

2nd Sunday of Easter
Sermon 4.24.22

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 in fear..., 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. (336)

Jesus, resurrected, has returned to his friends.

We're in John's gospel now. Not so for most of the year. For most of this year, "Year C," we'll follow Luke. But on the Sunday after Easter, we're always with John, no matter the year. On the Sunday after Easter, we're always with Jesus, resurrected, returned to his friends.

Oh, all but Thomas, who seems to have been out.

If you know of Thomas at all, it's likely as "doubting." He has gone down in church history, or at least in the church's popular memory, as "doubting." "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." That's what he said. Or that's what he's said to have said. And since he puts an ultimatum on his belief, he's thought to be doubting, and that's thought to have been a great shame—what *not* to do.

What Thomas actually is, if you ask me, is someone who asked for what he needed. He's someone who's twice remembered to have asked Jesus a question or had of Jesus a request.

Earlier, when Jesus was speaking of his leaving, of his going ahead of them to prepare a place for them in the eternal realm of his Father's house, Thomas asked him, "Jesus, we don't

know where you're going so how can we know the way?" And it's important to note: Jesus answered him.

And here: "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." And it's important to note: Jesus responded as requested.

Really, it's important to note about Jesus, throughout especially John's gospel, that he responds to people's requests of him. He answers questions. He engages more fully. He responds to requests of closeness or further interaction, having in some cases some very long conversations—with the woman at the well, with Nicodemus in the dark of night. Never to be shamed, never to be called out, people approach Jesus with need, confusion, request; and Jesus responds in kind.

Granted, it's not always clear as day what he means in his responses. He's often obtuse, ironic. But that's because the nature of the thing he's here to manifest, the nature of the word that he's given flesh to, outpaces the definitions and delineations of more commonplace human understanding.

It's mysterious, this thing he's come to reveal. So, it's not going to fit into a bullet points or if-then statements.

And none of this should surprise us. That he responds to people's requests of him, that he responds to Thomas's near-ultimatum: really, this should strike us as essential to what Jesus is to manifest, as response is itself theologically essential.

Respond is a word that comes to us from Latin, and its root, *spond*, means promise. So, to respond is to renew a promise. Of presence, of availability, of faithfulness, the promise is ancient, as old as the hills. God promises to be faithful. God promises God's presence. God promises blessing and sustenance and providence, God's gracious provisions for the living of our days. This God, then, must also be one who *re-sponds*, who ever renews that ancient promise.

For what it's worth, this fits with my experience of God. People will talk of God as being in control. People will have as their pep-talk mantra: "God's got this." You hear this among megachurch millennials. You see it on Christian Twitter. "God's at the wheel." "God's got a plan."

I gotta say, I can't relate. In my experience, God is much more about call and response than about control or taking the reins. The grace of God at work in life feels more like a series of openings to which I can respond, a series of opportunities to act in love, to act in grace, to be open to surprise or collaboration or encounter or new insight. An offering of revelation, a coming down

of a word. God feels less to me to work with some preset plan and more with simply an aim and then an openness to how that aim will be met.

The aim is glory and eternal life and peace, a whole and redeemed creation. The aim is each part and particle fulfilled of its purpose and brought to fullness and wholeness and completion and peace.

As to how we get there, that's up to each of us, with God responding to what we do and with us responding to what God offers us as next.

Soren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher and theologian and namesake of the Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College, says of our choices that God doesn't abide as judge of our choices as much as God abides as one of our choices, always and forever and in any given moment one of the choices we might exercise.

It's not for nothing that our call to worship is always in the form of call and response: the one and the many. That's a practice as old as the psalms themselves.

It's not for nothing, also, that I always (I hope always) act on my faith conviction in relationship, "If nothing else, simply respond." If someone reaches out to you, if nothing else: simply respond. Whether you can fulfill the request, if nothing else: respond. Whether you can answer the question, if nothing else: just respond."

I'll even say it to the boys. As they call out to one another, sometimes to annoyance, if nothing else: respond! Respond to the one calling out to you.

And see, I'd never say that everything happens for a reason. But I would say that everything that happens can be redeemed, can and will and has been redeemed—will have been redeemed, the future perfect tense. How I do love the future perfect tense.

To say that everything happens for a reason is to imagine God as the past, operating from the past with a plan. To say that everything that happens can be redeemed is also to imagine God in the future, meeting us along the way as we go while also awaiting at the end which is glory and light, love and peace. Redemption. A re-deeming of all things.

So, Thomas has been out—and whether to get provisions or to scout out still present danger or to get word out that these now shut and locked away could be marked as safe, we don't know. We don't know why Thomas was out. But we can bet that it was for something important, even essential. This hadn't been a day for just passing the time. Things had happened. *Hard* things had happened. What we do know is that the others, in being shut and locked away, were there to witness the risen Lord, and Thomas wasn't.

They would tell him what Mary had earlier told them, “I have seen the Lord! We have seen the Lord!”

Mary had seen him in the garden of the tomb, a story we’ll sometimes hear on Easter morning.

And later that same day, the other disciples would have given to them an encounter that would have them saying the same thing.

And what’s remarkable about this encounter is how Jesus entered a locked up tight space. It’s to call us to wondering what other locked up tight spaces Jesus might enter. John’s gospel is not without suggestion to tease out further wondering. What other locked up tight spaces might Jesus enter? What other fear might Jesus enter for filling with something else altogether—a spirit of peace? A spirit of presence and reassurance?

And what’s remarkable about this encounter is how he returned from a violent death with but peace to offer, which needn’t have been the case. He might have taken this as chance to get revenge. He might have taken it as the perfect opportunity to whip up his followers into a blood lust, a spirit of vengeance.

That’s easy enough to do.

It’s actually the easiest thing in the world to do. Powerful leaders will, in fact, do it all the time, justify their own power and enthuse their people with a remembrance of wrongs suffered in the past, a recounting of all the ways some certain other people have done them wrong and would now get comeuppance. And it doesn’t even need to be true. A made-up story of grievance, or an exaggerated one, can be just as effective as a true one. “That election was so rigged.”

But in this case, it would have been true. Some very specific people had crucified Jesus. And now he was back. And what were they all gonna do about it?

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

And what’s remarkable about this encounter is how Jesus gave the gift of the Holy Spirit, breathing it on his disciples as if it were equal to the breath of life, and empowering them to forgive, which is a great power: to forgive.

We’ll see the gift of the Holy Spirit in other ways and on other days, most significantly on Pentecost, in about forty days, the fiftieth day after Easter. Then it will come down like tongues of flame resting on every member of this now-born church. It will have remarkable effect on this whole gathered body.

Here it has more personal effect, each of the ten gathered here filled with this new though ancient thing—a spirit of life, which is a spirit of forgiveness, for you cannot have sustained life without on-going forgiveness.

What’s remarkable about this is how very much is remarkable about it. John’s telling of things is always full of meaning—

all of which Thomas missed, missed out on.

Poor Thomas.

Really, our shaming of him tells us more about us than about him.

Truly, beware the preachers who shame Thomas: they might not be the pastor you need them to be when what you really need is a pastor.

So, the following week, which is to say on the evening of this day, the Sunday after Easter Sunday, the disciples were again shut away in fear, and Jesus resurrected again came to them and stood among them: “Peace be with you.” This time, though, Thomas was there, was with them. And Jesus spoke to him, specifically to him, to Thomas, answering his very specific request, answering his nearly demand. “Unless I see the mark of the nails...”

And it’s interesting, to me at least, that Thomas had needed to see not simply Jesus, or even Jesus risen, but Jesus crucified and risen: “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.” It’s as if the whole thing had been unfathomable. It’s as if the whole series of assertions and events had been incongruous, baffling. The Messiah, the one who comes to save not just the people Israel but the whole world (for anything less would not be to save, for saving itself—*salus*—involves the whole, the entirety); to save the whole world from itself (its devouring, destructive, unforgiving, vengeance-addicted ways) had himself been destroyed in precisely the way the world destroys, and now he was back and was *not* engaging in that dynamic of destruction but was instead putting to death that dynamic of death to generate in its place a dynamic of life, which is life sustaining life?

This?

He would need to see this whole incredible thing: Jesus (the man) made Christ (the eternal word) crucified (by the world) and risen (to eternal peace and life).

Thomas would need to see this whole unfathomable thing—as he had come this far, seeing it all, interacting with it all, but that final move, that final move which would be the forever move.

Would we really judge him for this? Would we really judge Thomas for this if Jesus didn’t, Jesus whom we mean to imitate, to follow?

“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

A preaching point: the Gospel of John has as its central agenda to cause people to believe, to move the people who read this narrative to belief. It’s a point our writer seems to understand as crucial, a move our writer seems to feel as essential. It is essential that we believe, that the world come to belief.

It’s come to be reductive. Dully reductive: belief, you gotta believe. Contemporary Christians, perhaps especially Christians of the American Church, stress belief almost exclusively, though belief is hardly the thing it used to be, hardly the thing our writer here assumes it to be.

To believe, to our hearing, is mostly a mental activity, nearly entirely separate from a lived phenomenon, an embodied phenomenon. There’s nearly no way to tell from the outside the difference between someone who “believes” and who doesn’t “believe.” It’s a gnostic phenomenon, a secret about someone that comes to known only if they disclose it—which makes “believing” a sort of secret society, like the Masons or Yale College’s Skull and Bones.

But in John’s world, as in Jesus’ world, to believe is more akin to our understanding of trust. To believe, as John would have it, is to trust, to live in some fundamental place of trust. It’s even suggested about this gospel narrative that, whenever we come to the word “belief,” we add to it “and trust” or simply replace it with “trust:” “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 *trust*.”

“I will not trust that this whole thing meant anything.”

“I will not trust that this is ground from which I can live and move.”

“Unless I see Jesus, and him crucified and risen, I will not trust even my own perception of things, because I seem to have been utterly wrong about it all.”

Can’t you just imagine Thomas, poor Thomas?

What do you trust? How does trust enable your living, or how does its lack enfeeble your living?

We gathered here are the people whom John meant to bless in his remembering Jesus as having said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to trust.” And this might come across as embarrassing to the likes of Thomas for his need to see in order to believe. But this statement of Jesus according to John is less about Thomas than it is about us: Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to trust.

Because, and I'm guessing here, we none of us have seen the crucified and risen Jesus, not in the way the story this morning indicates the disciples did. We might have glimpsed him. We might have recognized him in a moment here, a person there, an event or occurrence or an arrival of some surprising truth.

I have, a few times.

They are fleeting.

They require some translation, some imagination or double vision.

As for what trust, though, has come to be the ground on which I stand, the ground that makes possible movement, a sending forth; as for that: that comes from people like you, gatherings like this, foundations like the living church, this which has held me Sunday to Sunday throughout my fifty-one years.

Yes, as for what trust has come to be the ground that makes possible movement throughout the unfolding of history and the full living of our days, that is thanks to people like us together who start from a familiar place and set out toward shared ends. Love. Justice. Beauty. Peace. It's not supposed to be a secret. It's supposed to be an appeal, a pealing out as of church bells, widely sounded that others might hear it and recognize it and long to join in, a calling out that invites response.

With this moment remembered in the locked-up room, we depart from following Jesus in real time.

Holy Week and Easter and the Sunday after Easter all line up with the events told to us in scripture. We walk with Jesus and his friends in remembered day to day.

With this event, though, "a week later," we return to the more ordinary time, April in the year 2022. But Jesus yet walks with us, in our walk with one another.

Blessed are we who have this to trust.

Thanks be to God.