



Sermon for Second Sunday of Easter, April 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Acts 4:32-35

John 20:19-31

Good morning, friends, on this Happy Second Sunday of Easter. We say, "Alleluia, he is risen!" *"The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!"* I invite you each day during these 50 days of Easter to rise each morning, stretch out your arms, and say, "Alleluia." Turn toward this bold declaration. Turn toward the risen Christ Jesus.

Today in the reading from Acts, we get a taste of how the early followers of Jesus came alive with resurrection joy, hope, and dedication. Peter is one of the first spokespeople for this rising tide of passion and infectious joy and hope flowing through the followers of Jesus. He speaks with full assurance.

He, among others, was blessed with seeing Jesus after the resurrection and interacting directly with him. He was among those whom Jesus met and called by name.

Remember, on Easter Day, we had that first sense of how Jesus seeks us out and calls us each by name. We saw how glimpses of signs of resurrection can be enough to stir change in the patterns of our hearts and minds – how light dawns and how each of us takes in the signs with mixtures of fear and ecstatic hope, uncertainty and wonder. And we saw how Mary Magdalene was the first to come to the deepest and fullest experience and understanding of the risen Jesus through the path of her tears and gripping sorrow that she was not afraid to express and give voice to – and how Jesus meets us in this space of our own heart-wrenching honesty to call us out of confusion, to call us to ourselves, to call us to open our eyes and ears and hearts.

Today, we turn to another disciple, Thomas, and we follow his path of turning as he demands to see and then is found by the risen Jesus, Emmanuel, the Lord of Life. Our friend, Thomas, shows us another path that our fears and uncertainties and skepticisms can take us. We can see how this can be an honest path full of conviction, but also how it can lead us into a space of being trapped. And we can see how Jesus answers directly.

Thomas is such a wonderful disciple. He is the one who cuts to the chase, who speaks the questions and statements aloud that others might not.

We hear from Thomas in some earlier places in the Gospel of John.

When Jesus' words are confusing about leaving to go and prepare a place for them, Thomas speaks the confusion that everyone is feeling: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14:5)

When Jesus sets his face toward Bethany just outside Jerusalem, after Lazarus had died, against the warnings of his disciples, Thomas mutters his misgiving that others are also feeling: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16)

And now, after others have seen the risen Jesus, Thomas says, "I need to see him and touch his wounds."

I'm like Thomas. I want to touch Jesus. Through different points in my life – throughout much of my twenties, and in important periods of my life over the past 25 years – I have been frustrated, or angered by what seems to be God's unwillingness to set things right, or angered and hurt by my own powerlessness, or in deep sorrow over some of my own losses and the suffering of others. My relationship with Christ has ebbed and flowed over the years as I have wrestled with the Lord as well as embraced the Lord with hearty gladness. Believe me, being a priest or pastor doesn't exclude me or any of my colleagues from experiencing and facing the same challenges and gifts that anyone faces in their lives and in their journeys of faith.

So, we begin today's Gospel reading with a second appearance of the risen Jesus. After the experience of Mary Magdalene and other women, Peter, and the beloved disciple at the tomb, a week passes. The disciples are still hunkered down in fear. Fear of those who oppose them among their own people, as well as fear of imperial authorities. Jesus breaks through and is among them – in the body, but a body transformed. Yet it is clearly his body.

Thomas isn't there with the disciples – in a room locked for fear of being hunted down – when Jesus comes to see them. Thomas isn't there to see that it is Jesus, and that his wounds show how he suffered. Thomas isn't there when Jesus says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Thomas isn't there when Jesus commissions and authorizes his followers – "As the Father sent me, so I send you."

If I were Thomas, I'd be miffed that I missed this. I'd feel slighted for not having Jesus appear to me. I'd wonder if it were really true – and if true, then what are they doing inside this locked room again instead of hurrying back to Galilee or taking to the streets to tell people this amazing news?

But, as I think about Thomas and the other disciples, it sticks out to me that they were gathering in a room locked for Fear. I believe we know something of this fear in our society today, as we see and hear of aggressive movements fueled by an anger that itself is rooted in fear. We know fear grips people in South Sudan, where it appears that democracy may not survive due to the intensity of fighting. But here at home, we know this fear of "our own turning against us" that is fueling responses of fight and flight. The fear of flight can come through in us wringing our hands and saying, "Oh dear. But what can we do?"

Here are these disciples who dared to follow a Rabbi that spoke differently and did things differently than the world around them – a Rabbi who became the target! What is it like to fear being hunted down? I am grateful that I have not known that kind of fear. But in recent years, I have known an anxiety about how to be public with our faith in a way that doesn't end up painting a bullseye on any one of us or on this church in this community. And, perhaps, that's a form of hiding.

So, Thomas' skepticism and angry stance may be just one more way for a person to deal with just how frightening their situation felt to all of them? Don't some of us deal with anxiety and fear about life's uncertainties by getting cynical, being skeptical about everything, demanding proof on our own terms – even to the point of dismissing other people's testimony. I wonder if this is the bluster of trying to be strong.

But maybe Thomas is just wired a bit more like a lawyer or judge, or an engineer. Maybe he is an ancestor of people who got the state of Missouri its nickname – the "Show Me" state. You know, that bit of skeptical realism that wants evidence, data, and the details. It's not a bad thing – often, it is a healthy and

very helpful thing, even if there are times when it becomes annoying to others who don't hold the same value in seeing the details for themselves.

Maybe disappointment has become Thomas' badge of honor, and he takes pride in being unwilling to trust change that begins to emerge in the people who disappointed us.

In any case, Thomas lays down the gauntlet for the risen Jesus (whom he hasn't yet seen). And he goes one step beyond what the other disciples experienced. "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." He lays down his gauntlet – "I need not just to see, I need to touch."

But maybe underneath this bluster is a really deep eagerness to know, to really know. Maybe Thomas is actually pleading to have his doubts, despair, and deep grief and sorrow driven from him – and he knows that touching Jesus, and actually touching the wounds that they had all seen Jesus suffer, would absolutely push through and drive aside all of the clouds encircling him.

Thomas knows that sometimes you need to get gritty – that only getting gritty will shake you free.

Imagine – Actually touching the wounds of the one you loved, the one you had followed, the one you had seen killed cruelly, now risen again. The wounds will prove to Thomas that this is Jesus. But more than that, seeing and touching wounds up close will open his heart and allow him to release the tears of grief he is carrying, to rediscover the hope and love that he has felt crushed within him.

This is Thomas' prayer. It is a demand. It is a plea. And, truly, it IS a prayer. It's not just some bravado act of defiant doubt. It is a cry of yearning. "I need this, too. Please, Jesus, don't leave me hanging."

And Jesus meets Thomas right where he is. Just like he met Mary Magdalene right where she was outside the tomb. Jesus comes to meet the disciples again, this time when Thomas is there. And he comes right to Thomas and answers his defiant cry of the heart directly. He invites Thomas to touch him – right in those wounds that Thomas said he needed to touch.

Isn't it amazing that the risen Lord Jesus, in this resurrected body that is beyond our own bodies and beyond any decay and death, carries the wounds he suffered? Isn't it amazing that the wounds have not been swept away? Isn't it amazing – maybe even unbelievable – that the incarnate God takes up what God suffered at our hands, and bears them forever? This is who God is, and the wounds are part of God's being forevermore.

Here Jesus is very direct with Thomas: "Put your finger here, see my hands. Put your hand here into my side. Do not doubt, but believe." Now that's not an exact translation in our English versions of the Gospel. In the Greek, Jesus doesn't pit doubt as the opposite of belief – Jesus pits unbelief as the opposite of belief. Doubt is the same as unbelief. Doubt is, "I have a question. I'm not sure." Doubt is part of the journey of belief, or unbelief. But what Jesus actually says here is "Do not unbelieve, but believe." Even closer in meaning to the Greek is "Do not become unbelieving but become believing." Believing and unbelieving are processes, steps along a path, turns in the road. They are not absolute, once-for-all-time decisions. They are choices, the little choices each day. So, "Thomas, choose where your path will go in this moment – but make your choice toward believing." Another meaning from the Greek can actually be

taken, “Do not show yourself to be unbelieving but believing”; in other words, “Thomas, choose to let go of your posturing and showboating.”¹

We don’t ever know if Thomas touches Jesus. Maybe he did, maybe he didn’t. In the end, that doesn’t matter. We just hear him respond, “My Lord and my God!” And this is the boldest statement by anyone in the whole of John’s Gospel. Lots of people call Jesus “Lord” – but no one else calls him “my Lord and my God.” We are taken right back to the beginning of John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” When Jesus meets him and speaks to him, and invites him to do just what he said he needed to do, Thomas finds the healing he seeks. But Thomas finds much more than that. Thomas’ eyes are open to see something more than he ever imagined.

When we bring who we are, really, to God – when we dare to speak with God directly about our pains, frustrations, doubts, skepticisms, griefs, and demands for evidence – we are in relationship with God. As long as we don’t just make our declaration and then go and slam the door and sulk in our room. As long as we stay in the conversation, we are in an honest relationship with God. And God welcomes and embraces that honesty. Bring all that you are to the risen Christ Jesus.

When we meet people where they are – when we really reach out to people in this way that Jesus has reached out to Mary Magdalene and to Thomas and has called to them and drawn them in – when we find ways of really saying to people, “I see you, I really see you,” we help people see Jesus who is coming to them through whatever locked doors they are living behind.

The disciples eventually open the doors. But first, they open the doors of their hearts to the wonder and awe of the unbelievable. Christ Jesus, the Risen One, visits them in their locked places. Hope, love, faith, awe, wonder, and joy grow and fill them. And they move toward the door.

When a door that is locked is cast wide open from the inside, that is an amazing act of power rising from the strength that has arisen within. And it is a power amazing to behold – a power of the wounded, the trampled, the fearful, who no longer fear but are taken by love that will not die.

Open the door.

¹ Helpful insights into translation of the Greek come from Robert Kysar’s commentary on John, from the *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament* series.