

Easter2_YrB_041215_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of the Giver of Peace. Amen.

That first Easter Day must have been an exhausting one, what with all the confusing emotions, and the conflicting stories of what had happened to Jesus' body. Finally it was evening, and the disciples were huddled together again in a locked room, just as they had been the day before. Only now, the room was filled with fear and confusion, instead of sadness and despair.

Instead of asking, "What shall we do now?" the disciples were asking, "Can it be true?" Somewhere in all the chaos, glimmers of hope passed through their minds, but in the end, they had given in to fear. That's why they had locked the door. They were afraid.

Some might have been afraid of Jesus himself. After all, if he *was* alive, as those weepy women kept insisting, he probably would have a thing or two to say about the way they had all abandoned him. Guilt and shame at their failure to remain with him might have given some of the disciples a reason to fear rebuke from the teacher they had promised to follow, no matter what.

Some surely were afraid of the religious leaders. If Jesus' body *was* gone, the high priest's gang would be scrambling to find it. The first place they'd probably look would be among the Jesus' closest friends and followers. They remembered Jesus telling them that he would be killed, but that he would be raised up on the third day; didn't it make sense that the religious leaders would figure one of them had taken the body, to make it *look* like Jesus had risen? But, if that were true, who would have done such a thing?

Suddenly, all the whispers and the talking stopped. Someone gasped. A familiar voice was coming from the center of the room. Jesus was there!

Later, Thomas, who had not been there when Jesus appeared, returned to the room and to the excited reports of the others telling him that they had seen the Lord. But Thomas demanded to see the evidence with his own eyes before he would believe that Jesus was really alive.

Now we could joke about Thomas being from Missouri, the 'Show-Me State', where seeing is believing, or call him by the unfortunate name he has received due to his reaction. But in reality, he was no more a 'Doubting Thomas' than the other disciples, whose hopes had been dashed by the crucifixion.

As you'll recall, the other disciples had been filled with doubt, even after Mary had come back to say, "I have seen the Lord." So Jesus made a personal appearance, to convince them all that he really was alive. Thomas just happened to be late for dinner that first night!

When Jesus appeared he said, "Peace be with you." Then he showed them his hands and side to prove he was the same Jesus they saw die on the cross, but now very much alive. Then he commissioned his disciples to go out and share the good news, breathing on them and saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

In Matthew's gospel, the Great Commission (as this sending out is called) happens moments before Jesus ascends into heaven; in Luke's version of the story, the disciples don't receive the Holy Spirit until Pentecost; Mark's gospel doesn't even have a post-resurrection appearance. But John never was much for chronology. His story is less concerned with making dates match up, and more concerned with getting the word out: *Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. Believe the Good News!*

For John, believing is always a verb; you won't hear him talk about the noun 'belief'. Believing is what John is very eager for us to do. And once we believe, we will be given the Holy Spirit and be sent out to help others see, so they, too, may believe.

Jesus tells his disciples, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." John isn't talking about sin as moral failure; he is talking about sin as refusing to believe in Jesus.

Theologian Elisabeth Johnson writes, "*Jesus is not giving his disciples some special power to decide whose sins will be forgiven and whose will not. Rather, he is further specifying what it means to be sent, to make known the love of God that Jesus himself has made known. As people come to know and abide in Jesus, they will be "released" (aphiemi) from their sins. If, however, those sent by Jesus fail to bear witness, people will remain stuck in their unbelief; their sins will be "retained" or "held onto" (kratéo). The stakes of this mission are very high indeed.*"

The stakes were high then, and they are high now. We have forgotten that this whole story is about how much God loves us - about how much Jesus loves us - so much so that he was willing to die in order for us to know that love, and we have turned it into a story about how sinful and wicked we are.

So Jesus had to make sure each disciple was convinced of the truth. All the disciples had to see for themselves that Jesus had been raised from death to new life.

The concept of seeing-is-believing is present throughout John's gospel. 'Come and see' is found in the first chapter, when Jesus meets some of John the Baptist's disciples. When they ask where he is staying he says, "Come and see." (Jn 1:39). A few verses later, when Philip invites Nathaniel to meet Jesus, Nathaniel asks, "Can any thing good come out of Nazareth?" Philip says, "Come and see" (1:46). Then the Samaritan woman at the well runs to tell her neighbors, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" (4:29) And when Jesus arrives four days too late in Bethany, he asks Mary and Martha where they've buried Lazarus. "Come and see," they tell him (11:34). In this gospel "seeing" means everything from physical sight to complete understanding.

But Thomas isn't there when Jesus appears to his friends. Thomas does not see Jesus. The disciples tell him later, just as Mary told *them* the week before, "We have seen the Lord." Thomas is skeptical, just as they have been.

So, when Jesus does the whole appearing-out-of-nowhere thing again, this time it's for Thomas' benefit. And Thomas, unlike the other disciples, offers a confession that is profound and personal: "MY Lord and MY God," he cries out. Not just "the" Lord but MY Lord and MY God. In an instant, he moves from skepticism to trust. Thomas "sees." Then *all* the disciples see.

The disciples who had lived and walked with Jesus, the ones who had watched him die and be buried, they all needed some visible sign that he was really alive again. He told them they did not need to be afraid and he gave them his peace. Jesus gave it to them, as often as they needed to see it, so that they might believe.

We, too, have our doubts. We cannot stand where Thomas stood; we cannot see what Thomas saw, we cannot touch the One whom Thomas touched. But we should not feel left out, just because we weren't in that room on Easter night.

Because Jesus keeps showing up. *"As he came back a week later for Thomas, Jesus keeps coming back week after week among his gathered disciples - in the word, the water, the bread, and the wine - not wanting any to miss out on the life and peace he gives."*(Johnson)

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," Jesus says to Thomas. We are 'those.' We are the ones for whom John wrote his book, so that we may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, we may have life in his name.

As we live that life in the name of Jesus, let us show others what we have come to see and know, that Jesus died for love of us, and that we are called to proclaim that love to all the world. Let us join with Thomas in naming Jesus as our Lord and our God, so that through our witness all may see him, know him, believe and have life in his name. Amen.