

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 8, 2018
Second Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 3:12-26
Psalm 118:19-24
I John 5:1-6
John 20:19-31

Our Gospel lesson today finds the disciples of Jesus huddled together behind locked doors because they are afraid for their lives. Their world has been turned upside down. Jesus has been brutally murdered, and there is reason to believe that they might be next.

While it is true that Mary has found them just prior to this and told them, “I have seen the Lord,” the truth of the matter is that the testimony of someone else in this moment is *not* enough.

Yes, these men were with Jesus for quite some time. Yes, they witnessed him do amazing things. Yes, they saw firsthand miracles of healing and power. And yes, they heard Jesus tell them of his need to die and that he would be raised again by God’s power.

But faith has not dehumanized these disciples. They still need validation and assurance, especially in times of great crisis. Their lives have been shattered. Everything is now uncertain. And while the testimony of someone else says, “I have seen the Lord,” the reality for *these* men is that they are terrified, and they are

unable to rejoice in this news until they have some confirmation from their own senses.

Seen in this light, Thomas is no worse than the others. It's just that he's not present with the others here when Jesus encounters them. And just as the testimony of someone else was insufficient for the *others*, their testimony to Thomas is insufficient for *him*. He needs validation. He needs assurance. He needs his own personal encounter.

It is easy to criticize Thomas, but perhaps we should be thanking him instead. We should thank Thomas because he reminds us that *honest doubt* can be better than accepting or memorizing someone else's answers or experience.

Thomas reminds us that there is more faith in seeking an explanation than there is in glibly repeating something that has not yet reached your head and captivated your heart. *Sometimes, there is more belief in honest doubt than in easy answers.*

Like Thomas and the others, *we* understand what it means to live with fear and uncertainty. We understand what it feels like to want to lock yourself away from the outside world. We understand what it feels like to believe in Jesus, and yet at times to feel that the world has gotten the upper hand.

We are afraid of many things. We are afraid of the future, of the unknown. We are afraid of death. We are afraid of failure. We can be afraid for our children,

or our parents. And it's one thing for someone to come along and say, "Don't worry -- Jesus is in control and everything will be all right." But in the final analysis, the testimony of someone else simply cannot compare with the risen Christ standing in your midst and saying, "Peace be with you."

That's what happened to the disciples, and subsequently, to Thomas. As they sit in the darkness with perhaps just a single candle flickering its light, and as they whisper quietly to one another and plan what to do next, suddenly there is Jesus. And there is peace.

But there is more than merely peace and validation. With the peace comes a commission, a job to do. **As the Father has sent me, so I send you.**

The implications of these words are staggering. In the very same way that Jesus was sent by the Father from heaven to come to earth and carry out God's will, so Jesus now commissions these men in whom he has invested his life during his earthly ministry.

And as he does so, he invests them with the same authority that God the Father has given him, when he says: *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you refuse to forgive them, they are unforgiven.* (v. 23)

Such a transfer of responsibility to the apostles would be an impossible task for them in their own human strength and resources. So, in what many scholars

describe as John's Pentecost, Jesus breathes on them and says: *Receive the Holy Spirit.* (v. 22)

And with those words – and the gift that accompanies them -- Jesus shows the apostles that there is work to be done. *Jesus' very life and ministry must now continue through these men that he has chosen.* No more living in fear. There is life to be lived, work to be done, and a story to be continued.

Something about this personal encounter with the disciples and with Thomas must have worked. For we know that these men did indeed come out from behind those locked doors, and the world has never been the same since. We get a glimpse of this in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning, where Peter boldly proclaims, "You killed the author of life, but God raised him to life. And we are witnesses of this fact!" (Acts 3:15)

Some of you may be thinking this morning, "Well, that's fine for Thomas and the others, because the risen Jesus appeared to them and validated their faith in a face-to-face encounter. But we don't have that same luxury. Jesus does not appear to us in our living rooms saying, "Peace be with you. Rest in me. Everything will be all right."

And you're right, he doesn't.

But do you remember what he says to Thomas in that locked room? He says, “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen me and believe anyway.”

The blessing of Jesus is pronounced here, not on Thomas, *but on all of us who come later* and who believe in Jesus without the benefit of Jesus personally appearing to us. Easter faith cannot rest on physical proofs or encounters. There has to be another way, because Jesus could not spend all of his time (then or now) personally appearing to people in order to validate his resurrection!

But how then does it happen? How does Jesus encounter people today?

John gives us a clue here in our text. Near the end of the passage he says, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs besides the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in his Name!” (Jn. 20:30-31)

If we want to know how Jesus encounters people today with the truth of his resurrection, we need look no further than the Church, the community that has been given the Spirit and has been commissioned and sent forth in the power of the Spirit to tell the story.

In some ways, I suppose, it would have been an awesome experience to be with the disciples in that locked room, and to see Jesus standing there and to hear

him speak. It would have been a tremendous “God moment” to hear him speak and say to you, “Peace be with you. Everything is all right.”

But the greater blessing belongs to you and to me, friends. Jesus says so. It belongs to us when we gather here in this place and we continue to read and tell the story, when we read together the signs that John and others have recorded for us.

That blessing belongs to us when we continue to seek Jesus in the midst of our doubts, because when our doubts are honest doubts we are also listening, praying, hoping, asking, and searching. And in such moments, God can speak to our hearts even while we’re struggling in our heads.

That blessing comes to us because ultimately faith precedes sight, and trust comes before assurance. That’s why it’s called Easter *Faith* and not Easter Certainty. In the words of the famous musician Bono, “Walk on, walk on, you’re packing a suitcase for a place none of us have been, a place that has to be believed to be seen.”

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, I remind you again that you are blessed.

Blessed are you that have not seen and believe anyway.

Blessed are you who have not seen, but who have heard the old, old story, and who have found your place in that story.

Blessed are you who have not seen, but who taste in the bread and wine
God's promise to you that he is with you, that there is work for you to do, that you
can unlock the doors and step out in faith and trust him.

Blessed are you who are packing your bags for a place yet to be seen and
visited. For if the journey is this invigorating -- imagine what the destination will
be!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.