



SAINT PETER'S CHURCH

Stories of Resurrection, and the Journey Home

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
The Second Sunday of Easter ~ April 28, 2019*

Acts 5:27-32

When the captain and the temple police had brought the apostles out of the temple, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Psalm 150

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| 1 Alleluia! Praise God in the holy temple; *
praise God in the firmament of power. | 4 Praise God with timbrel and dance; *
praise God with strings and pipe. |
| 2 Give praise for God's mighty acts; *
praise God's excellent greatness. | 5 Praise God with resounding cymbals; *
praise God with loud-clanging cymbals. |
| 3 Praise God with the blast of the ram's-horn; *
praise God with lyre and harp. | 6 Let everything that has breath *
praise God. Alleluia! |

Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 20:19-31

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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 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." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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." 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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 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." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.

Every year at Yale Divinity School, a special evening worship service is held in the week following Easter. This highly anticipated service, called Easter Rejoicing, takes a different form every year, as students continually seek to make it more creative, more experiential, and more full of life. The year I remember best was the year that we went outdoors for a portion of the service... which was also the year the Scriptures came alive for me in a new way.

Outdoors, the Divinity School's façade is punctuated by a number of inlets, creating small, protected niche gardens. These inlets are the perfect place, it turns out, to stage a tableau for a small audience.

During the outdoor portion of this Easter Rejoicing service, a small group of students turned each inlet into a stage, where they dramatized one of the narratives of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to his friends and followers. I moved slowly from scene-to-scene, taking in the full spectrum of Jesus' friends' and followers' reactions to his resurrected presence.

And as I saw these narratives unfold, one after the other, it slowly dawned on me that the aftermath of the first Easter was not at all uniformly joyous for those who had loved Jesus. Indeed, those early post-resurrection days were much more emotionally complicated than our contemporary Easter festivities ever let on. You see, before word started to spread that the resurrected Jesus was making appearances, his friends and followers were filled with sadness, confusion, and fear. And even as he started to make appearances, the sadness, confusion, and fear of those who encountered him did not immediately dissipate. His appearances were mysterious, leaving those who saw him simultaneously awe-struck and unsettled. Indeed, his appearances presented a number of perceptual and logistical challenges to his friends.

First, of course, the resurrected Jesus seems to often have been difficult to recognize. He was not always identified immediately as "Jesus". Indeed, it seemed that people had trouble perceiving him, "seeing" him. Even people who had known him intimately. He was different, somehow. Yet still Jesus. People could eventually "see" him.

Another challenge: even when he was recognized, Jesus rarely stayed around for long. The post-resurrection appearances seem to have been brief, momentary encounters. Transforming, yet transient. Nearly impossible to grasp. Fleeting. Jesus didn't set up camp, re-gather the crew, and get back to business. Rather, he was everywhere at once. Making contact and then departing, just as people were getting used to the idea of having him back.

Indeed: Jesus seemed to both appear and disappear quite mysteriously. He didn't make conventional entrances and exits. He seemed to just suddenly "be there," on a few occasions. Not quite arriving "out of thin air," but in the vicinity of such an experience—even appearing in a room whose door was locked. So how did people feel when they encountered Jesus, when they recognized him in these mysterious, evanescent encounters? More often than not, there was a kind of quiet peace. Certainly relief and hope, but still, confusion remained about what it all meant. There certainly weren't any of the trumpet fanfares that we associate with Easter... nothing quite at the level of boisterous joy to which we're accustomed. Resurrection just wasn't really in the playbook, so there was no pre-programmed response.

So, while they were certainly amazed and overjoyed, Jesus' friends and followers were also still in shock. And Jesus didn't stick around long enough to answer any of their questions. His presence was simply an assertion: I am here. I am with you. Even if you don't understand, I am here.

And I think this is all quite important to remember when we come to the story of Thomas and his "doubts."

Jesus' encounter with Thomas, you see, is always our Gospel text on the Second Sunday of Easter. And I think it's a bit strange that he gets so much attention, since there is a much wider range of post-resurrection texts available to us. Nevertheless, Thomas always gets the prime slot, the Sunday after Easter.

We do eventually get to hear other texts, of course.

Next Sunday, the Third Sunday of Easter, we'll have the chance to hear about another post-resurrection appearance: the time when Jesus joined a few of the disciples for breakfast by the sea, cooking fish and bread over a charcoal fire.

On the Third Sunday of Easter in 2020, we'll hear about Jesus walking alongside two of the disciples on their way to Emmaus. At the end of their journey, they invite him over for dinner, and they finally recognize him "in the breaking of the bread."

And then on the Third Sunday of Easter in 2021, we'll hear about the aftermath of Emmaus, when the two disciples who recognized Jesus over dinner, as he broke the bread, go and tell the rest of the disciples. The others

react just as Thomas did. They are initially doubtful. So Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish in their presence to prove that he is indeed human, and not a ghost.

It will take 3 years, however, for us to hear all these accounts of how Jesus showed up after his resurrection. And there are still other accounts that we rarely hear, including Matthew's telling of the encounter with Mary Magdalene and her friends.

So to me, it feels hard to get perspective on all that Jesus was up to after the resurrection given that these texts are doled out to us in dribs and drabs.

With just one or two pieces of the puzzle, it can be difficult for us to perceive the wider terrain: how Jesus' friends experienced his resurrected presence... how it felt to be one of those very first witnesses. It can also be difficult to find a way to enter the story ourselves, through these narrow portals we are given. I long for a way to tell all of the stories, all at once, the way I experienced that year in the Divinity School quad. These stories yearn to be heard together. To be allowed to overlap and intersect. To be permitted to interrupt and interpret one another. Encouraged to weave themselves together into a more complex tapestry.

But instead, what the lectionary gives us, is Thomas. Just Thomas. Year after year, we hear again from Thomas on the 2nd Sunday of Easter.

Now, I'm not trying to badmouth Thomas. I'm a lot like him. I'd certainly have needed to touch Jesus.

But by foregrounding Thomas' experience, by giving it so much airtime, we can lose touch with the diverse range of ways that Jesus showed up to his friends and followers; ...the range of ways that they reacted to him; ...and the range of reactions that we can imagine for ourselves.

Hearing again and again from Thomas, tends to give us a one-size-fits-all template for engaging with Jesus' resurrected presence.

Indeed, because of Thomas, legions of liberal preachers have spent the Second Sunday of Easter reminding their congregations that it's okay to doubt—that doubt is good and healthy and natural.

And while I can certainly be a prolific doubter, in some ways, doubt feels too simple, too easy. Doubt simply feels like an inadequate response to the magnificent claim that Jesus is risen from the dead.

You see, in our modern world, doubt has become incredibly easy—fashionable...trendy, even. Doubt has become an almost automatic cultural reflex. And with little social pressure to believe, or even feign belief, many of us don't really try. We don't tend to wrestle much with the extraordinary claim that "Jesus is risen. Rather, we quite easily lay it aside as so much pie-in-the-sky—almost too fanciful and otherworldly to bother engaging sincerely.

We latch onto Thomas' momentary doubt, and too easily forget that, with very little coaxing, Thomas quickly believed. Just as all of the other first-hand witnesses did. They experienced something incredibly profound, and they believed. They believed in risky and courageous ways. They believed in ways that changed their lives, and the lives of others.

The popular spiritual writer, Fr. James Martin, explains it this way:

"To my mind, only something as vivid, dramatic and, in a word, real as the multiple appearances by the risen Christ could have moved the disciples from abject fear (cowering behind closed doors) to being willing to give their lives for Jesus. Nothing else can credibly account for the transformation of terrified disciples into willing martyrs."¹

It's really quite amazing, isn't it? The persistent faith of so many of our forebears? And the fact that this originating event—Jesus' resurrection from the dead—could result in all of us, so many generations later, being here today? It's almost miraculous, when you think about it. This unbroken chain of witnesses, each new generation witnessing the faith of its elders, in spite of all manner of obstacles and impediments. Resurrection faith has somehow survived it all.

And yet, at times, it can feel like we have so little to go on. The first Easter feels so far away. And our lives feel so different from the lives of Jesus' original friends and followers. We don't have the same first-hand experiences that those original witnesses did. We have so little evidence, such inadequate data on which to base our resurrection faith.

And I've often wondered: how can I base my life on this story? This fanciful story that is unprovable and unrealistic and just about the strangest kind of basis for a religion that you could possibly dream up.

When I get to doubting, I always return to my favorite Easter image: an Orthodox icon depicting Jesus' descent

into Hades. Tradition holds that between his death and resurrection, Jesus descended to hell to empty hell of its prisoners. And this icon depicts Jesus grasping the hands of those in the tombs, pulling them up from the abyss, out of their graves and onto solid ground.

It's a powerful image for me. Because so many times in my life, I have felt my own need to be pulled up from death. I have felt the world's need to be pulled up from death.

And again and again, Jesus reaches out his hand. He reaches out his wounded hand to welcome Thomas' doubtful touch. And even now, he reaches out his hand to touch my wounds...to touch yours. Doubtful though we may be of his healing power. Still, we know he is alive because we have felt his touch. Because he has taken us by the hand. Because he is leading us home.

We may not be healed. But we are on our way home. Pulled up from the grave again. And that is enough. Enough to believe in.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/04/23/literal-flesh-and-blood-resurrection-heart-my-faith>