



Sermon for Second Sunday of Easter, April 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Acts 4:32-35 John 20:19-31

Happy Easter again, everyone! It is Easter Season, and this is the second Sunday in our 50 days of Easter celebration. The Lord is risen! We sing "Alleluias" and raise our voices together in joy.

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. They were all of one mind and spirit together, sharing all they had with each other so that no one was in need. There are these amazing moments that happen in the history of our Christian faith, that give us a full glimpse of the kingdom of God.

We're not there yet, in the Easter story. It takes a while for the truth of Jesus' resurrection to take hold in the disciples.

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 came 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.

Now, we can follow that continuing way of finding and being found by the risen Jesus, Emmanuel, the Lord of Life – in the Gospel of John's account of Thomas. 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, and 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.

When I was on retreat at a Jesuit center in Pennsylvania five years ago, just weeks after my father died (and his dying was not easy for him), I found myself in angry, intense conversation with God. I was angry about how my dad had died. I was angry about his unnecessary lingering. His death reminded me of the old hurt and frustration about how my mother had died decades ago, despite her prayers in faith for healing. And I was exasperated about wanting to see and be with and touch Jesus directly, and not being able to – because I yearned for that closeness that means something more than words and stories and accounts of other people and beliefs could ever give me.

I was so glad for the statue of Jesus near the entrance to the grounds – the risen Jesus, standing with bare feet on rocky ground and with hands raised up to bless and to invite. I came up to the statue, laid my hands on those feet, and prayed, “This is how I want to touch you. This is how close I want to be to you.”

There is a strong streak of Thomas in me. I remember in the years following my first very close work with people with chronic and severe mental illness, at sometime in my meandering driving trips I came upon an older urban church named St. Thomas's Church. I remember going inside, not having many words to offer or express in prayer, and just laying down on a pew. I remember being thankful for St. Thomas, an apostle who dared to speak doubts and skepticisms, for whom it mattered that he met Jesus directly.

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.”

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. It says for fear of the Jews. But I think we can read this more today as “for fear of their own who were turning against them.” And we see this kind of thing all around the world.

Last week, there were press releases that revealed more of the terrible atrocities being committed in Ethiopia against citizens living in the Tigray region. Horrific things have been done to these people who share in citizenship of this country, even if they have their own language and hold a strong sense of local autonomy and ethnic identity. We hold the Tigray people in prayer, for God's help and protection!

We've seen the news of Hong Kong coming under much stricter iron rule by Beijing – and the imprisonment of people who tried to hold ground for more democratic rule.

We know how our own partisan political discourse has devolved to a point that people demonize and dehumanize each other in their speech and how there have been rumblings among some groups eager for civil war.

And I wonder, what was it like for the 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.

Is this the kind of fear the disciples had?

And is Thomas' skepticism and angry stance a way of his dealing 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? Isn't there a bit of the Missourian "Show Me" spirit in many of us?

I wonder if this is the bluster of trying to be strong.

We know folks who hold on to their disappointment as a badge of honor, unwilling to trust change that begins to emerge in the people who disappointed us. At times, each of us may have done this ourselves.

So, 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 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? Isn't it amazing that this is what God is like?

We don't ever know if Thomas touches Jesus. We just hear him respond, "My Lord and my God!" When Jesus meets him and speaks to him, and invites him to do just what he said he needed to do, well, hearing and seeing is enough to break through. Thomas finds the healing he seeks.

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.