

Sunday, April 28, 2019
Second Sunday of Easter (Year C)
John 20.19-31
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On this Second Sunday of Easter, we always get a “twofer.” Two Resurrection appearances for the price of one.

The first happens on the evening of the day of Resurrection. Earlier in the day, Mary Magdalene had come to the disciples, announcing the remarkable news: “I have seen the Lord” (Jn 20.18). But they just were not able to believe Mary. Such a thing as a bodily resurrection had never happened before, and was therefore beyond their comprehension. So, unlike Mary, they do not go out and share the good news. Instead, they hid. After all, their leader was brutally killed by the Romans. So, they fear that they will suffer the same fate.

Now, the Risen Jesus appears to the other disciples, greeting them with “Peace be with you” and shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. Presenting his risen body as proof of this new reality. Only then are the disciples able to recognize Jesus, and to rejoice at the miraculous thing that has happened. Only then are they able to experience for themselves the truth that Mary had proclaimed earlier that day.

Jesus does not just appear as a social call. His real purpose is to tell the disciples to get back to work. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20.21). This is their commissioning for life and ministry post-Resurrection. That just as the Son revealed the Father through his life and ministry, now the disciples are to reveal the Risen Lord to the world through their lives and ministries. They are to share the joy and comfort of the Peace of Christ with future generations. Recognizing that the disciples are not able to do this on their own, Jesus then breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn 20.22). It is the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit that motivates and emboldens the apostles to proclaim the forgiveness of sins through repentance and to publically testify to Christ’s death and resurrection before the Sanhedrin in today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. An action that they likely would not have been able to do had it not been for Jesus’ first post-resurrection appearance to them on Easter evening. Had it not been for the gift of his peace and the imparting of the Holy Spirit.

But I’m getting a little ahead of myself. After Jesus appears to the ten disciples (for Judas was out of the picture and Thomas was inexplicably absent), Thomas returns from wherever he had been. They excitedly tell Thomas, “We have seen the Lord.” But he is dubious. He responds, “Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the marks of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (Jn 20.25).

It’s understandable that Thomas was dubious about the disciples’ claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Dubious because that had never happened before. Other than Lazarus, and that was a completely different thing. That was resuscitation at the hands of Jesus. Not someone bringing themselves back to life. It was just such a fantastical story that did not make

any sense. Particularly to someone like Thomas. And he was not willing to accept until he had some sort of proof. But at least he is open to reconsidering his position.

While we may be tempted to think, “well, why couldn’t Thomas believe? After all, the other ten disciples believed.” But we need to keep in mind that Thomas was not asking for anything that the other disciples had not already received. Remember that the other ten disciples did not initially recognize Jesus either. It was only when they saw his wounds that they recognized Jesus and came to believe in the Resurrection. They may not have expressed doubt, but they were feeling it. They may not have asked for proof that Jesus was who he claimed to be, but they needed it anyway. And they got it.

Well, Thomas gets what he asks. A week later, Jesus appears again, this time specifically to see Thomas. Jesus “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’” (Jn 20.27). What’s important here is that the word translated as “doubt” is more appropriately translated as “faithless.” There’s a subtle difference. Faith is trusting in what is unseen. So in being faithless, Thomas, by his very nature—the analytical, literal thinker—is willing to trust, but needs something more to go on, something he can observe. I like to think of Thomas as not doubting, but as doing his due diligence.

Now it’s interesting to note that Thomas never actually gets what he specifically asks for. He does not touch Jesus’ wounds. Even when offered to him, he chooses not to. Instead, Jesus’ divine love touches him, helping him to see, not only with his eyes, but also with his heart, that this is indeed the Risen Lord. He only accepts the message because of Jesus coming to him in love. This is precisely what Thomas needs to be able to move forward in faith. Not physical signs, but an experience of Christ’s love, to help him move forward.

And move forward he does. In a big way. We know this because Thomas’ reaction is the first recorded profession of faith in the Risen Lord. “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20.28). Thomas never lacked faith in Jesus. He just needed something to go on. Something to help him get over the fantastical, unbelievable claims of the other disciples. They had already received their proof. Now Thomas has his. And he is all in.

After Thomas professes his faith in the Risen Lord, Jesus then says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (Jn 20.29). This may seem like a backhanded rebuke of Thomas. “What took you so long to believe? There are those who will come after you who will believe without benefit of physical proof. And they will be blessed in their belief.” But that’s not what Jesus means. His statement is really an affirmation of those future generations—of our generation—whose faith relies on the words of Jesus and not on physical proof. Of those who come to faith through the witness of others and not through any subsequent physical appearance by Jesus. If anything, it is a recognition that everyone comes to faith in a different way. That we find our own needed proof in varying ways. And part of that body of “proof” that helps future generations to believe in the Risen Lord and to come to faith is the due diligence exercised by Thomas.

We owe a debt of gratitude, not to “Doubting” Thomas, but to “Due Diligence” Thomas. In many ways, he is a model for us all. It is in our human nature to doubt, to question, to struggle with those things that we cannot readily see with our eyes or hear with our ears or touch with our hands. And when it comes to faith, there is not much that we can see or hear or touch. At least in a bodily way.

Thomas is a model for those who want to believe, who want to have faith, but sometimes question. Who sometimes need just a little more to go on. Who sometimes even doubt. Thanks to Thomas speaking his truth about where he was in his doubts, thanks to his persistence, we have a model of how to navigate our own times of questioning and doubt. French philosopher Peter Abelard, which is described as “the keenest thinker and boldest theologian of the 12th Century” wrote, “It is by doubting that we come to question, and by questioning that we arrive at the truth” (*Synthesis*, Easter 2, April 28, 2019). We need the freedom to doubt. We need the freedom to question what we believe. We need the freedom to test our faith.

Thomas freely expressed his doubts. He freely expressed his questions. And at the same time, he was open to the possibilities that might present themselves. And by having the courage to do that, the Risen Christ did indeed show up, lovingly offering Thomas just what he needed. Turns out, it wasn't to actually touch the wounds in Christ's hands and his side. Rather, what Thomas really needed was an expression of Christ's peace. What he really needed was to be in the presence of Christ's divine love.

This is a place where we seek to transform the Thomas within each of us. To take the questions and doubts, and to transform them into ever deepening faith by being open to hearing Christ say “Peace be with you.” By being open to feeling Christ's divine love as expressed through one another. So that one day we might be able to say with Thomas: “My Lord and my God.”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!