

Let's set the scene for the Gospel reading this morning.

It's night. The disciples are meeting-- we are told --in the room where it happened, where the disciples and Jesus met for what was to be their final meal together. They are hiding out in fear in that same upper room.

This is undoubtedly the room of a friend. It is probably traditionally small—one or two rooms—and it would have been common to have pillows or cushions strewn about a very low, large, plain table. There probably were few, if any, chairs. So there they were, reclining around the table, as was usual, and there was probably some simple food and wine there that their remaining friends had delivered.

The disciples are filled with grief. And they were afraid.

Grief is like a burning house. We can only stand there and watch as everything goes up in smoke, and we are helpless to change it.

And after the heat of grief has consumed everything, grief invites us to cross the threshold of fear as we --at last-- find the courage—the heart-- enter the house again and survey the ashes of our life differently.

Grief takes us to a place where risk is enormous.

And suddenly Jesus appears with them, and offers the standard Hebrew greeting to them : “Shalom Aleichum.” Which means “peace be with you.” It's the standard greeting in Israel and the Arabic world even today, “Salam aleykum.”

The disciples were astonished. Joyous. Disbelieving. Grateful. It changed them.

It's hard to fathom how much it affected them.

Maybe this will help us. A friend relayed this story. A woman went out to call her small elderly dog on the hottest day of the summer. She couldn't find him anywhere. She looked all over the back yard until she noticed a dog sized hole in the back fence. The dog was gone.

For four days, in the intense southern heat, she searched for her dog. First one neighbor called and said they saw him, then another. The woman knew the dog wouldn't survive without his medicine and water. Finally, some one saw him staggering down their street and her husband raced to get him and bring him to the vet, while the woman fretted, and cried, and prayed that he'd be all right. 4 Hours later their car drove into the driveway. She tore down the sidewalk and I'll read the rest in her own words:

*“I grabbed my dog from the seat, nearly crushing him in my motherly embrace. His hair was matted and covered with thorns and brambles. He was beat up and exhausted, but that did not matter. His eyes told me the truth: he was glad to be home. He nuzzled me and licked my face.*

*You're home! Home! Never never never run away again! I laughed and scolded while tears ran down my cheeks. Thank you thank you thank you!..I whispered. All my feelings of fear and grief were overwhelmed by a far more powerful emotion: gratitude.”*

Scholars and researchers tell us that a person can't be grateful and grieving at the same time. In my Family Systems class we were told that neuroscientists have discovered that fear and gratitude don't exist in the same parts of our brains. Fear resides in the amygdala, the "reptilian" part of our brain. This is part of our brain that controls "fight and flight" in emergencies or traumatic situations. Situations like the disciples find themselves in.

Feelings of gratitude—on the other hand, are located in the neo-cortex, which is located in the front of our brains—and this part of the brain governs "higher thinking". It's the part of our brain that processes cause and effect, and it is the final part of our brain to fully develop.

It is now thought by researchers, that gratitude and fear cannot exist simultaneously-- because gratitude is a function of the neo cortex, but more than that: they believe that gratitude actually helps process fear.

The disciples had been awash in grief and fear for days, never expecting to see Jesus alive again. But—like the woman with the dog—in a split second, their grief and fear are overwhelmed by gratitude. Their fear disappears.

That's what Thomas missed. It's not like he didn't believe his brothers. But think of the example of the woman and the dog: if she hadn't actually gotten to hold the dog at the end of the ordeal—if someone had just told her the dog was fine—would she have had the same experience?

Of course not.

All the disciples except Thomas got to – in effect—hold the dog, *hold Jesus* when he appeared. Thomas didn't.

He wanted to hold the dog. Can we blame him? Wouldn't we want the same thing?

He wants to see him, let the tears flow, and embrace the person who seems to have overcome death.

Jesus presence does nothing less than invite us all to understand that that which is alive never dies—that death is never the end-- and that's a promise.

Love always continues, and with that knowledge we can go on and find the courage—the heart-- to trust again, to re-engage, to be so grateful.

As grateful as the woman who discovered her dog was alive and with her.

As grateful as the disciples were when discovered that Jesus was alive and with them.

And as grateful as we are to understand that Jesus is with us, love always continues, and courage is found in a heart full of gratitude.

And our heart grows strong, and we can continue on. Because gratitude and fear cannot exist at the same time. Amen.