

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
April 7, 2013  
Second Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 5:12-29  
Psalm 111  
Revelation 1:1-8  
John 20:19-31

Many of Jesus' appearances to his disciples after his resurrection find him patiently working with them, helping them to accept the reality of it, and guiding them to what comes next.

This is the case in our Gospel lesson this morning from John's Gospel. Several hours have passed since the women were at the tomb early in the morning, and found that Jesus' body wasn't there.

Our text tells us twice that as the disciples meet together, the doors are locked. I used to struggle with this. Why this reaction of fear? Why aren't they having a party, or running through the streets shouting and celebrating?

But then I remember that even though Jesus had predicted to these disciples that he would rise again, the idea didn't sink in with them at the time. And as we'll discover in these next weeks, the idea doesn't immediately sink in with them even *after* it has occurred.

But there is another reason for their fear. With Jesus' body gone from the tomb, the political and religious leaders who killed him may now possibly come

looking for Jesus' followers – and when they find them, they might do to them what they did to Jesus.

So – in this highly charged atmosphere, these disciples do what you and I would do. They lay low. They hunker down. They pull the shades, turn out the lamps, and lock the doors. They whisper softly as they try to make some sense of all of this.

Have you ever been in a group or a gathering where everyone's nerves were “on edge?” Where the slightest unforeseen gesture or comment could scare the living daylights out of you? You're walking through a haunted house on Halloween with your friends, slowly moving through the pitch blackness. You don't know what's around the next corner, and as you move along, one of your friends behind you pokes you in the back and yells, “boo!”

I have found that one of the scariest places to be is in a dark church in the deep hours of the night. When I was in high school, my church hired me to clean once a week. One night, I discovered I had left some personal items at the church while I had cleaned it earlier that day. It was now well past midnight, but I needed those items so I decided to drive over to the church and get them. I arrived and quickly unlocked the door, and made a beeline for the sanctuary doors. The darkness was creeping me out, so I pushed the swinging door to the sanctuary open so I could turn on a light. As I flipped the switch, I found myself staring at Lloyd

Grabast, an elderly member of the church who lived next door. I screamed, my legs buckled, and I cowered in fear for a moment. I later learned that Lloyd often went to the church in the long hours of the night to pray. But I can tell you I was not expecting to encounter him when I showed up that night.

I think that something similar to this is what happens to the disciples here. You've got a group of disciples together after what has been a harrowing couple of days. They are probably sleep deprived. They have been traumatized by Jesus' bloody and gruesome death. The adrenaline is still surging. Their minds are racing, thinking that maybe the authorities are out looking for them *this very moment*. Imagine, then, turning around in a dark room – and there stands Jesus!

Whoa Nellie! This would truly be a “wet your pants” moment.

So Jesus says to them: “Peace be with you. Take it easy. It's alright. It's me.”

The looks on their faces and their open mouths tell the story. Pure joy – and pure fear at the same time. It's real – and it is *surreal*. So Jesus reassures them again: “Peace be with you. It's ok. It's *really* me. You are not dreaming. You are not hallucinating. This is real. I am real. And just as the Father sent me, I'm now going to send all of you. Receive the Holy Spirit, who will be your helper.”

What an encounter.

John tells us that Thomas, one of the group, was not present in this moment. This should not surprise us. After all, considering what has transpired, it's not as if *any* of the disciples were expecting to encounter Jesus like this. It's not like a memo came down from headquarters: "Jesus will hold a special meeting of the twelve at Simon Peter's house at 9:00 p.m.; attendance is compulsory." It is easy to read this text and to assume that Thomas wasn't there because he chose *not* to be. But that is a dangerous assumption.

Thomas isn't present, and when the others tell him they have seen Jesus, he is reluctant to believe it. And for centuries subsequent to this, he is unfairly labeled for feeling the same feelings and needing the same reassurance that those who *were* present needed *and received*.

Jesus doesn't bring Thomas up short. He shows him his hands and his side, just as he did for the others. And then he challenges him to faith.

But this story isn't really about Thomas. And it's not really about the other disciples.

Well, then, you may ask: Who is the story about?

Before we answer that, let's do a little exercise. I want to ask you a question: *Do you believe I have \$5 hidden in my hand? Do you have faith that it's here?*

Well, now, I am about to *shatter* your faith. (Open hand to reveal the \$5).  
You may say, “no, my faith is *confirmed*, not shattered.”

But that’s not true. Because once I opened my hand, faith is no longer faith because it has become *knowledge*. Faith is now certainty, because you see with your eyes the money in my hand.

But while my fist was still closed, there always remained a bit of uncertainty. The outcome was somewhat in doubt. In order for there to be an authentic “yes,” there had to be a genuine possibility of the “no.”

Now, then, who is this story of Thomas and the others about? For whom was it really written?

This story is not a criticism of Thomas. This story is a *blessing* pronounced upon people like *you* – people who were not there on that dark Jerusalem night, but who nonetheless gather up all of the chips of your life, push them all to the center of the table, and say, “I’m all in. The story’s true. Love this amazing demands my life, my soul, my all.”

*Blessed are those who have not seen, yet believe.*

As you come forward this morning, the bread and wine that you receive is an invitation to you. It’s similar to the invitation Jesus gave to Thomas and the others. It’s an invitation to *faith*, an invitation to believe what you have yet to see. It’s an invitation to trust that the *spiritual* encounter you have with Jesus at this table will

one day become a *face-to-face* encounter. Faith will turn to sight. You will know even as you are fully known.

Blessed are you, Epworthies, who have not seen – and yet believe.

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