

Today is the Octave of Easter, the eighth day of Easter. Some churches call this “low Sunday.” Originally, that name distinguished this Sunday from the High Sunday of Easter, but for too many Episcopalians “low Sunday” came to refer to a dramatic drop in attendance. Some years back, a few Episcopal churches even adopted the Protestant practice of holding hymn-sings on this day instead of celebrating a Eucharist.

As lovely as hymn-sings can be in other situations, the practice loses an opportunity that our ancestors in the faith created for us; an opportunity to walk more deeply into the mystery of God’s grace. We can choose instead to return each year to an ancient practice with fresh eyes and renewed expectations.

Now, you may have noticed that the Gospel reading for most other Sundays including Easter rotates on a three-year cycle. But every year, on the Sunday following Resurrection Sunday, the lectionary gives us this same reading. That’s because, as far back as the first century, Christians have focused on the story of Thomas from John’s Gospel on the Octave of Easter.

In the ancient church, from the earliest days up to about the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> c. C.E., baptism almost always happened at the Easter Vigil in the wee hours of the morning of Resurrection Sunday. The church prepared people for baptism with a three-year period of instruction during which these people, called “catechumenates,” essentially remade their lives. On Sundays, those people preparing for baptism were allowed to be present for the readings and then were escorted out of the room. Only after they were baptized were they finally allowed to participate in their first Eucharist or to see a baptism.

In the weeks that followed Easter morning, the church exposed the newly baptized to the nature of the mysteries of baptism and Eucharist. That’s what today’s Gospel is about—offering insights into the nature of spiritual rebirth.

When the church split in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Western churches took to calling this second Sunday of Easter, “Thomas Sunday” or “Doubting Thomas Sunday,” a day on which Christians could be reminded of the disciple’s disbelief. But the Eastern churches called this Sunday the “Touching of Thomas”—not “Doubting Thomas” but the “*Touching* of Thomas”—a day on which the Orthodox invite the faithful to kiss an icon of the Risen Christ appearing to Thomas; in particular, to kiss the wounds of Christ. They are not kissing an idol nor are they fixated on some kind of death-fetish. Their reverence is a recognition that we, who are also the disciples of Christ, live in a world marked with wounds of all kinds. And something happens when we practice reverence toward images of Christ’s wounds, something mystical.

Now, John’s account of the appearance of the Risen Christ takes place on the first evening of his resurrection. We’re used to thinking of this event happening 50 days after Easter. That custom may have been created as a liturgical convenience to match with the Jewish Festival of *Shavuot*, which marks the wheat harvest in Israel and commemorates the anniversary of the day God gave the Torah to Israel. In English, *Shavuot* becomes “Pentecost.”

John’s telling of the first appearance of the Risen Christ comes in two parts, both of which begin with Jesus passing through closed doors, saying: “Peace be with you.” In the first appearance, Jesus shows the disciples his hands and his side to prove that he wasn’t a ghost or apparition or someone that just looked like Jesus. He showed them that the one who had been nailed to the cross and pierced in the side was the same one who now stood before them, resurrected.

He repeats the phrase: “Peace be with you” and breathes the Holy Spirit upon them—the breath of life. With this action, the Risen Christ recreates the second creation story of Genesis, when God took dust and breathed life into it. The Risen Christ breathes new life, a life that is imperishable, eternal and everlasting. In breathing resurrection life into the world, God’s creation occurs

anew. The Divine One, the Son of God, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth who actually died, releasing our bondage to death and all its consequences, now breathes new life in the resurrection. That's the first point that the early church mothers and fathers wanted the newly baptized to ponder.

For our ancestors in the faith, baptism was not a “get-out-of-hell-free” card. Baptism was not entry into a civic club whose members improve the community through volunteer work. Baptism was not a purification that turned the church into a society of the holy who separate themselves from what they perceive as the ungodliness of the world or look with scornful judgment on the lives of others.

By focusing on John's story on Octave Sunday, our church mothers and fathers wanted to impress upon the newly baptized and every member of the church that Jesus stood among the disciples and showed them the marks of his suffering before breathing the Holy Spirit upon them.

You see, to be baptized is to become one with the crucified and resurrected Christ. We trace fragrant olive oil in the sign of a cross on the newly-baptized, and we make that same sign, the tracing of a cross over our own bodies: from forehead to stomach, shoulder to shoulder and stopping at the chest to imprint our minds, bodies and hearts with the wounds of Christ.

In baptism, we become members of the body that bears the wounds of the Risen Christ so that we might participate more generously, more directly, in God's compassion for this world and all who dwell in it. Southern author Flannery O'Connor said it this way: “You will have found Christ when you are concerned with other people's suffering and not your own.”<sup>1</sup>

A week after the first part of John's story, comes the second part about Thomas. Thomas, who had the testimony of all the other disciples and who actually saw Jesus crucified. Thomas who wanted not just to *hear* the news of

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald, Sally. *Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.

the resurrection, but who wanted to see and to *touch* the wounds, the body, of his beloved friend.

He wanted nothing more than what the others received. And when the Risen Christ said to Thomas, “be not untrusting, but trusting,” (a more precise rendering of the Greek), Thomas moved immediately from his skepticism to the first and simplest expression of the mystical dual nature of Jesus Christ: “My Lord and my God.” And *that* is the *second* point that our mothers and fathers in the faith wanted for the newly baptized to take in and for all members of the church to remember.

There was no “low Sunday” after Easter in the early church. The Octave of Easter was a day for the “interpretation of mystery,” a “mystagogical” day, that served as the first of a set of teachings to complete the period of initiation into the faith. The entire congregation returned to hear, to be reminded, and to say “My Lord and my God” as they, too, came to touch the Risen Christ in the mystery of the blessed bread broken and wine poured out.

*That’s* what the church has to offer that no one else can: the mystery that actually happens here at this font and at this table. Too many churches have moved beyond doubt and skepticism into cynicism. And once cynicism takes hold, hope is snuffed out. Church becomes nothing more than a social gathering or a civic group or, worse, people stop coming to church altogether.

There is a cross baked onto the bread we bless. It is there to remind us that we are touching and receiving the reality of the crucified and risen Christ, just as Thomas did. It is there to inspire us to say: “My Lord and my God.”

So. Come to the Eucharistic table. Bring your doubts, your questions, your needs. Reach out your hand and let Christ breathe the Holy Spirit into you, filling you with new resurrection life. But remember that this life has been poured out not just for us, but for *all* people. Then let your questioning shift: how can we *participate* in the risen life so that *everyone we encounter*, marked by wounds both visible and invisible, may have life in God’s name?