

What is the first thing you do when you're scared or when you are faced with the unknown? My coping mechanism is self-isolation and falling back on what is familiar.

In my childhood I found a sense of security in hiding in a crawl space during storms. Then as I got older, I sought my room in my high school years, my closet in my dorm room in college, (if my roommate was in the room), and now in my house with my husband, parents and kids, under my blankets my "crawl space" to get away from it all. Where do you go to find a sense of security, where you can cope with stress and fear?

It is no question that in the middle of the Coronavirus spreading in our world today, we all seek this "safe place" where we can hide from what is happening. "Shelter in place" ordinance or not, most of us who know the seriousness of COVID 19 would choose to be sheltered in our own "crawl spaces", only to sneak out once in a while for necessities, "in fear of spreading the virus" for the good of ourselves and others, of course. So we can identify with Jesus' disciples from the scripture reading today.

Immediately after Jesus' death on the cross, the followers of Jesus were in FEAR, "in fear of the Jews" meaning the Jewish leaders who played the significant role of putting Jesus on trial, on the cross, and into a tomb. Some scholars say that they also would have been in fear of facing Jesus, weighed down by guilt for betraying Jesus in his time of need and afraid of the mysterious Jesus who is risen. And so their response was to go into their "crawl space".

Some scholars say it was the upper room where they ate the last supper with Jesus but some say it may have been their main gathering place where they spent time with Jesus in worship, prayer, and fellowship. Wherever this place was, this upper room was a place they could lock themselves in together. Some may criticize these disciples for their cowardice behavior but isn't this reaction a normal way to respond in times of fear?

Hiding was normal but what was different was that they were gathered! Instead of being scattered in their own homes, this group of Jesus' followers gathered. They found comfort in being together in fellowship, prayer, and worship.

But ponder with me about what this gathering would mean in the times of Jesus, without technology. These disciples would have been intentional to prepare the place, to communicate with one another, to be creative, bold, and courageous to invite, to set aside their own tendencies to want to be alone or to run away. But in the midst of fear, these disciples acted as a collective and safely connected with one another.

And it was in this gathered place Jesus barged in, through the locked door to meet them, to greet them as he always did, "peace to be with you", a promise and a gift only he can give. Then Jesus breathed life into each of them who gathered; the Holy Spirit took a hold of them as they were gathered! Their deliberate effort in gathering was well worth it as Jesus entered and gave them new life!

This speaks to each of us who are gathered in worship right now through creative ways. Though we are in our “crawl spaces” today, even if we are not hand in hand, or shoulder to shoulder, we have gathered. Fear has not “Killed” this church! We as a church are being bold, creative, and courageous in reaching out to one another to “gather” in worship, prayer, study, and fellowship. Through the various ways of connecting with each other, we have prepared and created this safe space to gather together behind our locked doors helping us find comfort in what is familiar, the word of God, hymns of praise, Bible study, service projects, and fellowship. As we continue to gather safely, Jesus barges into our lives! Jesus is breathing life into our church, our community, and the world even if we are behind locked doors because we have gathered. Let’s continue to be creative in inviting others to our “crawl spaces” of creative worship, fellowship, and prayer “crawl spaces”.

But Thomas... where was he? Did he not get the message like the rest of the disciples? He missed everything! Scholars speculate that Thomas made a conscious decision not to be in the upper room with the rest because he coped with his grief differently. William Barclay Commentary suggest that Thomas was one of the most courageous and compulsive disciples among the twelve as he clearly expressed his love for Jesus. He was willing to “go to Jerusalem and die with him” which is found in John 11. Barclay shared that “Thomas made one mistake. He withdrew from the Christian fellowship. He sought loneliness rather than togetherness. And because he was not there with his fellow Christians, he missed the first coming of Jesus. We miss a great deal when we separate ourselves from the Christian fellowship and try to be alone. Things can happen to us within the fellowship of Christ’s church which will not happen when we are alone. When sorrow comes and sadness envelops us, we often tend to shut ourselves up and refuse to meet people. That is the very time when, in spite of our sorrow, we should seek the fellowship of Christ’s people, for it is there that we are likeliest of all to meet him face to face.”

Can you remember a time you removed yourself from the Church for any reason? Even if you gained something from your retreat away, the truth is, there are some experiences missed. This guides us to think about people we know who have isolated themselves from the community of faith and to reach out to them. Could this be the time for us to be like these first disciples who witness to others “We have seen the Lord” in creative ways?

Lastly, Thomas gained a bad reputation as “doubting” Thomas as if he reacted differently from the rest of the disciples and us. Does he really deserve that bad rap?

The important fact to acknowledge here is that in actuality, the word “Doubt” does not appear in the original text. Even though the widely used translations of the Bible has Jesus saying to Thomas, “Do not doubt but believe” as he offers to show his hands and side where he was pierced, the literal translations is actually “do not be unbelieving but believe.”

The new Interpreter’s Bible commentary says, “This story does not focus on doubt and skepticism, but on the grounds of faith.” Another commentary praises Thomas for his transparency and honesty. Barclay says about Thomas, “Faith was never an easy thing for him; obedience never came readily to him. He was the man who had to be sure; he was the man who had to count the cost. But once he was sure, and once he had counted the cost, he was the man who went to the ultimate limit of faith and obedience. A faith like Thomas’s is better than any

glib profession; and an obedience like his better than an easy acquiescence which agrees to do things without counting the cost and then goes back upon its word.” In today’s terms, Thomas didn’t check his brain at the door to follow Jesus.

Thomas was indeed not doubtful but conditional in his belief. “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”. The disciples responded in the same way as Thomas but they just didn’t say it as bluntly as Thomas did. So in essence, Thomas’ name isn’t “Doubting Thomas”; it is “Conditional Thomas” the “If... then...” Thomas.

So who isn’t conditional in their “belief”? Richard Carlson, professor of New Testament at The Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania says that “we often approach faith relationships by establishing terms by which we will respond with faith.” “If you do this God, if I see this, then I will believe, then I will commit (we can surely check our brains at the door into the sanctuary as we enter in worship...but do we?). We all seek to understand, we all journey in the path of faith. Thomas refused to accept things as is, or to say things on the surface, but honestly sought to know for himself, to see for himself, and to experience for himself. And in his honesty and desperation to see Jesus, he is satisfied. Jesus came back for Thomas and with Jesus’ appearance alone, without meeting the multiple conditions, Thomas proclaimed the most profound revelation, “My Lord, My God”. One that validated Jesus’ message and the purpose of the Gospel of John that God, who is the Word came in the flesh.

Are you the conditional (insert your name)? If we find the cure? Then... May we be bold and courageous in honestly and earnestly seeking that God would lead us to faith in these times of uncertainties. To seek to connect with the community of faith, and to be watchful for Jesus’ invasion of our “crawl spaces” to receive the breath of life that continues to be breathed into us.

This indeed makes us different as Christians, that we have hope beyond death, that we continue to have meaningful and safe gatherings behind our locked doors, that we have peace in the midst of uncertainties, and to have the breath of new life within us that in turn gives the breath of life into others. May it be so, Amen.