't do it and so for a while, I settled for a kind of agnosticism that appreciated the Christian message but didn't fully buy into it.

But over the years, I have discovered more and more moments of clarity and trust and faith in the Risen Christ. And these moments have always been fueled by experiences or observations of love or wonder.

One of these moments came to me when reflecting upon the disciples locked in that room. Finding the courage to leave did not depend upon a logical and rational decision. It was a decision based on love.

Because in one moment, they were immobilized by fear. They were locked inside without any idea of what to do next. But Jesus appeared. He breathed upon them the Holy Spirit and proclaimed his peace. He was there to comfort, but also to send them out. To remind them of the mission they had been on since becoming his follower. A mission they could not carry out behind locked doors.

We know how dangerous that mission was because we can read about it in the Book of Acts. What we find in our selection from Acts this morning gives us a glimpse into the dangers they walked into when leaving that room.

Peter and the other apostles had just been imprisoned in Jerusalem for preaching about Jesus. Miraculously, they escaped prison (Acts doesn't tell us how) and are back at the Temple preaching in our story today. The high priest and other religious leaders were so enraged at what they are proclaiming about Jesus that they want to kill the apostles. If we were to read a little further in Acts, we would know that the apostles were flogged for their preaching. And history tells us that many of the apostles were eventually murdered for sharing the message of Jesus.

So remaining behind those locked doors made absolute sense. Leaving was dangerous. The kind of bravery displayed by the apostles could not have been fueled by rational thinking. Theirs was a kind of bravery that could only have been fueled by love.

As people of faith today, we do not live under the threat of violence or death for proclaiming the message of Jesus, at least not here in the United States. And yet we face our own dangers. All of humanity stands on the precipice of possible extinction. The threat of nuclear war and ecological disaster and the brokenness of the world that we see all around us could make us want to hide in our own locked rooms, immobilized by fear.

It is in that shadow, however, that we are called to break free from our locked rooms and proclaim resurrection. Proclaim that hope and beauty and life and rebirth and miracle are real and present in the world.

Parker Palmer, a writer and poet many of you know, says it like this. “We live in dark times, surrounded by forces that try to block the sun so they can operate under the cover of darkness. But something in us persists in reaching for the light.”

That something in us that persists in reaching for the light is love. In the church, we call it the love of Christ, and we claim that that love is liberating and life-giving. And it’s that love that calls us, like the disciples that have gone before us, out of our fear, out of our locked rooms so that we can continue to reach for the light and proclaim that light in the face of darkness, proclaim joy in the face of despair, and proclaim life in the face of death. May it be so. Amen.