

Link to Lectionary readings:

https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Easter/AEaster2_RCL.html

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter

A Reading from 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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "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."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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."

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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 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."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.

In this season of Easter we hear parts of the Resurrection story from Matthew, Luke, and John. All four gospels tell the story, though each gospel has its own particular details. Last Sunday we heard the story as told by Matthew; the two Marys saw the resurrected Jesus at the tomb and then went to tell the disciples. None of the twelve disciples were at the tomb or saw Jesus that day.

This week we hear John's version. In his version, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone and found the stone rolled away. She ran to tell the disciples that someone had taken the body of Jesus, and then Mary, Peter, and John returned to the tomb. Finding the linen wrappings there but the tomb empty, Peter and John went home. But Mary stayed at the tomb weeping, and then two angels appeared, and then Jesus appeared, although at first Mary thought she was seeing the gardener. Even when Jesus talks to Mary she does not recognize him. It is only when he calls her by name that she sees and knows Jesus.

When Mary returns to tell the disciples that she has seen the Lord, there is no record of how the disciples responded to this announcement, but it's a good bet they did not believe it because they remained locked in the house in fear. And in Luke's gospel the disciples did *not* believe the women - they thought it was all an idle tale!

All of this is worth noting because in this terrible, stressful, and fearful time of great loss, the women and the disciples each reacted differently. They did not all believe at the same time. Just as no two of us will process suffering or loss in exactly the same way. And we each have to come to understanding and peace in our own time.

When Thomas says he does not believe the other disciples saw Jesus, I imagine they were frustrated with Thomas, just as the women were that morning when the disciples who had not seen Jesus did not believe them. Seeing is believing, right? I'd have never believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, we say. It all comes down to trust, doesn't it? And who can you trust? The politicians? The media? Your neighbors?

Your employer? These days, we can't even trust that there is going to be any toilet paper in the grocery store. Believing is not always easy.

A recurring theme in the resurrection appearance stories is how early Christian communities struggled to understand and believe. So often we belittle Thomas, because he demands more tangible proof than the others. But isn't he only asking for what the others have already received? Whatever the reasons for his doubt, and there are always reasons to doubt, it's likely all the other disciples had those same doubts. When it came to seeing the resurrected Jesus, all of them had a difficult time of it.

"Have you believed because you have seen me?" Jesus asks Thomas, the other disciples, and the rest of us. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." The disciples themselves have trouble believing on the basis of testimony alone – but life is about to change in a radical way as the Jesus movement will grow and the Church will be established as a result of the power of testimony. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon his followers to empower them, sending them out to proclaim good news, to tell the story; a story that would be seen and heard.

It's as if Jesus says, I understand your need to see me and touch my body in order to believe, but there's an even greater form of faith and trust, a deeper understanding, that isn't dependent on signs and miracles, or even on the presence of my physical body. It's a new form of faith and trust to help you discern me within you and among you and throughout creation. Now I give you the Holy Spirit, and send you out, away from my physical body, into a new and deeper relationship with me. The cross and my resurrection are not the end of the story. In the power of the Holy Spirit you will go into the world to tell the story with your very lives.

It's as if Jesus says, I know you really wanted to be here physically in the church celebrating Easter Day. I know you long to be here and receive me in the bread and in the wine. But I want you to trust that your faith can withstand the separation; I want you to believe that I am within you and among you and throughout creation no matter where you are. I want you to trust that you have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to tell the salvation story in this world.

Why would Jesus teach and encourage the disciples to move beyond their dependency on signs and wonders and his physical presence? The author of Hebrews says that faith is the conviction of things unseen. Because in life, there are many things unseen, many things unknown and incomprehensible. It is our faith, our belief, our trust in God that becomes a light in the darkness, a glimmer of hope in the midst of suffering and death, and the breath of peace in our fear.

Do you ever have doubts? I know I do. We are in good company with Thomas and the other disciples, and so many throughout scripture and in the Church. That's why we need the Church where we can wrestle with our doubts as a community; where we can strengthen and expand our faith that God is with us in all things, even as God is leading us into new life and new ways of being. I have a hunch that our doubts (and fears) surface whenever things change, whenever our faith is challenged.

We are in a time of great change in the world, and while we long to return to normal life, to the old and familiar way of life, there will be a new life for us after this pandemic abates. There will be a new normal for the Church as well. We will need to move forward, even with our doubts, but we need not fear because Jesus has gone ahead of us to prepare the way *and* Jesus will not leave us in our doubts but will meet us right where we are, breathing on us the peace and power of the Holy Spirit.

Each Gospel writer tells the story a little differently, but all of them are clear that the story does not end at the cross or with the resurrection of Christ. Our lives are particular stories of our life in Christ. This fearful and anxious world is looking for one to trust; waiting to hear the story of new life in the power of God's love. May we live this story with our lives, revealing the newness of life in Christ Jesus.

Amen.