

Sermon for Easter II—Year C 2019
Just the Starting Point

The tomb is empty, Christ is risen,
death has been defeated, love wins,
victory is ours, we're a resurrection people,
and nothing will ever be the same again.
Right?

Welcome to the week after!
The week after euphoria.
The week after triumph.
It's one week after the resurrection and the disciples are in the same
place they were Easter night.
They are in the same room behind the same locked doors.

So if the resurrection was such all those things I just stated—
why are they still stuck in same place?
What difference has the empty tomb made?
How has it changed them?
Has it let them see themselves and the world differently?
Has it done anything for them?
It doesn't look as if it's made much difference.
They are, after all, in the same house
behind the same locked doors as a week ago.
So, what's changed?

Which makes me wonder, one week after Easter—
what has Christ's resurrection done for us?
Is your life different?
Do you see and engage the world in new ways?
What difference has the empty tomb made in your life
over the last week?
When I look at my life, it looks a lot like it did last Sunday—
and even the week before that.
When I look at the world, it looks pretty much the same as before.

As a young adult, I used to hear today's gospel story
and be critical of the disciples.
They are stuck in the same place.
They should have done better than that.
After all, death has been defeated.
Christ is risen. Alleluia!
Why are they still afraid?
Why aren't their lives different?

But, you know, I realized that those were questions I was really asking
about my own life.
Why isn't my life different after Easter?
Why am I stuck in the same place?
Shouldn't I be doing better than that?
Shouldn't I be living the resurrection better,
more boldly, more fully, more authentically, than what I am?
After all, "The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!"

More recently, however,
I've begun to hear today's gospel differently from how I used to.
Here's how I hear it now:
Christ's resurrection is a big deal.
The empty tomb is a life changing event.
The resurrection does make a difference in our lives.
But, now I know, it also takes time.

Resurrection takes time.
It is not a one-time event.
It's something that we grow into.
It's a process, a progression.
It's a way of being and a life to be lived out of but also into.
By the grace of God, we evolve into resurrection people
through our relationships and the circumstances of our lives.
God wastes nothing.
Every day we are stepping into the resurrected life.

It's not always easy and some days are just plain hard.
But the risen Lord's wounded body reminds us
that some hurts are for keeps—
they leave their scars on us—outwardly but also inwardly.

Change and growth occur slowly.
I don't know about you, but I've rarely—if ever—
experienced instant transformation.
The changes that matter most have always come sideways
and in fits and starts—
often without my conscious understanding or effort.
Anyone who has battled an addiction,
or stuck it out in a challenging relationship,
or lived with chronic illness,
will testify that genuine conversion is lifelong.
Maybe this is why the earliest Christians
referred to their new faith as “The Way.”
A “way” is not a destination.
It's a road to walk.
It's an invitation to journey.

The risen Lord's body retained its scars.
Not old scars.
Not neat, faded scars signaling a long-ago victory
on a half-forgotten battlefield.
But fresh wounds, still raw enough to allow a doubting disciple
to place his fingers inside.
I imagine Jesus winced when Thomas touched him,
but that wincing, that pain, that openness,
signaled real life.
Real engagement.
Real presence.
It spoke the very words Thomas hungered for the most:
I am here. I am here with you.

I wonder if we sometimes come to Easter Sunday and the empty tomb expecting to wake up on Monday to a whole new life and world.

I'm guessing that you awoke on Easter Monday to the same life and world you had on Good Friday.

I certainly did.

It's not because the resurrection failed or because Jesus didn't do "the Jesus thing" in our lives.

It's because "the Jesus thing" takes time.

Maybe we need to let go of the fact of the empty tomb and start claiming the story of resurrection.

The empty tomb is a fact.

Resurrection is a story.

Facts are one dimensional;
stories are multidimensional.

Facts inform the mind,
stories touch the heart.

Facts transmit information,
stories transform lives.

Think about it like this—

a fact is static, like a snapshot of a particular moment in time;

a story is dynamic, like a movie that takes us across time.

So it might be best to begin to understand resurrection as the movie of our life instead of a snapshot of Christ's life.

The fact of the empty tomb is not the story of the resurrection.

The facts of Jesus' life are not the story of Jesus.

The facts of your life and my life are not the story of our life.

The facts are just the starting point for the story.

The fact of the empty tomb is the starting point for the resurrection story.

Too often, however, we take the facts as the entire story.

Isn't that what we've done with Thomas?

What facts come to mind when you hear his name?

He was a doubter—

*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.*

That Thomas doubted may be the only fact that comes to mind.
It is so prevalent that we call him “Doubting Thomas.”

But that fact is just the starting point for his resurrection story.
His doubt is only the beginning.
What if where we start is less important than where we go,
where we end?

Do you know the end of the story of our so-called Doubting Thomas?
Do you know that he died in India?
Do you know that he was the apostle to the people of India.
He brought the gospel of Christ to India
where he eventually died as a martyr.
That doesn't sound much like a doubter, does it?
It sounds like someone who grew and changed,
someone for whom the resurrection of Christ was real,
someone for whom the empty tomb made a difference.
It just took some time, as it does for most, maybe all of us.

We know Doubting Thomas but let's not forget Confessing Thomas.
He's in today's gospel as well.

My Lord and my God!

With those words Thomas recognized and named a new relationship,
a new worldview, a new way of being.

Somewhere between Doubting Thomas and Confessing Thomas is the
story of resurrection in Thomas' life.

All that stuff about Doubting Thomas, the fact of his disbelief,
is just his starting place, nothing more and nothing less.

It's neither good nor bad.

It's a starting place.

And we all have our starting places.

So, what is your starting place?
What are the facts of your life today?
The starting place for the story of our resurrection is whatever is.
Whatever your life is today,
whatever your circumstances are,
that's the starting point for your story of resurrection.
If you're dealing with loneliness, depression, sorrow or loss,
that's your starting point.
That's the room which Christ enters.
If you are locked in a house of fear, confusion, or darkness,
that's your starting point, the place in which Jesus stands.
If illness, old age, disability, or uncertainty are facts of your life,
that's your starting point and the place in which Jesus shows up.
If you feel lost, betrayed, disappointed, overwhelmed,
that's your starting point and the house Jesus enters.
If joy, gratitude, and celebration are the facts of your life today,
that's the starting point for your story of resurrection.

All those things I just described and a thousand others
are the many ways the doors of our house get locked.
Whatever it might be for you,
it's just the starting point.

The great tragedy is not that the disciples are in the same house
behind the same locked doors.
That's just their starting place.
The great tragedy will be if the disciples refuse to unlock the doors,
refuse to open the doors, and refuse to get out of the house.

What are the doors that are locked in your life?
What are the things that have kept you stuck in the same place?
Once again, it bears repeating—that's just your starting place.
Don't judge it as good or bad, right or wrong.
It's just where you are and it's the place where Christ shows up.
It happened twice in today's gospel.

Both times the disciples are in the same house
behind the same locked doors, and Jesus shows up.
He stands in the midst of them.
The walls and the locked doors of their house could not keep Jesus out.
And the walls and locked doors
of your house and mine will not keep him out either.

The risen Christ steps into the midst of our house,
through the locked doors,
and breathes peace and life into us.
He breathes peace and hope into us.
He breathes peace and courage and strength into us.
That breath of peace is the key that unlocks the door.
So, take a deep breath,
take it all in,
let it fill and enliven you.
Let it give you the hope, courage, and strength
to stand up and unlock and open the doors of your life.
Then . . . get out of the house!