

“Alone Together”

New Testament: Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Psalm: Psalm 16

Epistle: 1 Peter 1:3-9

Gospel: 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.”<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, which are not written in this book.<sup>31</sup> 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.**

**The word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.**

What happens after Easter? Well, Christmas is 254 shopping days away, but that’s getting ahead of ourselves. If Christmas is the birth story and Easter is the death and

resurrection story of Christ, then what happens afterwards? In the Gospel of John, Christ started preparing the disciples for his departure on the way and once they arrived in Jerusalem. In chapter 16, He told them, “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.” They didn’t understand Jesus at the time, which brings us to our story today.

So let’s recap the story we just read, it is the first day of the week after the crucifixion and the disciples, 10 of them at least, are locked behind closed doors. Christ enters the room, gives them a mission, breathes the Holy Spirit upon them, and grants them the power of forgiveness. Judas has hung himself and Thomas, for some reason, is not there. Thomas was not with the group and did not see Jesus. The disciples see Thomas later that week and tell him, “We have seen the Lord!” (Today they might have sent him a message on Facebook...), but for Thomas this is hearsay and he gives a negative conditional statement in response, “Unless I see... these things... I will not believe.” The following Sunday, they are once again, inside and Thomas has *made* it to the meeting this time! Christ appears again, says “Peace be with you”, “Do not be unbelieving, but believing”. After seeing, Thomas then confesses, “My Lord and My God”. The evangelist then tells us that the purpose of the signs written in this book was so that you “might believe” or in some transcripts so that you might “continue to believe”.

What if Thomas had been with the other disciples when Jesus appeared in the house the week before? That’s our focus for today.

When I started training for the Shamrock marathon in 2007, I was working with Team in Training. The team followed a training plan where we ran four days a week with long group runs on Saturday and solo runs during the week. It wasn’t long before I realized

that Saturday runs, though they were longer, were far more enjoyable than running by myself. They seemed to take less time and I was able to run farther. I found I needed music, caffeine and mental gymnastics just to be able to run alone. I told myself, chemo must be far worse than whatever pain I feel in my legs and lungs... As the marathon got closer, I started reciting Hebrews 12.1, "Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us throw off the sin that so easily entangles and run with perseverance the race set out before us." The whole concept of Team in Training is to run and raise funds for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, as a team. There are coaches, staff, and mentors to help you cross the finish line. Race day arrived and thanks to the team, and Peter Thompson, I was able to finish the race, *but I could not have done it alone.*

Now imagine if you will trying to build a house alone, learn a subject alone, sing or play music as a one person band, or even play a given sport alone. Yes, there are some solo sports, but you are still competing against others. Or consider our present situation. The public has been asked to follow social distancing guidelines and self-isolate to curb the spread of the virus. Although sticking to the advice is essential in the current crisis, staying at home with limited human contact can have a significant impact on our mental well-being - and in particular, lead to feelings of loneliness. The most vulnerable are also being advised to isolate themselves entirely. It is no stretch of the imagination to see that we can't get very far by ourselves. There are some things in life we can do alone, but there are many where we need people around us to help us out.

SO Imagine, if you will, being Thomas after Jesus was crucified and being in fear of persecution and your life and being alone. Perhaps you feel alone at this very moment, struggling in your life and your faith and seeming to be going at this all by yourself. Thomas and the others had followed Jesus for months and years, seeing his miracles, hearing his stories, and now Jesus is no longer physically with them. If Thomas had been with the disciples on that night, would he have still doubted?

If he had not been the only one who was absent when he heard the news from the other disciples, would he have doubted?

Believing alone could be like running alone- it becomes more challenging, more dangerous, more painful perhaps, and more importantly there is no support. It could be like being alone during this pandemic. The late Dr. Samuel Roberts, ethics professor at Union Seminary, wrote in his book, *African American Christian Ethics*, “To the extent that we live in community, the great commitments we make in life, the great milestones we reach in life, must at some level be grounded in the reality of the context of community. For the Christian, personal identity for (that individual) must necessarily include some reference to the believing community”. Dr. Roberts is saying that we cannot believe alone, it is impossible to be Christian by oneself or believe while in utter solitude. Historically, monks or nuns have spent a life in quiet solitude and reflection, but they were still in the presence of others. There is strength in believing in community and yet it is easier to doubt or be challenged in your beliefs while walking in faith alone. How do we do that during a time like this? Well I am glad you asked...

Stay in virtual contact- I will admit that I am not a huge fan of Facebook, but in times like these, it is a helpful tool. Zoom and other apps and media can help us now as

well. If you need help using these resources, call us or someone you know, we can walk you through it. It's better to be together, even as we learn new technology, than to suffer through this alone.

Plan home-based activities- Kathleen has been setting up some wonderful videos, activities, and devotionals online for our youth and children. Cat Adams has had a large part in setting that up as well. There are countless things we can do inside the walls of our homes, we just need to think and pray about it, to get creative, or if you like me aren't creative, find someone creative, like Cat and Kathleen.

Structure your day- it would be easy to stay in your pajamas or bathrobe, and let's be honest, that's not a bad thing. But if you need structure, and we all do from time to time, then I recommend setting up some structure for yourself and your family. As we have been at home all the time for the past weeks, the days can merge into one and seem endless. If we have a plan, it breaks the day up into manageable pieces, and can give us a sense of control, even when things like this pandemic are out of our control.

Look after yourself- drink plenty of water, get some exercise, eat well, practice mindfulness and prayer, get out and garden, try something new, put a puzzle together, draw, listen to podcasts or the radio, find time to relax. Some days, dress up, at least beyond PJs, because chances are if you dress better, you will feel better!

Finally, Reach out for help. If you are struggling, there are lots of people in our church that care, that listen, that pray. Our staff would love to chat with you. Call Peter or myself. Our numbers are posted all over, including on today's bulletin. Call members helping members for the month. An example I used while on active duty is of an athlete in the gym lifting weights. In order to get stronger, the athlete must lift more weight. To

do so safely requires what is called a spotter. A good spotter will stand close to the athlete and be ready to help, but the spotter does not take the burden of the weight. They give the athlete a “bump” if you will, to get past the hard point. The athlete is lifting, is carrying the weight, and continues to through the exercise. So also with life. We all need spotters to help us when the weight becomes too heavy. We still carry the weight and I should mention that asking for a spotter is not a sign of weakness. It’s actually smarter and safer than lifting the weight alone. Look at our Scripture for today, for whatever reason, Thomas was outside the house, *outside* the group, and outside the early church. When Jesus called the first congregational meeting, or showed up at it unannounced, Thomas did not make it. Thankfully, the disciples shared the good news with him that week and brought him back *inside* the community of early Christian faith. Thomas was alone, but he did not STAY alone. So also with each of us. We may be alone, but we don’t have to stay alone. We can still be church even while maintaining safe social distancing. Herman Melville once said, “We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men.”

As we look at our time and this place, what is required to be a part of a church? One becomes an active member of the church ***through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and acceptance of his Lordship in all of life.*** Belief in Jesus Christ is all that is required. Once we are members, we then have a responsibility to take part in the common life and worship of a particular church, even, no, especially amidst a crisis.

So What happens after Easter? We confess, like Thomas, “My Lord and My God”, and we follow that belief statement with a life *in* the community of faith and witness to those *outside* the community of faith. The race we run is two fold, to support the flock and to grow the flock. We must live, serve, worship and learn inside the community of faith while also welcoming outcasts, tax collectors, and sinners to join us. We must welcome those who have doubts and run the race with them, because we *are* surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. We must welcome those who know the story of the resurrection and those who do not know, or perhaps, believe, the story. Who was John’s intended audience after all, who was John writing to or talking to? I believe he was writing to both communities, those inside the early church and those outside the early church, Jews and Gentiles alike. Some manuscripts state in verse 31, that these are written that you “might believe” while others write that you may “continue to believe”. One would seem to target Gentiles “who might believe” once they hear these stories, the other Christians “who might continue to believe”. The gospel was written so that those on the inside and those on the outside might be given support and encouragement by the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection, of Christ’s peace that he gives to us all, so that we might run this race together.

The following was shared this past week from Judy Stowers...who wrote that she was “So moved by this, particularly as we approach Holy Week.” Her writing came from Lauryn Ashworth, “The very first Easter was not in a crowded worship space with singing and praising. On the very first Easter the disciples were locked in their house. It was dangerous for them to come out. They were afraid. They wanted to believe the good news they heard from the women, that Jesus had risen. But it seemed too good to be true.

They were living in a time of such despair and such fear. If they left their homes their lives and the lives of their loved ones might be at risk. Could a miracle really have happened? Could life really had won out over death? Could this time of terror and fear really be coming to an end?

Alone in their homes they dared to believe that hope was possible, that the long night was over and morning had broken, that God's love was the most powerful of all, even though it didn't seem quite real yet. Eventually, they were able to leave their homes, when the fear and danger had subsided, they went around celebrating and spreading the good news that Jesus was risen and love was the most powerful force on the earth.

This year, we might get to experience a taste of what that first Easter was like, still in our homes daring to believe that hope is on the horizon. Then, after a while, when it is safe for all people, when it is the most loving choice, we will come out, gathering together, singing and shouting the good news that God brings life even out of death, that love always has the final say!

This year we might get the closest taste we have had yet to what that first Easter was like.”

Do we proclaim our beliefs alone, or in the fellowship of Christian believers? 1 John 1:3 states, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” Though we may be alone for a time, let us continue to meet together, to look out for one another, to call on one another while we look forward to that time of being



together in church and community again. What *does* happen after Easter? Let us run this race together and may peace be with you, now and always.

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.**