

Up Close and Personal
John 20:19-31
April 28, 2019 – The Second Sunday of Easter

Today's reading picks up where we left off on Easter. In fact, there is a slight overlap. If you were here last week, you heard me speak of Jesus breathing on the disciples and telling them to receive the Holy Spirit. And I told you that the Holy Spirit is indeed the spirit of divine love. Jesus infused the disciples with the love of God in an up-close and personal way.

So, today we conclude John's resurrection chapter with the story of poor Thomas. Thomas will, forever be referred to as "the doubting Thomas," and who wouldn't doubt if they were told the things that Thomas was told. Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus showed up that first Easter Sunday evening. We don't know where Thomas was. Maybe he was out shopping – buying the food for dinner. Maybe he was taking care of his livestock. Maybe he just needed some time by himself to "process" the horrific events of the past week. His teacher and mentor and friend had just been crucified. He saw the brutal crucifixion. He saw the burial. He had just lost a close friend.

And now. . . now he joins his friends and is told, "We have seen the Lord! He is alive!" Would you have believed it? Thomas tells the others, "You expect me to believe that Jesus is alive, after all we have witnessed? Unless I see him for myself, unless I actually touch the wounds of the crucifixion, I will not believe."

But Jesus would not let this go. Jesus would not let Thomas's doubts go unanswered and Jesus does not let our doubts go unanswered. So, eight days later Jesus appears again in the house, and this time Thomas is there. Have you ever wondered what those eight days were like? Did the other disciples continue to try and convince Thomas that Jesus was indeed alive, that they had indeed seen him and spoken with him? Did Thomas continue to doubt, to question, "What are they talking about? Here I have ten of my friends telling me that someone that I saw die is alive? What's going on here?" As much as I have previously studied this scripture, I've never really thought about that time period – eight days. When you're grieving, when you're full of doubt, when you're full of questions, eight days can be a long time. How often have you or I had medical test and needed to wait eight days for the results? Those eight days can seem like an eternity. But Thomas is left in this perplexed state of questioning, doubting, wondering for eight days.

Friends, I think those eight days are significant. . . significant for Thomas and significant for us. How often I have told people that God's time is not our time. How often I have encouraged people to be patient about something, when it's oh so difficult to simply wait patiently. Wouldn't it be much easier on the disciples and Thomas, if Jesus had shown up immediately after Thomas returned: The disciples tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord!"; Thomas doubts saying,

“Unless I see him for myself, I will not believe”; and Jesus shows up, right then and there saying, “Alright, Thomas, here I am.” It would be so much simpler. It would save a lot of grief and pain and doubt. But that was not Jesus’ timetable. No, Jesus waited eight days, left Thomas to doubt for eight days. I don’t know why. Maybe it was to teach Thomas, and to teach us, that the answers are not instant, that we need to struggle, to wrestle with, maybe even to doubt for a while. Sometimes the belief is stronger, because we have had that extra time. Sometimes the joy is fuller, because we have had that extra time. And sometimes, it’s simply “God’s time” – not for us to set the timetables of life. No, I don’t know why Jesus let Thomas wait eight days; but I do think there is a lesson in it for us. If Thomas was left to doubt for eight days, we should not expect instant answers to all our questions or instant solutions to our problems. Indeed, patience is a virtue; but, that doesn’t make it easy.

So back to Thomas. After eight days, Jesus does appear to Thomas, and he invites Thomas to touch him, to examine his wounds, to do exactly what Thomas had said he needed to do in order to believe. There are a couple of interesting things here. First, you might remember last week, that when Jesus appeared to Mary at the tomb, he specifically told her not to hold on to him. Now here, he invites Thomas to touch him, indeed to probe his wounds. Here he invites Thomas to do whatever is necessary so Thomas will believe in the resurrection. But, more than that, he invites Thomas to an “up close and personal” relationship with the living Christ.

It’s also interesting that the Gospel never tells us if Thomas actually did touch Jesus. We’re told that Jesus invited Thomas into the relationship. Jesus told Thomas, “Do not doubt but believe,” and Thomas joyfully responded, “My Lord and my God!”

Friends, how many times have I stated that the Gospel was not written for the disciples. The Gospel was not written for Thomas. The Gospel was written for you and for me; and, indeed, you and I are mentioned in the Gospel, for Jesus tells Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” That you and that’s me. We have not seen the physical Jesus. We have not seen the resurrected body. Yet we believe.

Still, we don’t believe out of nothingness, for I believe that just as Jesus invited Thomas into an “up close and personal” relationship, Jesus invites each and every one of us into an “up close and personal relationship.” I also believe that, while we may not physically see the resurrected Christ, we are invited to experience the risen Christ each and every day of our lives.

Last week, on Easter Sunday, I spoke of the importance, the strength, and the joy in the promise that Jesus gave us in the last verse of Matthew’s Gospel: “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” The living Christ is here as we worship. But the living Christ walks beside us wherever we go,

whatever we do, whatever we say. Christ is with us. That's the good news of Easter. That's the good news of the Gospel.

Paul said it at the end of the Eighth Chapter of Romans: "Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depths, nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (*Romans 8:38-39*) Nothing can separate us from the risen Christ. We must simply be aware, be open to the experience of the risen Christ walking beside us. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not physically seen me, but yet believe. . . believe in the ever present guidance, believe in the joyful presence, believe in the unending care, believe in the mighty strength, believe in the eternal love of God. Do you believe it? Will you live it?"

This is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,

Help us in our belief.

Make us always aware of your constant presence in our lives.

Lead us and guide us that we may walk in your path.

May we always experience you, up close and personal;

and, in that experience, may we find courage and strength, love and joy and peace.

Amen.

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