

2 Easter, Yr. C  
April 28, 2010  
John 20: 19-31

For as long as I can remember, this Sunday's gospel has been dubbed the "doubting Thomas" gospel. Which is a bit of a puzzle if you stop to think about it, because these few verses are packed with other messages: there's the peace that Jesus offered those who deserted him; there's the whole theme of fear and overcoming it; there's John's Pentecost, with Jesus breathing on his disciples and giving them the Holy Spirit; there's the commissioning of the disciples who are sent by Jesus just as Jesus was sent by the Father. And yet, we seem to focus on Thomas and his doubt.

Those of you who attended, not the recent Easter vigil, but the one last year, will remember that rather awkward moment when I went to take the candle out of the stand to carry it to the baptismal font and tipped it, ever so slightly, so that all the wax that had melted during the first part of the service came down on my head. It was an interesting liturgical moment and, unfortunately, for me, everyone who was in

attendance, whether Episcopalian or Lutheran, remembers that moment. When we were preparing for this year's service, I said something to Pastor Jim to the effect that you make one little mistake and that's what's remembered. So it is with Thomas. This one passage is what we most remember about him. We don't remember the time after Lazarus had died and Jesus was heading to Judea where he would ultimately raise him from the dead and it was Thomas who, sensing the lay of the land and the danger that Jesus was in from his enemies said that all the disciples should accompany Jesus so as to die with him.

And also when you think further about it, Thomas wasn't the only doubter. They all were. You'll remember that they had ignored what the women had told them as "an idle tale" – and what did they do with what the beloved disciple told them when he returned from the empty tomb. And this reading this morning, you'll note, is the second time Jesus appeared to them. What about that? This text tells us that Jesus appeared the previous week, but this week, they're still cowering in the locked room – still afraid, still doubting. Thomas had been absent the

week before. I wonder where he was? Was he the only one not afraid to leave the locked room? Out getting food for the rest of them? Who knows? And I'm not criticizing them. Perhaps they were still getting their heads around what had happened. And one thing was certain – their fear of the Romans was well-founded. As followers of Jesus they were undoubtedly in danger themselves.

I remember reading something during the Serbia conflict about a Bosnian family hiding in their basement saying that whenever they heard footsteps on the stairs, they wouldn't know if it was a kind neighbor bringing them food, or Serbs coming to kill them. That must have been something like what the disciples felt.

But when the disciples heard footsteps on the stairs it turned out to be Thomas. He wasn't receptive to their telling him that they had seen the Lord.

Thomas was like the folks from Missouri who want to see it for themselves; or like the logical positivists who thought that if you couldn't detect something with your senses, couldn't measure it or weigh it, it wasn't real. Or maybe he was like a defense

attorney going through and discarding witness statements: it was still dark, the women had tears in the eyes, maybe they were overcome with grief, or it was all wishful thinking

So, they were all doubters; Thomas just got to the party a week late. And, thinking about this, I'm wondering if part of the reason we focus on the Thomas part of the gospel is because we're all tempted to be doubters as well. I remember David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, talking about doubt and saying that there was nothing wrong with doubt; in fact it was part of a healthy faith. You just had to make sure that your faith stayed a nose ahead of your doubt.

Frederick Buechner tells about an experience he had after an English friend of his had died. He said that he and his wife were visiting the widow and were staying overnight with her. He had a dream about his friend. He dreamed that he saw him standing there in the guest room, looking his usual self in the white slacks and navy blue jersey he often wore. "I told him how much we missed him and how glad I was to see him again and he acknowledged

that somehow and then I said, 'Are you really there, Dudley?' His answer was that he was indeed. 'Can you prove it?' I asked him. 'Of course,' he said and then he plucked a strand of wool out of his jersey and tossed it to me. I caught it between my thumb and forefinger and the feel of it was so palpably real that it woke me up." Buechner says that when he recounted his dream at breakfast the next morning, he'd hardly finished when his wife said that she'd seen that strand on the carpet as she was getting dressed. She was sure it hadn't been there the night before. He rushed upstairs to see for himself and there it was – a little tangle of navy blue wool. Could it be that those we love who have died are now, like Jesus, free of the limitations of time and space and therefore available to us in a totally different way? That's certainly part of what John is saying.

As I said, there's a lot more in this Gospel. This is John's Pentecost, in which Jesus breathes on his disciples and gives them the Holy Spirit, that spirit that animated him during his life and ministry. We've talked before about God's new creation. And here, John makes a connection. Mary sees Jesus in

the garden; in fact, she mistakes him for a gardener. And if you go back to that original creation, to the Garden of Eden, where God creates humans by filling them with God's very own breath, here you have the NEW creation, with God's people once again being enlivened with God's breath. You'll note also though, that they, and we, are filled with God's breath and God's spirit for a purpose – just as Jesus was sent by his Father, sent to heal and redeem the world, now these disciples are sent the same way, out into the world to proclaim the risen Christ and the release from fear that that entails.

There's one more thing that I'd like to note here. And that is that the risen Christ who appears still bears the scars of the crucifixion. That's significant because it says that that suffering and the evil that killed Jesus can't be skipped over. It has to be lived through and thus transcended. As much as we would like a life without suffering, and perhaps a savior that would have skipped over Good Friday completely, that's not what we have. When I was in Madison this past week, both boys had gotten tickets to see the Avengers. I must confess that I don't know much about that, but apparently it's the

wrap-up of 22 previous avenger hero stories – those guys and gals who never suffer and always win. Lovely, but fictional.

There's an old legend that the devil tried to get into heaven by pretending to be the risen Christ. Being a master of disguises, he took with him a contingent of demons made up as angels and shouted up at the gates of heaven the words of the psalm - LIFT UP YOUR HEADS, O YE GATES AND BE YE LIFTED UP, YE EVERLASTING DOORS AND THE KING OF GLORY SHALL COME IN! The angels looked down on what they thought was their king returning in triumph from the dead. So they shouted back with joy the refrain of the psalm: WHO IS THE KING OF GLORY? The devil then made a fatal mistake. In every particular except one he was just like Christ. When the angels thundered, WHO IS THE KING OF GLORY? The devil opened his arms and said "I AM!" In that act of arrogance he showed the angels his outstretched palms. There were no wounding marks of the nails. The angels recognized him as an imposter and refused to let him in. The message of the scars is that the world did its worst to destroy

the Christ and it failed. The worst was, and always will be, overcome.

A final thought. I don't know sign language, but I read that the sign for Jesus is the left middle finger touching the right palm and then the right middle finger touching the left palm. The marks of the nails. Nothing more need be said. It's the sign for Jesus – the one who has suffered and overcome all the evil of the world. Amen.