2nd Sunday of Easter
Sermon 4.7.24

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. (330)

We've been in this room before. You: you've been in this room before. If you've ever been to church on the Sunday after Easter, then you've been in this room before.

Always here, on this Sunday: this is where the disciples had gathered with Jesus on the night of his arrest, where they'd had their last supper together. This is the place to which they retreated when everything had gone mad, when the annual Passover festival became overshadowed at least for these unfortunate few—overshadowed by the cross, their friend and teacher hanging from one.

They gathered here in fear, the text tells us, for fear of the Jews.

This makes little sense from the story's point of view. Everyone in this story is a Jew. Jesus is a Jew, as is Peter. Judas, Herod, most of the people crowding the city during this festival, the Jewish festival of Passover, not to mention *all* of the people currently locked away in this fear-filled room: everyone here is a Jew. The one exception is Pontius Pilate, who ordered the execution, the crucifixion. So, if anyone here was actually to be feared, it's the one person who wasn't a Jew.

But John's gospel in this regard means to say something else. Written for the so-called Johannine community, indeed written also *by* the Johannine community, John's gospel belongs with a small library of books that also includes three letters, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John. Sacred texts to

this gathering set off apart, they bear the signs of a people wounded not unlike the wounds Thomas insisted seeing on the Risen Christ. These people: they're understood by history to have been a people driven from their families and villages and synagogues because they'd come to "believe in Jesus," which is to say to believe that Jesus is the anointed one of God.

For what it's worth, the closest current analogue I've ever come up with for what the long-past Johannine community was like is the queer community. People who've discovered and gone public with something deep and enduring about themselves, something that is unacceptable, unthinkable, to some of their home communities; people who've then been cast out, made to live on their own and then, perhaps, by grace, to find one another and to build their own community: found families is what many of the queer community were made to make, and these became a blessing.

It's said of the Johannine community: "They understood themselves to be in intimate contact with [Jesus] and with one another, under the guidance of the [Holy] Spirit, in Greek the Paraclete. They were conscious of their relationship to other believers with whom they hoped to be in eventual union." It reminds me a "gay-dar," the unspoken, nearly unnoticed way of queer folks finding one another, as if by radar. If you know, you know.

So, they'd come to believe in Jesus, these particular outcasts, a belief very much about Thomas' insistence on seeing the wounds of Jesus, the wounds that weirdly remain on the risen Christ. It might seem like a weird detail, if even we noticed it. It might seem like morbid fascination on Thomas' part. "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."

Thomas, of course, gets a bad rap for another reason. He's castigated as "doubting." He serves as a cautionary tale in many a Sunday school lesson. "Don't be like Thomas. Don't doubt." So, here I am in my annual need to defend Thomas.

First of all, that he was out: this can only be for reasons of his courage. The city was a frightening place at this point. The festival of the Passover had taken a scary turn, and someone had ended up crucified for reasons that have more to do with the violent confusion of a mob than some clarion call of justice. It had these people, these believers in Jesus, locked away, for a few days now locked away.

Meanwhile, of course, out there, in the garden, earlier this very morning, Jesus had appeared to Mary by his tomb. He had appeared to her alive, so alive indeed that she mistook him for the gardener, which is a suggestion as to his role amidst God's good though not-yet-perfected

creation, he the gardener to bring it to its fullness of beauty and joy, good order, that blessed interweaving of nature and culture. Her mistake, though more true than she would perhaps know, was corrected in her sudden recognition of him as Jesus, following which she went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

And it might have been these disciples she's remembered to have told, these who are locked away for their overwhelming fear. Or it have been others. There's no sense that these, in this upper room, had heard about the resurrection.

So, Thomas was out, had perhaps been sent out, to see if it was safe, to see if they could emerge. After all, they'd need food eventually. They'd need provisions. They couldn't stay here forever, or if they were to, they'd need a supply line of some sort. Like the dove set forth from the ark, Thomas was perhaps on such a mission.

If so, his missing Jesus should all the more evoke our pathos, not our judgement. He wasn't weak in faith. He was strong in faithfulness, not to mention in courage. "We have seen the Lord," they all say to him when he's returned, the very same words Mary is remembered to have said to the disciples when she'd come in from the garden where she'd made her enlightening mistake. Not a gardener! Or is he? I have seen the Lord."

No surprise, Thomas isn't all that happy to hear it. He wants to be a witness as well. Taking his proper place among these people who'd given their lives to believing in Jesus, he wants to see, as is so crucial in this whole gospel narrative, where to see is the hope and the victory.

But what he wants to see is surprising, I think. He doesn't just want to see Jesus risen. He wants to see Jesus *wounded* and risen. He wants to bear witness not only to the resurrection of one previously dead. He wants to see the resurrection of the one who was crucified. It's as if Thomas needs confirmation not of the resurrection, but of the crucifixion.

Which is what belief in Jesus amidst the Johannine community is all about, by the way. The scandalous thing about what these believers believed isn't that they believed in the resurrection of the dead. Lots of people believed in that. Lots of Jews believed in that. This was, indeed, an increasingly common confession, that at the end of history there would be a total restoration of the people of God, the nations of Israel and Judea. They would rise and stand, a whole multitude, as we see in the prophecy of Ezekiel, as we hear of in the book of Daniel. No, the scandalous thing about what the people of the books of John believed is that they believed in the resurrection of the crucified one, that one so shamefully dead would be the first born to live again.

Which suggests that the beloved of God aren't the ones who act in power amidst history and therefore should have that glorious place restored once all is made perfect. No, what this suggests is something about the wretched of the earth, something about those whom history steamrolls over, begs us to forget about.

And before we get too proud of Christianity's willingness to confess such belief, it's worth wondering whether we actually do. Is it indeed the case that confessing Christians actually get behind a God who can suffer, is vulnerable to wounding and humiliating death?

Some do. The loudest of us though…?

A number of years ago, Saturday Night Live aired a spoof movie trailer. A play on the movies of Quentin Tarantino, this was to revisit an old victim narrative but with a new spin, one of vengeance. It followed Tarantino's revenge fantasy, "Inglorious Basterds," which imagined a volunteer militia during the Second World War poised to execute Nazi leadership while they were all out at the movies. Then came Tarantino's revenge fantasy, "Django Unchained," which followed Django who'd fought his way out of slavery in the American south, leaving many a slave-holder dead in his wake.

Of course, it's hard to argue that those killed in these movies—Nazis, White slave-traders and owners—didn't have it coming, which is one of the problems for anyone who'd critique these movies as unhelpful additions to our cultural conversation, which I would do.

Saturday Night Live managed something far more sophisticated, and certainly more provocative.

Their movie trailer was for "Djesus Uncrossed," a revenge fantasy that has Jesus emerging from the tomb, with these words narrated in thatd sonorous movie trailer voice: "He's risen from the dead and he's preaching anything but forgiveness." Armed to the teeth, guns blazing, he echoes Brad Pitt's "Inglorious…" character, stoked as he was to kill "Ger-*mans*." Djesus uncrossed has his sights on "Ro-*mans*."

As you'd expect, there was an outcry from more than a few Christians at all this. They were shocked, *shocked*, that SNL would so grossly handle the precious things of the faith. To take this most important moment in the Christian imagination, the emergence of Jesus from the tomb, and to make it all a sick joke. How dare they!?

But one blogger (among many, I'm sure), a clergy person in Madison, Wisconsin, called out the irony: "Christianity in America has become so intertwined with nationalism and patriotism that American conservatives have fashioned an image of Jesus Christ that conforms to their

patriotism and to the cult of violence… And just as our popular culture is wedded to the myth of redemptive violence, so too is the Jesus of conservative Christianity like the lead character in so many of our action films, leaving blood, destruction, and mayhem in his wake as he rides through the scenery."

For what it's worth, this firestorm all took place in 2013.

The more things change…

But that's not us, we might well argue. We're not Christian nationalists. Our iconography doesn't involve a hyper-muscled Jesus bursting his way off the cross.

True.

And yet, that's not say we're utterly faithful to this, our *crucified* Lord. That's not to say we don't live in the world in such a way as favors tastefully-appointed power and turns away from piteous struggle. We're like sunflowers turning our blossom to the light with hardly a decision to do so. When I walk up North Street in Pittsfield, my gaze turns to the beautiful furnishings inside Paul Rich rather than to the piteous gatherings outside the bus depot. I'm only human.

We have to *decide* for Christ and him crucified. We have to *intend* to believe. There's a willingness involved in seeing Jesus in the wretched of the earth, a willingness to seek God in the garbage of history, the discarded waste on the side of the road that's just easier to look past. It's *everywhere.* Let's pick it up.

Thomas wanted a chance to exercise this willingness, to see whether it bore true. "Unless I see the *wounds* I will not believe."

And we shame him for that. We use him in our Sunday school lessons.

Notice, please, that Jesus didn't. Notice, please, that instead Jesus simply granted his request. Maybe we should be a little more like Jesus…?

Back in this room once again, we get the chance to try once again.

We've been here before. You: you've been in this room before. If you've ever been to church on the Sunday after Easter, then you've been in this room before. Always here, on this Sunday, where for the last time until next year we're in real-time with Jesus. With this story our liturgical time is joined with narrative-time on the Sunday after Jesus' resurrection. This confluence of time, our liturgical time and the historic playing out of events in time, began with Palm Sunday, two weeks ago, which was the Sunday when Jesus finally entered Jerusalem, the Sunday before the Friday that would have Jesus on the cross. It was the beginning of a week the gospel narratives would recount now day by day.

Our Maundy Thursday meets up with the fourth day after Jesus' entry.

Our Good Friday meets up with the fifth day after Jesus' entry, the day of his death.

Our Easter morning meets up at the original one.

And this all amounts to a way in which liturgical time plays out differently than our ordinary experience of time. In our liturgically, in church, playing it all out once again during Holy Week and Easter, we're weirdly close to the events that otherwise the two millennia separating then from now would have us be.

And this moment of encounter between Thomas and Jesus—Jesus crucified and now raised—is the last moment of the liturgical year when there's a timely correspondence between our remembrance and what we remember. In all this, we don't merely recount. We enact.

But from this moment, on the eighth day, we depart from Jesus as he moves in the world in real time. From here, we move more exclusively into liturgical time.

We'll see more of him, of course. The season of Easter, seven weeks long, has Jesus appearing all over the place, all over time. But that real-time tracking that began with Palm Sunday ends here.

For this departure, however, we're given to one another. We are, by consolation now, all of us together to be the movement of Christ in the world. This is by the power of the Holy Spirit, breathed into the world, the paraclete, which is to say the comforter, the consoler, by which there is a consolation of presence amidst an also admitted absence.

We are here the real-time appearance of Christ, which the Holy Spirit, breathed unto us, might make so.

Let it be so.

Thanks be to God.