

A Easter 2 4.16.23

John 20:19-31

Focus Statement: Jesus meets us where we are with what we need.

Guys, it's still Easter. I know the lilies are gone. And, let's throw out there, the handful that are still around, are alive because I rescued them from the sanctuary. If the lilies were still in here, they would have died from spending a whole week in a room with no natural light, or light at all. But, anyway. The lilies are gone, the trumpets are quiet, I'm back to just a stole instead of the whole festive Easter chasuble. But, it's still Easter. It's still Easter and it will still be Easter until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, some forty-two days from now. Easter, dear people of God, is not a day, it's a season. We get a whole fifty days, seven weeks, of celebrating the Risen Christ among us until he finally ascends to be with the Father, sending us the Holy Spirit, just as he promised, who will abide with us and be in us.

The Holy Spirit is coming, but for right now we have Jesus, the resurrected crucified one, walking around, in the flesh, still bearing the marks of torture on his hands and side. We have the Risen Christ, except... do we? Where is he? What does it mean to say that the crucified one has been raised? What difference does it make in my life and in yours that Jesus, as we heard an angel of the Lord tell the women last Sunday, is no longer in the tomb, "for he has been raised, as he said"?

The disciples are wondering that very same thing in our Gospel reading for this morning. Actually, they're not even far enough to wonder "does this matter" yet, they still don't even yet recognize the event that has taken place. And here let me get on the same soapbox I get on every year on the Second Sunday of Easter about how poor Thomas gets picked on by

the church, forever getting the name “doubting Thomas,” even though he is, in my opinion, the most loyal of all the disciples. Let’s trace how we got here. Last Sunday we read Matthew’s account of the resurrection, John’s is a little bit different. In John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone and found it empty. Peter and another disciple, then come, engage in a silly footrace, agree the tomb is empty, and leave. But Mary stayed, and as she was standing there weeping, a man came up to her and asked why she was weeping. She thought he was the gardener and asked him where he had carried Jesus’ body. But, of course, he wasn’t the gardener, he was Jesus. He said to her, “Mary” and at once she recognized him. Then he told her not to hold onto him, but to go and tell the disciples. So she went and said to them, “I have seen the Lord,” and told them all he had said to her.

“And 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... Jesus came and stood among them.” And he said, “Peace be with you,” but this appears to have gotten him no response. So, the text tells us, “he showed them his hands and his side.” And then, after seeing his hands and his side, “the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”

But Thomas wasn’t there when Jesus appeared. So when the disciples came to him and said the exact same thing Mary had said to them, “We have seen the Lord,” he too had some questions about the truth, or at least the reality, of their statement. OK, sure, they thought they saw the Lord. But grief does funny things to people, and the one thing we can count on is that people who are crucified by Rome and laid in tombs stay there. And in response to their declaration, Thomas asked for the exact same thing Jesus had done for them, to see

his hands and his side. “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.” Certainly a bit more of a dramatic declaration than the others, who were just hanging out scared in a locked room, but they didn’t have a group of overly enthusiastic badgering them about their amazing experience like Thomas did. So it stands to reason he’d push back a little bit more firmly.

A week later, they’re all again in the same locked room, this time with Thomas, and again Jesus showed up and said to them “Peace be with you.” And then, immediately after greeting them, he turned to Thomas and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” And Thomas believed. He didn’t need to reach out his hand and actually touch Jesus. He just needed affirmation that the impossible thing he had been told was possible. He needed someone to meet him where he was at and acknowledge him.

Dear people of God, this is what Jesus does. Again and again in his ministry on earth and now we see even after his resurrection, Jesus is about showing up where we are at, wherever we are at, and offering what is needed to believe. And while I’m at it, let’s define this word belief here, because it’s one of those times where, while, yes, this is the best English translation of the Greek, it doesn’t capture the full scope. We think of belief as a noun. I believe this thing or that statement, or even this person or that idea. But belief in Greek isn’t a noun, it’s a verb. And more than a verb, it is a relationship. Here’s an example. In a few minutes we’ll all say the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe” a whole list of things that you may or may not be believing today, but we’ll all say them because that’s what the bulletin

says to do. We say them together and out loud not as some sort of test to make sure we all agree to all the things on the list, but because we say them on behalf of each other. We say them because when there are enough of us saying them, there is someone who believes every part of them, and can hold that belief for us. This, side note, is why we worship together, and why Jesus came to Thomas when he was in the locked room with the other disciples, and not at some time when he was by himself, because Jesus knew that belief is a relationship, it is community, it is connection.

And here's where this passage gets even more powerful. In verse twenty-nine, to use theater terms, Jesus breaks the fourth wall and moves from talking to Thomas to talking to us, when he said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Dear people of God, that's us. We post-resurrection, post-ascension, post-Pentecost people don't get to see Jesus in the flesh, to touch his hands and side, to eat with him on the beach. But we get him, just the same. Verse thirty-one tells us that these words were written to be Jesus' outstretched hands to us, so that when he took his place next to the Father, we could still, like Mary, like the disciples, like Thomas, see, believe, and have relationship with the crucified-risen one.

The good news in this text, dear people of God, is that Jesus meets us wherever we are with everything we need to trust in that promise. Jesus' outstretched, nail pierced hands, are extended to us. And if we're not there when they're extended, don't you worry, he'll show up again, and again, and again. The resurrected Jesus is nothing if not persistent. The challenge, however, is this. Look around the room. He meets us in each other. These are

the hands, yours are the hands, through which Christ now lives and moves and finds his being. So show up, dear people of God. You do, I know you do, but let me just say it again so you know how important that simple act is. Show up in worship, show up in phone calls, show up in letters, and prayers, and acts of service. Show up in Facebook comments and email and text messages. Show up for each other and for the world, and let others show up for you. It is through this, through your hands and your feet, that Christ still comes to others. And it is through others hands and feet that Christ still comes to you. Thanks be to God, who is so so so persistent. Amen.