

April 24, 2022 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray.

Savior God, your Word is a lamp to our feet on this discipleship road. Walk with us. Guide us with your wisdom and grace. Open us to discerning your will and your way. Amen.

Our scripture for today is from the gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 19 through 31. listen now for the word of the lord.

19 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." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 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." 26 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." 27 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." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 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." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 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.

The word of the Lord. thanks be to God.

I must admit that I come into this Sunday with mixed emotions. I come in with this mixed emotions because our scripture for today is a well known passage.

In the lectionary, in each year of the 3 year cycle - this passage is read on this Sunday, the second Sunday of Easter. With good reason, it's a beautiful post resurrection narrative - but because we hear it each and every year our focus and understanding of it has narrowed so much that we just know this passage as doubting Thomas - or the passage about doubting Thomas - or doubting Thomas Sunday. We've simplified it to just this one understanding, this one stereotype.

There's a famous painting which I think perfectly encapsulates how we historically have viewed this story. You probably know which one I'm talking about. It's called "The Incredulity of St. Thomas" painted by Caravaggio in the early 1600s. It's a beautiful, if not haunting painting. It's greatly contrasted with Dark and light.

It portrays Jesus showing his side to reveal his wound and guiding Thomas' hand into his side, his wound, so he can touch it for himself and believe.

Thomas is crouched over close to Jesus, staring intensely at his wound. Crouched behind him are Peter and John, also staring at the wound. The background is solid black and the light source shines on Jesus while the disciples are more or less in the dark.

Jesus looks down, looks disappointed, while the only thing the disciples focus on is the wound.

And it's how we've come to know this narrative - Jesus disappointed. Thomas needed to touch to believe (even though in scripture he actually doesn't). Jesus the light, Thomas the dark.

An overall beautiful, but dark and gloomy perspective with Thomas' doubt at the heart of it all. And to be fair, Thomas does doubt in this narrative. But this narrative is so much more than that. It's so much more than singling out just Thomas' moment of doubt.

And first and foremost, I think it's important to understand that. I think it's important to see the full story.

Our passage begins on the day of the resurrection. Just before our scripture, Mary encounters the risen Christ and she runs and tells the disciples but they don't believe.

Instead they hide in a locked room, where our scripture begins. And in this locked room, Jesus appears, shows them his hands and his side - his wounds - gives them peace and breathes the holy spirit upon them. And they rejoice. They believe.

Now, Thomas wasn't with them when this happened. He wasn't there when the resurrected Christ appeared to them. So when the disciples tell Thomas, he doesn't believe them. He says he must see for himself the risen lord - touch his wounds. He must see and touch to believe. Thomas is the only one at this point in John's resurrection narrative who hasn't seen the risen Christ. Mary has seen, the other disciples have seen. So when the disciples tell Thomas what they have seen, Thomas just asks for what they received. He too wants to see Jesus and touch his wounds like they did. He only asks to have the same evidence that they all received before they too believed.

Which, rationally, seems pretty fair. Thomas is no less a believer than any of them.

He didn't doubt Jesus, he doubted their testimony. And furthermore, when Christ does appear to Thomas and says put your hand in my side and believe, Thomas immediately proclaims "My Lord, my God!" He didn't need to touch to believe.

In a narrative filled with doubt in the resurrection, we pin it all on Thomas.

But maybe we should also turn our attention to why didn't Thomas believe his friends? People he loved and trusted? Why didn't he believe their testimony? Maybe he didn't believe them, because how had the resurrection changed them? How had seeing the resurrected Christ and receiving the holy spirit changed the disciples in ways that Thomas could see?

When the disciples heard the news from Mary that she had seen the risen Lord, their response is fear, not joy. They hide in a locked room.

But the resurrected Christ meets them there - appears in the fear of that locked room and gives them peace, and charges them to forgive.

And how do they go out and live into the resurrection - how do they live now that they have received the holy spirit - do they go out and forgive? No!

8 days pass and they are still inside, still in the house with their fear. The only change apparent is now the door is simply shut, not locked. What had really changed?

The resurrection had come and gone and they so quickly settled back into their old ways, seemingly unaffected by the promise of new life.

What has changed for us?

Here we are, a week later just like the disciples. How have we lived into the resurrection these past 8 days? How have we changed with the promise of new life? Have we gone out and forgiven? Or have we gone back to our routines and shut the door.

Can you really blame Thomas for not believing them? For having doubt - when the disciples who had seen something so radical as their Lord rising from the dead - when they saw this, nothing seemed different.

But what sets Thomas apart, what's quite remarkable about Thomas - is that even though he doubted, he didn't believe the disciples - he loved Christ so much that he sits in his doubt. He waits.

For a week he waits in fear and doubt - in the shut room - and he waits to see Christ. He wants to believe.

As David Roberts writes about Thomas - "Maybe Thomas had something deeper than belief in the resurrection. Maybe he had faith in his Lord.

So he waited in the darkness of his own unbelief for the ghost of God to reappear and breath on him, too. This, to me, is more difficult and more courageous than the simple act of believing. That Thomas waits, while disbelieving, is the very definition of faithfulness, if not faith itself."

I think Christ's wounds play an important part in understanding the resurrected Christ. The wounds are clearly important to Christ himself - he shows his hands and side to his disciples without them asking - and he immediately offers his wounds for Thomas to touch.

I think we can safely assume that these are wounds on Christ, not healed scars.

For Thomas says he wants to put his hands inside the wounds. Christ has the power and glory to rise from the dead to new life - but in this new life, he brings the wounds of his violent death with him. He rises to new life before they even healed. Wounds are not healed in resurrection.

We carry them with us even as we are transformed to new life. Maybe that's why the disciples still hid in fear after seeing Christ - because they saw those wounds.

Because even new life cannot erase the darkest parts of who we are, of what the world has done to us.

To theologians who engage human trauma and disability this detail has not gone unnoticed.

As Amy Paul writes - these theologians "reject the idea that Jesus' invitation to Thomas is merely a visual aid - a sensory accommodation to Thomas' weak faith. Instead, they interpret

Jesus' challenge to believe as a test of faith in a different sense. Jesus is challenging Thomas and the other disciples to confront the wounds of their personal and collective life, instead of trying to deny or hide them."

For the disciples it is the wounds of their betrayal, their broken relationship with the Jewish community. For Thomas, not believing his friends.

What are the wounds the resurrection challenges us to face today? For America, it is the wounds of our racial history, to be sure.

And what are own personal wounds - that is something each of us must face vulnerably.

Both require courage. But to do so, to step out of that room and face those wounds, we have to have a new hope for what our world could be.

The first thing that Jesus' charges the disciples to do is forgive.

Maybe first themselves for their fear, for hiding in that locked room, Thomas, for his initial doubt.

But this charge to forgive is also hope in reconciliation for a broken world. To not ignore the wounds - or assume they are immediately healed in new life.

Perhaps now we are invited to look differently at our wounds - to face them not with negativity or fear or shame - but to embrace them as part of who we are - and see the possibility of what it could look like to heal the wounds in new life - grounded in the hope of resurrection.

On the cover of your bulletin is a picture of a mosaic called 'Christ Shows himself to Thomas' by Rowan and Irene LeCompte. It's a mosaic on the Washington National Cathedral. And I love this piece of art. It's bright, it's colorful, it carries this just sense of joy.

And it's what I hope you see when you think of this passage.

The light that radiates from Christ symbolizes his peace transforming their fear - darkness to rainbow.

Christ showing his side - and Thomas reaching for the side (but not touching it), but instead of staring so intensely at that wound - he is looking up at Christ in wonder.

And all around them seem amazed. For this passage is one of joy and wonder - one of hope in the resurrection - even when we hide in fear, even when we doubt.

At the end of our scripture Jesus says blessed are those who have not seen but believe.

And this really isn't a dig at Thomas. It culminates the whole resurrection narrative. Mary encountering Christ at the tomb, the disciples hiding in fear, Thomas doubting their testimony. It's so that we, those of us who come after Christ is resurrected, those of us who cannot see the body of the resurrected Christ - it's so that we can believe.

It's so that we too can live into the resurrection knowing that new life does not erase fear or doubt or heal our wounds - but gives us the courage and peace and hope to transform them.

And surely that is a mosaic of bright colors. Amen.