

Message
Easter 2B – April 18-19, 2009
The Blessedness of Uncertainty
Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31
Hillary T. West

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! This is EASTER!! Jump for joy! He's alive!! All is well! The painful journey to the cross is over. The tomb is empty. No more doubt. No more uncertainty. God has broken through. Christ is alive! Except, that's not quite how it works, does it? Jesus is risen. Life is made new. With him, we are resurrected. The sun is shining. Hope and love surround us. But, we're still living with our troubles. We're still steeped in sorrow, worry, and fear. And, like our friend Thomas, in the familiar story we hear today, we must honestly admit our doubt and uncertainty of the Easter promise of new life given to us in Jesus Christ.

This is how it is with the disciples. They have the same Easter message. Mary Magdala bolts from the empty tomb and spreads the good news, "I have seen the Lord." But, the disciples haven't seen him. In fact, in Luke's gospel when the disciples get the women's message that Christ is risen, they find the story to be "pure nonsense, and they don't believe". In Mark's gospel, again, when Mary Magdala tells Jesus' friends that he's alive, they don't believe her.

In John's gospel, from which we hear today, clearly the disciples are uncertain. Yes, Mary gives them the news. But, their fear dictates. Maybe their fear is disappointment and shame. Remember, they don't hold out. They desert Jesus at the cross. They don't initially join the women at the tomb. Maybe they're overwhelmed with a sense of failure because they deserted Jesus. Hiding in the dank, darkness of the unlit upper room is safer than living a life for Jesus.

You see, these disciples, they're faithful Jews. They follow the Law; and they honor the rituals of the Temple, the house of God. And, if they trust in the power of Jesus in their lives, this new understanding of the Law, they'll be thrown out of the temple, excommunicated, no longer welcome in their faith community because of their beliefs. How quickly they've forgotten Jesus' reassuring words when he was with them..."in a short time you will no longer see me, and then a short time later you will see me again...and your hearts will be full of joy." Rather than trust in Jesus' saving promise, they isolate themselves, immobilized by their fear and uncertainty.

But, here's the kicker. Nothing keeps Jesus away. Even in our uncertainty, actually, especially in our uncertainty, Jesus draws us to him. He keeps breaking through. He keeps showing up. He bursts forth from the tomb, rising to life, assuring us of his eternal presence. He doesn't knock on the barricaded door and ask to be invited in. Miraculously, he just appears. Because, that's always how it is with Jesus. When we're in our most vulnerable space. When we shut out and shut down. When we're just not certain how it is God is working and moving in our lives, this is when we're most pliable and Jesus molds and shapes us with his promise of hope for courage and strength.

Gently, he greets his disciples. “Peace be with you,” he says; a typical greeting bestowing security and safety, completeness and soundness. Peace, given to a community of believers who will face trial and persecution, troubled times and serious doubt. Jesus shows them the wounds carved into his hands and his side. The proof is made known, Jesus is risen, and the disciples rejoice with gladness. Immediately he breathes into them the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the gospel writer’s interpretation of Pentecost, the birth of the church. We tend to be more familiar with the embellished, dressed up version from Acts, where the Holy Spirit descends upon the faithful in the shape of tongues of fire. In the writer of John’s gospel Pentecost takes the shape of the risen Lord, Jesus, alive, breathing his very life force into the disciples, filling them with his Holy Spirit, equipping them to go out and serve in his name. This is the same breath God breathes into humankind at creation, and now, it’s Jesus, exhaling that same life giving Spirit, into us, filling us with new life, as re-created Spirits.

Jesus instructs: “...I’m sending you, receive the Holy Spirit...If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.” Now, Jesus expects a lot of us. Obviously, he knows we’re up to the mission. His single breath removes the barricades of fear and resentment and clears the path for love and forgiveness. With our hearts softened, and our minds made ready, Jesus sends us out into the world.

Now, typically, this story is about Thomas. Often, we overlook the beginning of the story, that Thomas isn’t with the disciples as they hover together in fear, overwhelmed and burdened with worry and doubt; that Jesus comes, and lovingly, tenderly, empowers them, and equips them with his amazing holy spirit and gives them authority to teach and preach and heal in his name. Most of us remember just the Thomas part of the story; and how we’ve come to know him as doubting Thomas. Now, we don’t know why Thomas isn’t with the disciples in the first visit. But, we do know that, even in his uncertainty, Thomas is an honest, faithful follower of Jesus. When Jesus calls the twelve, Thomas is among them. He’s not always certain of his role as a disciple. But, Thomas tries to do the right thing. So, at the death of Lazarus, he bravely urges the group to take a perilous journey with Jesus to the bedside of the Lazarus, where he suggests that they may die with him (John 11:16). And, later, as Jesus patiently teaches and preaches his disciples to trust; that he is “going to prepare a place” in his death for them, curious, but willing, doubting Thomas asks, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?”

Thomas gets a bad wrap. Because, the truth is, all the disciples are doubting. They’re all uncertain. So they isolate, for fear of discovery. Discovered, not for condemnation or punishment. But, discovered because, Jesus calls them to be him in the world, *a group of believers, united, heart and soul, testifying to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power* (Acts 4:32-33). And, there is risk in such truth.

In an effort to embrace the truth Thomas speaks the words we all cradle. We want proof. So does Thomas. He tells his friends, “Unless I can see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe.” Well, Jesus is the good shepherd. If just one lone sheep

is lost, Jesus searches until the lost is found and joined together with his flock. So, once again, with the doors sewn shut, Jesus shows up. It seems there's no keeping him away. He issues the same greeting of comfort and reassurance, "Peace be with you." Lucky Thomas. He gets the real deal. He's a witness to the one who carries those very wounds carved for us, for our freedom from pain and suffering. Thomas also gets his own personal commission from Jesus, "don't be unbelieving, but believe." It seems to me that Jesus is saying, let our uncertainty be the door for him to enter, bringing transforming love and hope for us. Jesus is the power that breaks through doubt and fear. Jesus comes just when we're in those places where life just isn't making sense; where we look and search for just something good to come our way; then Jesus is there, and he says, you can rely on me. Be confident in how I'm here for you. I'm not leaving. You're mine. Given the truth, Thomas' eyes are opened. Standing before him, bearing the marks of a broken humanity, is the one true God, in Jesus Christ, Thomas' very God, our God, revealed to us, now and forever in the person of Jesus Christ. Blessed are those who serve as eye witnesses to Jesus' resurrection and can cry out, My Lord, my God!

More blessed, claims Jesus, are we; the ones who are not eye witnesses to the wounds carved into his hands and sides. We are not the ones standing on the road to Calvary, and looking up at that crucifying cross. We are not there when the stone is rolled from the tomb. Instead, we are here, and so is he, present for us, always, in this community, in one another, in our prayers, in the Word spoken, in this sacred meal, in how we live and love and trust. He's here, trusting in our belief in him. He's here, and he says, "even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing" (The Message). You see, for Jesus, it's ok that we sometimes doubt; that we're uncertain. Because, for Jesus, he's not one bit uncertain. He's very certain; certain about his love for us, the promise of his Easter journey, to be with us always. He doesn't doubt that we're his. He loves us, and he believes in us, in the love he has within us. He calls us to be his Easter people; to shout for joy at his redeeming life in us, making us new, restored, whole, equipped to live and love; like Jesus.

So, we practice. We practice being Jesus with one another. We come out from our hiding places. We trust in Jesus' power within us. We extend the kind word. We turn the other cheek. We look for the best in one another. We offer mercy. We show up as his blessed ones; and when we do, we're made certain. See, Jesus sees the blessing in our wonder and worry and questioning. Jesus peers into our places of doubt and uncertainty and sees them as entrance points, places where he gladly comes to fill us with his life saving love, binding us to him, now and forever; drawing us to belief. Belief in a Spirit so powerful and strong, to be his people, united in heart and soul, to be his church, loving and caring for one another.

We are his blessed people. So we see, we see with truth, in faith, the blessing of our Lord Christ, who has so shared in our life, so taken our pain, that now we are free, free to love, and shout out My Lord, my God, I believe! Alleluia!