St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Albuquerque, NM

Sunday April 19, 2020 Easter 2A

Text : John 20: 19-31 Thomas encounters the Risen One.

Theme: Touching when we cannot touch

Things are getting cancelled. Events we were looking forward to are postponed indefinitely and we are missing out on so much.

We all hate to miss out on things, especially something significant that happens with all of our closest friends. Thomas had missed an encounter with the Risen One and it had been painful. Others had received the Peace of Christ and been commissioned to go out into the world in ministry with the breath of the Holy Spirit tingling in their bodies. Thomas had missed out on this powerful encounter and wanted one himself. I’ve often thought that Thomas gets a bad rap for wanting to see Jesus himself. I cannot answer for you but I see a wonderful tenancity **in Thomas’s desire** for an encounter with Jesus on his own terms. Thomas wants to see Jesus, to know in his very bones the power and mystery of the resurrection. But perhaps more importantly he wants to be with Jesus again, just to be in his presence and to feel the power of God at work in his friend and teacher.

When Thomas returns and the disciples tell him what they had seen, he responds, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in fact, until I touch those marks and put my hand in the wound in his side, I'm not going to believe."

Thomas desires proof. No, what he wants is presence, embodiment. He wants Jesus. Thankfully, when Jesus appears a second time to his disciples, Thomas is there. Jesus doesn't rebuke Thomas for his desire for visible, tangible, concrete verification, he lovingly tells him to, "Put your fingers in my hands, touch my side." He has a personal encounter, a face-to-face with Jesus that enables him to be a believer. "My Lord and My God!" says Thomas in response.

Nobody else, in all of John's gospel, has said that much, that clearly and enthusiastically, or that openly about Jesus. Nobody to this point in John's Gospel has been able to have that much faith.

In saying, "Touch me, thrust your hands into my scars," Jesus was not rebuking Thomas for his doubts. Rather, he was giving Thomas the proof that he needed. Jesus did not say to Thomas, "Now, close your eyes and try to believe real hard." Nor did he say, "Thomas, if you would just have more faith, be more like the other disciples, you wouldn't have a problem."

Rather, Jesus gave Thomas the proof he needed. Out of love, he gave him tangible proof.

I don't know about you, but I'm grateful for this tangible proof scene. There are those who hear the Gospel accounts and, despite the two-thousand-year space between our time and their time, they hear and they believe.

There are other people who need something else. The stories of the gospels are fine. The Good News of the gospel is attractive. But they need more than words. They need touch. For those people, the good news is that Jesus gives them what they, you, need. Touch, see, and believe, Jesus says. For you there is the church. This building. There are those who say, "Christianity is a wonderful spiritual ideal." But who gets worked up over a spiritual ideal? You need the church, a place, a building, somewhere to go and know that God will be tangibly, visibly, really there. Sure, we believe that God can be found anywhere, at any place, but you need some place, you need a community.

And I think that this is where we find ourselves relating to Thomas in such a real and deep way now in this time of Stay At Home Orders and Self-distancing. We are all wanting some physical proof that the Christian Community is alive and well. We want to be among the faithful in-person. We want to pass the peace and chat people up a coffee hour. We want to reach our hands out to receive the body of Christ, to be nourished in the sacraments. We finally really want to go to meetings at church, O to be in a meeting with real people, real people who are interrupting each other and talking too much and getting off topic and making a beautiful human mess in our very own presence. O now we dream of going to meetings.

We all want to know things, to know them in our bodies, to reach out and touch and feel the truth, to be known and loved, to be noticed and matter, to feel alive and valued.  That is something that is rather hard in this time of Covid-19. It is as if the whole world is out of reach, off-limits, untouchable, contaminated and separate.  We really are embodied beings we live by gesture and touch by words and presence, by story and song, by exclusion and embrace.

I don’t know about you but I’ve been having some pretty wild dreams during the time of Covid-19. I keep dreaming I’m with actual people talking and laughing close together, shaking and hugging, loving on one another, joyous to be around other people. Giddy at the prospect of back slapping and sharing a meal. Last night I had a dream that I was watching Netflix with a strangest cast of characters whom I have never imagined watching a movie with but it was wonderful and a delicious possibility.

Perhaps St. Thomas is the patron saint of Covid-19. He longs for Jesus’ presence. He wants to know the resurrected one in his own body, to touch the resurrected body of Our Lord, to feel in-person the power of God to overcome death and grave. I don’t think that Thomas is so much a doubter as he is a passionate lover of Jesus one who wants very much to see for himself that Christ is alive.

So what are we to do in this time of not-togetherness? What are we to do while we are separated from one another but longing to be in the presence of the community of the faithful who are trying to follow hard after Jesus?

Thankfully we are not alone. One of the first things Jesus after appearing to the disciples is to give them the Spirit. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

At the core of the Christian faith is the mystery of the Incarnation, the beautiful truth that God in Jesus came among us in human form, that God humbled himself and became one of us that we might be reconnected with God. The Risen Christ makes it clear that while he is going to the Father, he is not going to leave us unsupervised. He is giving us the gift of God’s ongoing presence in the Spirit. The Risen One will be with us always. We will be able to feel the presence of God in our lives. The presence of Christ will be operative in our daily actions, urging us toward God, reminding us of what it means to be God’s people in the world, encouraging us to live in a sacrificial and generous way. Teaching us what it means to have the Way of the Cross at the center of who we are because that is at the center of who Jesus is.

So in this time of Covid-19, this time of Thomas the lover of Christ, we are bidden to be not only mystical Christians who believe that Christ is with us even if we cannot see him nor gather together to worship, nor reach out for the bread and wine, but we are also bidden to open our eyes to the ways that Christ is alive and at work in the world about us. We are to be on search for Resurrection all around us. Not just in the beauty of spring but in the loving care of those whom we come into contact with in our daily lives. The places where the hands and feet of Jesus are seen in our families: The meal planned and prepared. The shopping trip risked. The deep conversation engaged. The phone call of connection initiated. The help with a project. The dishes done without anyone asking. The forgiveness offered when someone has been harsh or lashed out in their anxiety and fear. The space and quiet to get work done. The simple listening to another human being trying to process what is actually happening. The check in the mail to help.

We are to read with interest the many ways the Risen One is to be found throughout the world, caring for the sick, the lonely, the vulnerable. We are to hear God’s voice in the words of scientists, researchers and doctors who are advocating for life, for health, for human thriving instead of death and disease. We are to weep when we hear of hospital chaplains giving last rights over the phone or being the only link a family has to their beloved in the hospital. We are to rejoice in the flattening of the curve in countries that are overwhelmed by illness. We are to take delight in those who celebrate and honor our health workers and healers. We are to take pride is strong leadership that protects people and collaborates and shares resources. We are to rejoice when someone can tell the honest truth to people, own up to mistakes and move into the future with a humility that can only be learned through failure.

This past week I received a story in the mail from a friend about a time of great struggle and pain and the slow and needed healing and resurrection that followed it. I think that this too might be a moment for us to write our stories, to recollect the mighty works of God in our own lives through our memoires and stories of struggle and of new birth. It is a time to remember the people in our lives who have shown us the path of the Risen One. This is a time to tell the story of people who shaped our own spiritual lives, the living, breathing embodiments of the Christian faith. The people without whom you might not be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, had you not known them: real, living, breathing witnesses who by their daily lives demonstrated that there is a force loose in the world, a force for healing and world repair for reconciliation and justice. God.

We are all of us like Thomas, we need reassurance, practical, physical reminders of resurrection in our lives. Faith is not just an idea. It is based on a relationship with the living God, a relationship manifested in the person of Jesus. Each of us share the faith with one another by living that relationship out in the world in practical everyday ways by what are, what we say, what we do, what we practice. It may sound rather simple but at the same time it is profound and that is what Thomas reminds us of in this beautiful resurrection story. We can all know Christ in our own bodies, we can all reach out and touch Jesus by living the faith out in our daily lives and being alive to they myriad ways Christ is present here and now.

There is nothing wrong with desiring to see Jesus. There is absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to know the presence of God in our own bodies. There is nothing amiss in desiring a relationship with the living God. And there is nothing more beautiful than realizing that it can be found right where you are. Amen.