

Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 118:14-29
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

Last Sunday we gathered together here in this place to celebrate the quintessential fact that is the center of our Christian religion...the resurrection of Jesus Christ following his death upon the cross. At the same time, millions of other Christians all over the world were celebrating the same thing. The man who was and is the cornerstone of our belief system had died in front of witnesses and on the third day he was alive again. He appeared to those closest to him who became witnesses to this remarkable event. That one unbelievable fact about Jesus sets us apart from any other religious belief system that exists among all of humanity. It makes us unique. And from time to time, it also makes us feel a little crazy. How could we possibly buy into such story? We are rational human beings. We require objective and irrefutable proof of some phenomenon before we can accept its reality. The disciple Thomas was no different. That's where faith comes in.

On this Second Sunday of Easter, we take a long, hard look at the disciple Thomas because we can relate to him. He is us and we are him. It doesn't take much imagination on our part to understand how Thomas felt or why he asked the questions he did or made the demands he made. We have the same questions and we want to make the same demands. "Show me!"

On that first Sunday of Easter, the disciples are huddled together in a house with the doors and windows locked. They are terrified. They have seen their master executed and their fear is that the same fate will be theirs. And they are trying to process what has just happened. Like all of us who have been traumatized, they are trying to make sense out of the events of the last couple of days that have overwhelmed them. What will happen to them now that Jesus has died? Before his death, they had identified him as the Messiah...as the Son of God. They had believed him to be the one who would save all the Jews from Roman oppression. They had watched horrified as he was executed. And now they trembled together trying to make sense of it all. What happened? And why had it happened? And what was going to happen next?

Just to complicate matters, in the morning of that first Easter they had found the tomb empty. They couldn't figure out what had happened. They wandered back home distraught because they didn't know what had happened to Jesus' body. Just to complicate things, Mary Magdalene had come to them and told them that she had seen the Lord...that he was alive.

Well, they thought, that's not possible. This must be the delusion of an emotionally distraught woman. None of them took her seriously as much as they might have wanted to. The human brain strains to make sense out of experiences that are not logical or rational or easily understood. The brain strains to make sense out of the unbelievable. There must be some rational explanation for what Mary Magdalene thought she saw, but she was unshakable in her story. "It was the Lord!" she insisted. The ten of them, without Thomas or Judas Iscariot, were talking among themselves and trying to figure out just what was going on. And all the while they were frantic about their own safety. They would surely be next to be hanging on a cross!

We know why Judas was not with them, but we don't know where Thomas was. Perhaps he was one of those people who just need to be alone when they are trying to process confusing information. Maybe he needed to be away from the others' conversations in order to get his bearings and to think straight. Perhaps he had gone to try to find some food for all of them. We have no idea why he was absent, but he wasn't there when Jesus appeared among them...locked doors and all. All the others had a chance to see Jesus for themselves. They had a chance to talk with him. They had a chance to look at his wounds and verify that it truly was Jesus...now in the flesh and talking with them. Here's more unbelievable information for them to try to process. They must have been in spiritual and emotional overload. More than one of them must of thought, "I can't believe this is happening! I can't believe what I'm seeing and hearing! This can't possibly be real." But being together and having the same unbelievable experience was hard to deny. Somehow, each one of them needed to make sense out of what they were seeing and hearing and experiencing.

Thomas was the one who got left out, but his part of the story is very important for all the rest of us. We, too, were left out of that first meeting between Jesus and his followers. Thomas is us trying to figure out if we can believe this unbelievable story. Thomas is one of the faithful. When Jesus decided to go to Bethany to raise Lazarus despite the fact that shortly before some of the Jews had tried to stone Jesus because he had said, "I am God's Son!", it was Thomas who said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas was not an outlier among the disciples. He was profoundly dedicated to Jesus and his ministry. And he had missed out on Jesus' appearance to the others on that first Sunday of Easter. He's asking only for what they had already had...a face-to-face meeting with the risen Lord. He wasn't satisfied hearing of their firsthand experience; he wanted one of his own. Thomas said he wouldn't believe unless he saw the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands and unless he put his finger on those marks and his hand in the wound in Jesus' side. It was all just too unbelievable. Thomas wanted proof. He wanted that first hand experience. And when Jesus invited him to do just that, Thomas didn't need to. He simply cried, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas didn't touch anything; he simply experienced Jesus for himself. And that cry of "My Lord and my God" was the

acknowledgement of a relationship between the two of them. He didn't say, "*The Lord and the God.*" He said, "*My Lord and my God!*" It's a personal one-on-one relationship.

And that's what happens to each of us who come to believe in the risen Lord. We have an experience of Jesus. We have a personal relationship. Those experiences are as different from each other as we are different from each other. And yet, they are the same. Once we've experienced Jesus for ourselves...whether it is in a quiet moment of desperation or the exhilaration of unspeakable joy...once we realize that it is Jesus who is present with us, we, too can cry, "*My Lord and my God!*" We don't have to put our finger on the marks of the nail or our hand in his side. We know down to the marrow of our bones that we have encountered the living Jesus...present with us now some 1,986 years after the actual event of that first Easter.

Doubt is not the absence of faith. Doubt is part of the process of faith. Doubt is a longing to be sure. Anyone who believes has moments of doubt. Our experience of the risen Lord is unique to each of us. Jesus comes to us sometimes when we need him most and sometimes when we least expect it. But when he appears, we are certain. When he has been with us, the doubts we may have had dissolve. Our journey of faith is much like a staircase. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Faith is taking the first step even though you can't see the top of the staircase." That first step we take is our first moment of believing. The step we rest on is the doubt that challenges us. When we move to the next step it is another act of faith. And so it is throughout our lives. Taking one step of faith and resting on one step of doubt as we move closer and closer to the living God who created us and loves us.

Thomas was not faithless; he was faithful. He wanted for himself only what the other disciples had already experienced...a firsthand encounter with the risen Jesus. It's the same thing that we want. And when we've had that encounter with the risen Jesus, when we know deep down that we have a relationship with him, when we can feel his presence, that is the very essence of faith...punctuated by moments of doubt that propel us to the next level of faith.

God has given us minds that require confirmation and verification and hearts that recognize when we have received it.

Thanks be to God!!

AMEN