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This is the church,
here today.

In John's gospel,
this is the story of the church.

They were gathered.
They were sitting around a table.
And Jesus showed up,
right in the middle of them.

Not everybody believed it.
Thomas doubted the whole thing,
but he came around eventually.

Our gospel reading today
starts with verse 19 of chapter 20.
The beginning of chapter 20 is the resurrection story.

That's not the church.
The church is those of us who are gathered,
looking for the *risen* Christ.

Chapter 20 begins without a church.
Chapter 20 begins with Mary Magdalene
going to find the dead Jesus.
She's going to see his body.
But it's gone.
She runs to tell the others.
But all they see is an empty tomb.

They've got to wait until today's story,
later that night.
They are locked away in their little room.
And Jesus shows up.

They aren't looking for a dead body anymore,
now they are looking at the Risen Christ.
Now they are the church.

Jesus is there,
right in the middle of them.

That's church;
when Jesus shows up
right in the middle of us.

Not everybody believed it.
Thomas doubted the whole thing,
but he came around eventually.

Jesus didn't tell them that they were the church.
He said,
"Peace be with you."

After all that.
After torture,
death,
and a grave;
after locking the door out of fear,
"Peace be with you."

He's got some nerve,
some kind of nerve.

But then you would, wouldn't you?
After all that:
after glorious entry into Jerusalem,
after washing feet,
after betrayal in the garden,
after torture
and death
and resurrection to new life,
you would have some kind of nerve:
preaching peace to the fearful.

And they felt it too.
In the middle of all that anxiety and that fear,
"Peace be with you."

Funny what resurrection can do.

Jesus didn't tell them that they were the church.
He didn't tell them to meet every week,
to form committees,
to have fundraisers and Sunday school.

But he did tell them what their job was.
"As the Father has sent me,
so I send you
...If you forgive the sins of any,
they are forgiven them;
if you retain the sins of any,
they are retained."

And that's the work:
being sent out into the world,
to preach forgiveness of sins.

That's why we meet every week,
why we form committees,
why we have fundraisers and Sunday school
- forgiveness -
sending ourselves out into the world to say,
"peace be with you"
to say,
"you are forgiven".

Most of us doubt the whole thing,
but we'll come around eventually.

Forgiveness is a doubtful thing.

Forgiveness that can lead to new life,
forgiveness that's as if you were raised from the dead.

Hard to believe in that,
unless you can touch it,
unless you can feel it.

That's what Thomas doubted:

NOT the resurrection.

No, that wasn't the most unbelievable thing.

No, the craziest part

is NOT that Jesus was raised from the dead,
the craziest part

is that he came back to the same group of people:
the ones who'd left him,
who'd betrayed him.

Thomas believed Mary

when she said there was an empty tomb.

He didn't believe the rest of them

when they said, "We have seen the Lord."

"I will not believe that he came back to **us**;

I will not believe that he said, "Peace be with **you**."

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."

That's our job.

Not to believe.

Believing isn't a job;
it's a gift.

You can believe all the right things you want to,
and you still won't be the church.

No, our job is to be like Jesus,

to keep showing up,

to forgive our way into locked rooms and doubtful hearts.

Forgiveness is our job,

the job of the church.

“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.”

That's our job.

Not to believe,

to forgive!

There you are,
locked away in a secret room,
fearing your secret fears
about your awful betrayal.

And the one you betrayed,
the one you left for dead,
there he is.

Alive
and not off gathering new disciples.
There he is,
with you,
telling us our work.

Can't you just hear him?
- "If you forgive,
it is forgiven.
If you retain,
it is retained.

But listen,
if there's some sin you can't forgive,
make sure it's worse than what you done to me.

Because here I am,
right in the middle of you;
here I am...
right here in your little locked up room.

Here I am
...here I am
...here is Life.