

Sunday, April 19, 2020
Second Sunday of Easter (Year A)

1 Peter 1.3-9; John 20.19-31

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/613716285884791/>

(Sermon begins at about 13:30)

“Overcoming Doubts That Christ is Present Among Us”

Our Gospel reading for today opens one week ago, in our time—on the evening of the day that Jesus was resurrected. Earlier that day, Mary Magdalene had reported to Peter and John that Jesus’ body was missing from the tomb. They investigated and found that he was indeed missing. They returned home, leaving Mary at the tomb, where she then has the first encounter with the Risen Lord. After which she “went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’” (Jn 20.18). Today, we pick up the story where we are told that the remaining disciples, minus Thomas, were locked in the house “for fear of the Jews.” A strange statement, since they themselves were Jews. What is really meant by this is that the disciples are locked away for fear of the Jewish authorities. After all, it was the Jewish authorities who had Jesus arrested and then manipulated the system to have him tried and executed by the Roman authorities. The disciples are naturally fearful that now that their leader has been taken out, they will probably be next. Put an end to Jesus’ message once and for all by having his most loyal followers eliminated. They were naturally—and rightfully—fearful for their safety, for their very lives; unsure of what the future would hold, unable to even imagine their lives ever returning to normal.

It’s kind of ironic that last week we lamented the fact that we were not able to celebrate Easter Sunday in our church, with all the pomp and circumstance, with all the signs and symbols, that are befitting such a glorious day. That we were not able to celebrate Easter the way it always has been. Yet, looking at today’s Gospel, we find that Easter has not always been celebrated the way we normally do. That, in fact, the first Easter Sunday was commemorated pretty much the way we had to do it this year. Locked away in our homes in fear. Not out of fear of religious authorities, but out of fear for our health. Out of fear of a nasty virus. In a very real way, our Easter this year was the same as it was for the first disciples. Locked in our homes out of fear for our safety, for our very lives; unsure of what the future holds, unable to even imagine our lives ever returning to normal.

On that first Easter evening, Jesus appears to the disciples—all except Thomas. When Thomas does return, the others tell him about Jesus’ appearance. Thomas does not believe their story. He has his doubts. He is skeptical. His friend and teacher has been killed. His whole world has been turned upside down. Surely the other disciples were delusional. Surely they were so overcome by grief that they could not accept the reality of what had happened. That Jesus was gone. His message of love, his message of hope, gone with him. Thomas had placed all his hopes in Jesus. He had given up everything to follow Jesus. And now it was all gone. Nothing would ever be the same again.

And, in a way, isn't that where we are at this point in our own story of Easter 2020? Unlike any other year, we are more like Thomas than ever before. Doubting. Questioning. Skeptical. Uncertain as to what will happen now that our world has been turned outside down. Uncertain as to when things will get back to "normal." Unable to see how things will ever be normal again.

But we should not be too hard on Thomas. Or ourselves. His response is no different than that of the disciples' initial reaction earlier that day when Mary Magdalene came to them and told them that the tomb was empty. They, too, needed proof. That is why Peter and John ran to the tomb. To see for themselves. While we often refer to "Doubting Thomas," that unfortunate moniker really misses the point. The story of Thomas is not about him doubting. It is not about him being skeptical. Yes, he does have doubts and he is skeptical of what he is told. Who wouldn't have doubts? Who wouldn't be skeptical? Peter and John were doubtful and skeptical of what Mary Magdalene told them. The rest of the disciples were doubtful and skeptical, even when Mary returned after her encounter with the Risen Lord, passing along Jesus' message to them. That should have been a signal to them to jump up and go out to proclaim the resurrected Christ, pointing to the empty tomb as proof that what Jesus proclaimed is true. Proof that he is the Messiah. But no. They stayed locked away in fear.

The story of Thomas is not about his doubts. It is really about him moving beyond those doubts. It is about the love and abundant grace that Jesus has in coming directly to Thomas to help him move beyond his doubts. For in the encounter with Jesus a week later, Jesus meets Thomas' questions and concerns point by point to help him move to a place of faith.

When the disciples first told Thomas about Jesus' appearing to them, Thomas said, "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" (Jn 20.25b). When Jesus comes directly to Thomas, he invites him, "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). Thomas did not actually take Jesus up on his offer. He did not have to. Because Jesus was present and offering what Thomas thought he needed. But what he really needed was for Jesus just to be present to him. To know that Jesus was there for him. That was enough. That was more than enough. Because in Jesus' simple offer of himself, Thomas was moved to proclaim, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20.28). The first confession of faith in the Risen Lord. The first verbal acknowledgment of just who Jesus truly is. That God is fully revealed through Jesus. That Jesus' mission to finally bring union between God and his people has indeed been completed. Jesus affirms this when he says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (Jn 20.29).

With this, Thomas is able to move on. Move on into a new reality in which Jesus is no longer physically present, but is alive, nonetheless. Alive in the faith and in the hearts of those who believe in him. And that would be us. Those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

How do we move to that point given our current situation? Jesus appeared to Thomas and gave him what he needed to move on. How do we get we need to move on?

Again, the answer is found in that first Easter experience. It just happens to be in the part of the story that Thomas missed because he was not there. On that first Easter evening, as the disciples were locked away in fear, the Risen Christ appeared to them and said, "Peace be with

you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20.21). In these words, Jesus is commissioning the disciples as the community of faith, charged with continuing the work God sent Jesus to do. They are not just to sit around in fear, but to get up and get on with the work he began before his death. Work that they need to continue. Work that only they could do.

Unlike that first Easter, the Risen Christ did not appear to any of us in bodily form last week—if he did come to you in bodily form, I certainly want to know about it. But he did come to us, nonetheless. The Risen Christ was among us. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar, “the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn 4.23). Were we not worshiping in spirit and truth? And the last thing he told his disciples before his ascension: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28.19-20). The promise that all who believe in him will worship in spirit and truth. The promise that “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” So, yes, the Risen Christ came to us last week, even as we were locked away in our homes in fear.

The message he gave to the disciples on that first Easter is the same message he has for us. A message that can help us overcome any doubts we might have about our ability to be the Body of Christ in these uncertain times. “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus is commissioning us as the community of faith, charged with continuing the work God sent Jesus to do. Even as we are locked away in our homes. Just because we are locked away from one another, locked away from the world, that commission has not changed. It has not been suspended during this current crisis. We are still called to be the Christ’s body in the word. That has not changed. That will never change. In the parlance of our time, being the Body of Christ is an “essential business.” It’s just that in times like this, we have to find new ways to do that. We are finding new ways to do that. Through our reaching out to one another, where we are engaging in deeper and more meaningful ways than we do during in-person church or at coffee hour. By continuing with our feeding ministries, where we demonstrate, even in the midst of a world turned upside down, we do still care about the needs of the most vulnerable among us. Through our online worship, which is reaching more people than were being reached through our in-person worship services. We may feel isolated from the world, but in reality, we are not. The world is looking to us—to the Church, to the Body of Christ—to provide a message of hope. And that is exactly what we are doing. We are living into the commission that Jesus gave his disciples on that first Easter.

Peter himself, in our Epistle reading for today, wrote of his vision of the church and of Christian life at a time of great upheaval for the church. Words that just as easily could have been written to us. “In this rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested in fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1.6-7). Remember, even in these times of suffering, of trials, and of testing, Jesus Christ is being revealed through you and your life of faith. Never doubt that!

Alleluia! Christ is risen!”

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!