

Hearing Is Believing
Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church
April 8, 2018

Gospel Reading: John 20:19-31.

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.

This Sunday is often called "Low Sunday" because of the return to a more ordinary liturgy following the great liturgies of the Easter Vigil and Easter Day, and also because of attendance! But Easter continues, for 50 days until Pentecost, and all year every Sunday is a little Easter. And so on this day, with the saints of every time and place we still proclaim: Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!**

For centuries the church on this Sunday has heard today's Gospel reading from John 20. After the Easter gospels themselves, this may be the oldest assigned reading. In the early church the newly baptized would wear their white robes until this day, witnessing to their new life in Christ. And out of all that baptismal affirmation and credal certainty, we come today to this story of Thomas, "doubting Thomas." This is where we get that phrase which means to be skeptical in the face of the facts. Sadly, poor Thomas goes down in history for his reported doubt. Yet his legacy to all of us who have come after is quite the opposite. It is a powerful and amazing proclamation of what resurrection means.

From the beginning of John's gospel, Jesus' followers respond to him much as Thomas does. New Testament scholar Mary Hinkle Shore writes that, in John 1, *when Jesus is calling the disciples, ... Philip tells Nathaniel, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth," Nathaniel replies with skepticism:*

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

The woman at the well questions Jesus theology and asks him how in the world he can give her living water. She goes into town after her meeting with Jesus and says to her neighbors, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” John says that many of them believed on the basis of the woman’s report, and many more believed because they heard Jesus themselves. ...

Fast-forward to Easter morning. Mary tells the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” John does not tell us if they believed her testimony or if they tried in any way to verify it. He merely continues the story by saying that on Easter evening, they were behind locked doors, afraid that the forces that had conspired to bring about the execution of Jesus might come next for them. Instead, Jesus comes into the secured room, saying, “Peace be with you.” He shows his hands and his feet to them demonstrating that the Risen One will be forever recognizable as -- and only as -- the Crucified One. The disciples rejoice to see him. They tell Thomas what Mary had told them: they “have seen the Lord.”

Thomas replies with the post-resurrection equivalent of, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” or the Samaritan woman’s “Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?,” or Mary’s “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away”. [Carrying] Nathanael’s skepticism and Mary’s broken heart, Thomas needs more.

When we hear this story of Thomas, we often think of him actually placing his hands in Jesus’ wounds as Jesus invites. But there is nothing in the text that indicates he did that. Jesus, simply by being present and speaking directly to Thomas questions, elicits from Thomas the strongest proclamation of what God has done in the risen Christ when he proclaims: “My Lord and my God.” To this point, Jesus has been called Lamb of God, Son of God, and other relational terms towards God, but it is Thomas who speaks the foundational truth of what has happened here: His Lord Jesus is indeed God who has brought new life and hope to Thomas and all the world.

Thomas often gets a bad rap for his questions. But his community holds him fast, as John reports it. Thomas helps us all know that doubt is not connected with sin or failure. It’s just doubt and, in the community of God’s people, it’s ok. In the first half of our Gospel reading, Jesus greets the gathered disciples, minus Thomas, with peace - the risen Jesus always greets them this way - welcomes the Holy Spirit into their midst and says a remarkable thing: ²³ *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* Current scholarly re-examination of the words of this verse have noted something powerful. The word “sins” does not appear in the second half of the verse, and the word “retain” is the word to grasp, or even embrace. Jesus is not asking the disciples to split hairs about each other’s sins. He is asking them to forgive at every opportunity, and, when there is struggle of faith or repentance, to embrace one another in the hope of new life. Pastor David Lose put it this way: *...Ilove [this] reading [of this text] because it's more or less exactly what happens with Thomas - they do not critique his unbelief or shun or exclude him for it; rather, they include - hold onto - him until he has his own encounter with Jesus. And I think that's what John wishes for all of us: To forgive each other, to*

hold onto each other, to embrace each other, especially when we struggle, until we are caught up in an experience of the Risen Christ.

Thomas' Easter proclamation, *My Lord and my God*, will find its echo when the gospel writer John adds the prologue to his story of Jesus. Jesus is the Word, the one spoken from the Creator who spoke all things into being: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...* And so John writes for all of us, first in Jesus' words to Thomas: "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" He's talking about us, you know. Then John adds his own comments: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.* That's the whole point - the life thing. That's what Thomas heard in Jesus, and that's what God has brought us all in raising Jesus from the dead.

There was a wonderful piece in *The New York Times* on Palm Sunday from the writer Margaret Renkl. She told of her year-long absence from church out of her frustration with our country and the world. So she decided to try it all again this Easter. She wrote: ... *I will be at Mass again on Easter morning, as I have been on almost every Easter morning of my life. I will wear white and remember the ones I loved who sat beside me in the pew and whose participation in the eternal has found another form, I will lift my voice in song and give thanks for my life. I will pray for my church and my country, especially the people my church and my country are failing. And then I will walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection.*

Walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection. It's what Thomas and the disciples set out to do, it's what we are called to do these centuries later. I don't know what that will look like for each of you, but whatever way you choose to do it, go out and practice resurrection. Practice is the key word here. Resurrection has been done once and for all. Our practice of it keeps our faces forward, our conversation lively, our doubts centered, and our embrace for one another strong and sustaining. Practice forgiveness, live thankfully in the communities of your life, pray for the church and the world, welcome friend and stranger, share the peace of Christ. Follow the lead of the young people of our country who are tell us they want to live and not die, to be part of life and not fear death. *Walk into the world and do your best to practice resurrection.* And your practice will be the words and actions that welcome others into the new life God has given the whole world in the risen Christ. This is what we proclaim; this is what the world hears: Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!**