

Second Sunday in Pascha  
John 20:19-31  
April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
The Rev. John Forman

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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 for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

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When it was early evening of that first day of the week, Jesus came and stood in the midst of the disciples and said to them, "Peace to you." Eight days later, Jesus came and stood in the midst of the disciples, and this time, Thomas is with them. And again, Jesus says to them, "Peace to you."

From the earliest days of Christianity, the church has read this passage on the octave of Pascha, that is to say, on the "eighth day" after the day that Jesus passed over from death to life. Our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith understood that Sunday is not only the *first* day of the week, it also carries mystical reality as the "*eighth* day," the day of Christ's resurrection when God made creation new.

The Risen Christ coming into the midst of disciples is a regular event. Every first day of the week, every Sunday, Christ is with them. When they gather, Christ is in their midst.

John's unique story begins on the evening of the Resurrection with the disciples gathered behind sealed doors. Thomas was not with them. On the octave that followed, the next week, they gathered again behind sealed doors. This time, Thomas was with them. And there he laid out his criteria for trust.

He says that he wants to probe the marks of the one who was crucified to confirm the new life that he has only heard about. His desire for physical evidence is natural in a culture characterized by “truthiness” and deception. Thomas assumes that his senses – his touch, his vision – will provide the kind of confirmation he seeks.

God, however, creates a new thing.

Jesus is not an undead zombie, a ghost or a reanimated corpse. Jesus *after* the resurrection is different than Jesus *before* the resurrection. The post-Pascha Jesus doesn't need to open doors to get into a room like people with physical bodies. And yet, here he is in the midst of his followers and somehow recognizable to them, wounds and all.

With no prompting, the post-Pascha presence responds to Thomas' test conditions with an unexpected twist. Jesus uses words that are similar to Thomas' criteria without actually complying with them.

“Reach here your finger and see my hands,” Jesus says, “and reach your hand and put it into my side, and cease to be faithless, but be faithful instead.” Jesus invites Thomas into his wounds – wounds that are not offered for surgical probing, but shown as openings for receiving the life of God.

Just so, Jesus invites Thomas, and *all* those who question – all those who have heard witnesses and still insist on a validating experience of the Risen Christ. The post-Pascha Jesus invites all seekers into a mystical understanding of his death and resurrection; an understanding that transcends and includes the physical realm. Because in that awareness, the seeker is exposed to the spiritual truth of Divine life present to us even now.

Thomas knew the flesh-and-bone Jesus. Common sense might lead us to imagine that he would have an advantage over those of us who never knew the historical Jesus who walked the Holy Land. And yet, Thomas consistently struggled to know the spiritual truth of his friend and teacher.

Until, that is, until he emerged from darkness to light on the eighth day; the day of Christ's resurrection when God makes creation new.

In the Paschal mystery of the eighth day, the Risen Christ breathes into the disciples with the same breath of God that moved into the mud to create Adama, the earthling: “Receive a Holy Spirit,” he says. And they become new creatures in a community living by the Spirit of God's peace and forgiveness.

The disciples begin to apprehend the *essential communion* between God, Jesus and themselves.

In the resurrection, Christ obliterates the power of *death* to separate us from God and from each other. God gives humanity a role to play in caring for creation, and in this new reality, the Risen Christ gives us a new responsibility: If we hold on to anything that separates, then separation will continue. If we release those things, then they are released and unity, that essential communion, develops.

The open wounds in the hands and side of the Risen Christ become channels for the peace grounded in God's perfect love; portals for the divine life that is stronger than death. And as we join our hearts to God's in the Eucharist, our own lives, even our wounds, become openings for God to work through us to bring peace and wholeness to others.

Because, you see, divine life can only be held long enough to give it away. The life and the light and the peace that the Risen Christ gives to us is not *for us*, but for others. And like a flame passed from one candle to another, the entire flame is given and yet nothing is lost.

John's Jesus asks Thomas to reach out and touch, not a bleeding spear wound, but an aperture through which God pours out Divine light and peace. Jesus invites Thomas to see his hands, not so that he will recoil at the cruel punctures of human hate, but so that he may receive the Divine life that flows from them.

Realizing the spiritual truth standing before him, Thomas does not probe further. In a flash of awakening, he only names his realization: "My Lord and my God."

For the Orthodox Church, this octave of Pascha is often called "The Assurance of Thomas" or "the Touching of Thomas" rather than "Doubting Thomas." The faithful kiss icons of the Risen Christ offering his wounds to Thomas in recognition of the intimate interconnection that all disciples of Christ have with the mystery of God's love for creation.

Rather than reducing Thomas to his doubt, we might consider the gift of his insight into the mystery of the resurrection: Christ is both with God, ascended, and with us, resurrected. Heaven and earth, God and creation, are forever and intimately conjoined by and through the wounds of the cross.

John's story of "the Assurance of Thomas" or "the Touching of Thomas" compels us to abide with each other at the intersection of the God that can be thought about and the God that can be experienced. Contemplating the story of "the Touching of Thomas" can inspire us to extend our hands to the living, active breath of God in the midst of us.

We gather each Sunday and the Risen Christ is with us. We trace the sign of the cross over our bodies, and we receive the wounds of the Risen Christ in blessed and broken bread and blessed wine poured out and shared for the forgiveness of sins.

Revitalized with the Holy Spirit, we go out into the world to participate more generously, more directly, in God's compassion for the creation made new this day and for all that is alive in it.

And as we awaken to the flow of God's light and love through us, when we give it and receive it, that is to say, when we encounter active love, as Yale theologian Miroslav Volf put it: "...the invisible and unique God, who dwells in inapproachable light, becomes 'visible' in the world – visible not to the physical eye, not even to the intellectual eye, but to the spiritual eye."

Let me leave you with an ancient practice. In the silence just before the blessed bread is broken, I say St. Thomas' words as a prayer of recognition: "My Lord and my God." And then I kiss the presence of Christ before breaking and offering it to you.

"My Lord and my God."

For me, it is a renewal of my confession of trust in the presence of the Risen Christ. I encourage you to pray it with me.

Whether I am presiding at the altar or sitting in the pews, there are moments when I can see – not with my physical eyes or even my mind's eye – rather I can see with the spiritual eye light and love pouring from the broken Body of Christ, flowing into people, spilling joyfully out into the amazing and wounded world until, depleted, it returns once again to the heart of God.

Like Thomas, God touches us so profoundly and assures us so deeply, that, in our awe and gratefulness, all we need say is: "My Lord and my God."

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