

Acts 4:32-35

Psalm 133 1

John 1:1-2:2

John 20:19-31

Human nature doesn't seem to change much over time. Apparently, for at least two thousand years, we humans have used a sort of shorthand to describe the entirety of a person's personality by one well-chosen adjective. For example, we know exactly what kind of person someone is dealing with when they are described as a Chatty Cathy or a Nervous Nelly or a Messy Marvin. Obviously, the person in question has lots of other character traits, but that nickname is the one that identifies them for all time. Such is the case when we meet up with Doubting Thomas in this morning's gospel. Prior to the resurrection of Jesus, he was the Apostle known as Thomas the Twin. His reaction to news of Jesus' resurrection has left him with a permanent nickname. He'll always be known as Doubting Thomas. It seems to be a rather disparaging description. Poor fellow!! He must have been more than just a doubter. So what do we know about him other than his skepticism surrounding Jesus' resurrection? The gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark don't mention him at all, but for some reason he's an important disciple to the author of the Gospel according to John who mentions him by name three times. We know something about him just by his name. He's known as Thomas the Twin. We don't know anything else about him and we know nothing about his twin. We don't even know if his twin was male a female! And we don't know where he is from or what his trade was before he joined Jesus and the other disciples. What we do know about him...other than his skepticism...is that he was a very loyal person. In John 11:16, Thomas tells the other disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with him." That was his response to Jesus' decision to go to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead even though Jesus was already wanted by the authorities. His disciples had been urging Jesus not to go because it was just too dangerous for him. But not Thomas. Thomas was ready to go with Jesus even if it meant putting his own life at risk. We know then that Thomas was very loyal to Jesus and supportive of Jesus' decisions even if they were risky. The next time we hear from Thomas is during Jesus preparation of the disciples for his

imminent arrest and crucifixion. This is part of Jesus' farewell address. He's starting to say 'good-bye' to the disciples even though they don't understand what he's talking about. In John 14:5 Thomas says to Jesus, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And Jesus makes the famous reply: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Jesus' answer to Thomas' question left the 2 disciples more confused than ever. We know by his question that Thomas is a practical man. He wants a road map for how to get to where Jesus is going. And then we come to the encounter with Thomas in this morning's gospel lesson. For whatever reason, Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them behind locked doors on the evening of the resurrection. But word has gotten to Thomas and he wants to see for himself. He can't believe what he's hearing, but the other disciples are most insistent. There's nothing wrong with Thomas being a bit skeptical. Any thoughtful person would be. And he's not asking for anything that the other disciples did not experience when Jesus appeared to them. They all saw the wounds. Jesus granted them Peace, not once, but twice. And Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on them. Thomas is holding out for the same experience. It's now a week after the resurrection. Still terrified about their safety, the disciples are once again behind locked doors and this time Thomas is with them. Once again Jesus came and stood among them. And Jesus invited Thomas to put his finger on Jesus' wounds and to put his hand in Jesus' wound in his side. But Thomas didn't need to. He was convinced just by seeing Jesus and the wounds. Jesus didn't chastise him for being skeptical, but Jesus did extend his blessing to those who would come to believe without seeing. So how does that happen...that someone comes to believe without examining the physical body of Jesus...the body that had been crucified on the cross...the body that had been wrapped in oils and spices and placed in a tomb...the body that had been resurrected and had left the tomb. How does a person come to believe without access to that body? That's a good question for all of us to consider. There seems to be a process in coming to believe in Jesus as the resurrected Lord. And that process has a sequence. It begins with a rumor; then goes to an encounter with Jesus which we may or may not recognize; next is the overwhelming experience of Jesus' power; then comes belief and finally evangelism. We can't contain ourselves. We simply have to tell someone else. The

first step in the process is just hearing about Jesus. Remember. Skepticism isn't a problem and doesn't exclude any of us from the process. Knowing something about Jesus is important even if it's just that you've heard the rumor that he was raised from the dead. Hearing about him comes first. The next step is having an encounter with Jesus. Sometimes that's a little harder to recognize, but when you've had an encounter with the risen Jesus you will be forever changed. Before you can recognize the risen Lord, you first need to be able to entertain the notion that it is possible to have an encounter with Jesus even now. Sometimes the encounters happen and we don't recognize what has happened. We don't connect the dots. But if we've had an encounter with Jesus and we know that's what it was, we've now experienced the power of his presence. It's something we never forget. It changes us forever. That experience of Jesus' presence propels us into belief. It's not an intellectual decision. It's a spiritual and 2 emotional experience that provides the pathway to belief. And trying to convey the experience to someone else is a little bit like trying to recreate any powerful experience we've had. We end up saying, "I guess you just had to be there!" The glory of this kind of process to belief is that we simply can't keep it to ourselves. There is now a force within us that propels us to want to share our experience with others. When we begin sharing our experience with someone else we have moved into evangelism. Again, believing is not an intellectual decision. It comes about because of our willingness to be open to the possibility and our ability to recognize it for what it is when it happens to us. In Thomas, we see the pattern of Christian discipleship established from the beginning of John 1 which was the New Testament lesson we heard this morning. One person encounters Jesus. Then they share their experience with the next person, who may express some reluctance. Then that person experiences Jesus on their own, directly, and becomes convinced about him and then shares the news about Jesus with the next person. Andrew tells Peter. Philip tells Nathanael. The Samaritan woman tells the townspeople. "Come and See" is the refrain.¹ and the chain keeps growing until it becomes a community. With respect to the witness of the resurrected Jesus, Mary Magdalene starts it off. She encounters Jesus, shares the news; the others don't really buy it until they have their own experiences so that they can own the experience. They become convinced and then share it with Thomas. Just like the other disciples, Thomas doesn't come to the fullest faith until he has his own experience. I say fullest faith, because he already has faith. It's recognizing

the experience itself that is the key. Everyone's experience is different. And everyone needs something a little different as a proof. An experience that will prove Jesus' living presence to you may not be the experience that I need. And neither of us can testify authentically without the experience we need to move us to belief. Simply saying, "I believe" is not belief. Living and making decisions and choosing how to interact with others reveals what we actually believe. If we aren't living it, then we aren't yet believing in any way but an intellectual one. And that's not the abundant life Jesus came to give us. Jesus told us that he came to give us life and to give it to us abundantly. Are we there yet? The story moves through the ages and through the chain of people hearing first hand accounts of experiences with the risen Jesus...from one generation to the next and this congregation and I are up next. Thomas makes his confession and, through this text, testifies to us. Now what will we do? Will we hang in there with some level of interest and commitment until we encounter Jesus in a way that moves us to the next level? What would the next level look like for us, understanding that we are all in very different places and we all need different experiences as proof? Think about what you need as proof. 2 In the end, it's not Thomas's "doubting" or demanding that matters; it's his believing. Everybody doubts; not everyone believes. Be a believing Thomas; push as hard as you need to until you are awestruck and moved to proclaim with him: "My Lord and my God!" Each one of us is more like those original disciples than we know. Jesus has provided us with the roadmap for creating Christian community right here in Bailey's Crossroads. We need to figure out how we continue to expand the circle of believers. How do we become the Mary Magdalenes and the Thomases of our day? That's what the original resurrection was all about and that's what our resurrection today as the body of Christ is about as well.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.