

Sermon for Easter II Year A 2020
Sight Unseen

It's the second Sunday of Easter and yet . . .
don't we all feel like we're still stuck in Lent?
Is it just me, or does the transition of Lent to Eastertide,
death to life, sorrow to joy . . . just a little bit harder to grasp?
Harder to fully celebrate?
Even feels a bit "weird"
Yes, I believe the tomb is empty,
Christ is risen and death has been defeated.
I believe that our sins are forgiven and love wins.
Yes, I believe this is all true . . .
just as I testified last Sunday on Easter Day.

And yet . . .
the numbers of virus infections worldwide is over 1.7 million
and there are hundreds of thousands who have died,
the numbers of people suffering physically,
psychologically, and financially as a result of the pandemic
are too high to even count.
Like most of you, I struggle to wrap my mind around what they signify.
Who can process a tragedy and crisis of this magnitude?
How should we begin?

More to the point, how should we live into the resurrection
at a time when death appears to be in charge?
Where and how should the cornerstone reality
of our faith apply in this moment?
Is it possible to hold the resurrection close?
To view it as more than just a theological abstraction?

Actually, these questions predate Covid-19 by centuries.
We are hardly the first people to ask them.

In fact, the first Sunday after Easter has *always* been a point in the church year when we take a good hard look at God's post-resurrection world and think, "Now what?" . . . or if we are really honest, "So what?"

Our gospel story this morning—the story of the disciple Thomas encountering the open wounds of the risen Jesus—is one of the few in the three-year cycle of our lectionary that is the same every year on the Sunday following Easter Day. Seven days after we have sung out, "Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia!" we are invited to struggle alongside Thomas who says—*Unless I see him for myself, I won't believe.* We are invited to feel wary, skeptical and – perhaps – envious. Envious of those who seem to find faith easier to sustain than we do. Envious of those who seem to have experienced Jesus more dramatically than we have. Envious of those who, for whatever reason, don't feel a disconnection between the truth of the resurrection, and the ongoing reality of death in the world.

And so I have found that there is a great deal to appreciate and glean from Thomas' encounter with the risen Jesus, but what I love most is that Jesus appears to his most skeptical disciple in a body that is scarred and wounded. They are wounds so raw that the skeptical disciple places his fingers inside of them. I wonder if Jesus winced when Thomas touched him. Certainly, if he did, the wincing signals real life, lived at a level we can comprehend. It signals real engagement. Real presence. Real pain.

It speaks the very words you and I hunger to hear—"I am *with* you.
I am with you where it hurts.
I don't float thousands of sanitized feet above reality.
Even after death, I dwell in the hot, searing heart of things.
Exactly where you dwell."

In my experience, it seems that Christians are expected to put a lot of stock in completed victories.

We value the race won, the mountain scaled,
the enemy defeated, the obstacle overcome.

We welcome stories of failure to an extent,
but only when those stories are shared in retrospect,
long after the sordid worst is over.

Sin that has surrendered to holiness?—That's a Christian story.

But sin that clings? Challenges that won't ease up?

A wound—physical, psychological, or relational—that remains?

Well, not so much. We squirm, we turn our eyes away. We worry.

And yet . . .

Jesus' wounded body reminds us that some hurts are for keeps.

Some markers of pain, loss, trauma, horror leave traces
that no amount of piety will take away.

Some wounds remain, even after resurrection—and that's okay.

It's okay to celebrate Jesus' rising—

and grieve our catastrophic losses at the same time.

It's okay to hear other people's uplifting faith stories

and say, "I'm happy for you, but my heart is still broken."

It's okay, even salutary, to ache for more of Jesus,

and to hold our ache in tension with the joys of Easter.

This year—more than ever—

I cherish the wounds in Jesus' post-resurrection life.

On this first Sunday after Easter,

even though we are a resurrection people, we are also still hurting.

The world is still wounded.

Regardless of where we live, we are still anticipating grief on a scale most of us have never experienced before.

This year especially, Jesus' scarred body speaks with great power, tenderness, mercy and truth.

It is good to allow them to speak to us.

If you're finding the joy of Easter difficult to grasp right now, rest in the fact that Jesus never sheds the marks of his pain—not even when he bursts from the tomb.

Contemplate the wonderful truth that ours is a faith of paradoxes: we live by dying, receive by giving, rule by serving.

We do not collapse these paradoxes, but we honor their complexities and then live our life of faith fruitfully within them.

Jesus' resurrected body—his victorious body—still retained its scars.

One other aspect of the post-resurrection gospel story I cherish is the faith journey of Thomas (called the Twin).

He carries the moniker “Doubting Thomas” in the Church because of his reluctance to accept the testimony of his fellow disciples, his insistence on physical proof, his late arrival to the joyous belief of his friends and peers—these are sometimes described as spiritual flaws, as signs of stubbornness, or weak faith.

But I disagree.

I'm a fan of Thomas and his story.

I'm grateful for his honest skepticism, his brave doubt, his slow, methodical conversion.

He reminds me that the resurrection story is hard.

Hard to accept, hard to internalize, and hard to apply to our lives—

Especially when our lives

are marked by pain, loss, uncertainty, and death.

The Church's glorious Easter hymns notwithstanding,
the week after Easter has always been murky, messy, and complicated.
We are not the first people of faith to struggle with it,
and we won't be the last.

In fact, as Luther pointed out time and time again,
the struggle between belief and unbelief is part and parcel
to all disciples—then and now.

Like Thomas, most of us possess the keen desire to follow the evidence
until a mystery is solved.

Faith is a mystery of the heart that the mind wants to solve.

To admit that we take certain things on faith

is to say that we are willing,

in limited circumstances, for things not to make perfect sense.

In Thomas, we see a man who yearns
for a living encounter with his Lord.

A man who can't settle for someone else's experience of resurrection,
but sticks around in the hope of having his own.

A man who dares to confess uncertainty
in the midst of those who are certain.

A man who recognizes his Lord in woundedness, not glory.

According to John's gospel,

Thomas has to wait in suspense for a whole week
after his friends first tell him they've seen Jesus.

What, I wonder, does that week feel like for the disciple
who misses Jesus the first time around?

Does he pity his fellow disciples for what he fears are their delusions?

Or does he fear that he's missed the memo,
missed the boat, missed the glory?

Does he wonder if he's destined only ever to know God secondhand?

Does he ask why Jesus won't come sooner for him?

What is so striking about Thomas story is not that he doubts,
but that he does so openly, without shame or guilt.

Would our churches be different if we embraced doubters as generously as Jesus and his other disciples embrace Thomas? In my own experience, I can say that it makes a huge difference. Being accepted and embraced by a community of faith while in a time of pain and doubt made an enormous difference in my own faith journey— But I've also seen it make a difference with and for others who, as one person put it, “had Jesus ‘issues’”— it made all the difference to that person when I reassured them not to worry so much since every one of us has “Jesus ‘issues.’” A baptism followed that honest and open admission of doubt.

Jesus and the disciples hold space for the cynic, the holdout. They allow him to voice his skepticism, and name his yearning to see the risen Jesus with his own eyes. Though they freely share their testimonies with him—as they should—they simultaneously give him time and space to encounter Jesus on his own. Meanwhile, Jesus meets Thomas right where he is, freely offering the disciple the testimony of his own wounds, his own pain.

Wounds and doubts. Doubts and wounds.
Welcome to life the week after Easter Sunday.
Welcome to life in the shadow of the empty tomb.
If this sounds anticlimactic, then consider this:
When Thomas' doubt meets Jesus' wounds,
new life erupts, faith blossoms,
and the “doubting” disciple becomes an apostle of the good news.
Resurrection happens all over again.

Jesus honors the desire to see more, experience more, encounter more.
He blesses those who struggle to believe,
but stick around anyway.
He leans towards those who year for more of him.

Jesus leads with brokenness so that we might follow him
into his joy which is deeper than mere happiness.
During this week after,
during these hard times,
may we find our solace, hope, and courage
in the wounded, risen Christ . . .
who is our peace.