

Second Sunday of Easter April 7, 2024

Introduction to themes for the day and season: Now we ‘practice resurrection’ to borrow the eloquence of the poet and farmer Wendell Berry. He writes of wading into fields of wildflowers and declaring them a harvest that God has planted. Berry would say that part of practicing resurrection is embracing the rhythms of nature and paying attention to all the places where God brings forth new life. In this fifty day Easter season, we can cast our gaze to our personal lives and even to society—looking for Jesus to show up just as unexpectedly as he does on the living side of the tomb and on the inside-side of locked doors.

GOSPEL John 20:19-31

19When 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.” 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So 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.”

26A 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.” 27Then 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.” 28Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But 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.

Sermon:

Thomas's faith or doubt is no different from our own. Sometimes he was vulnerable and asked important questions like, "Lord we don't know the way, how CAN we know the way?" Sometimes he was bold and deeply committed like the time everyone knew that danger awaited Jesus even before they all went to Bethany to be with Mary and Martha after Lazarus had died. Thomas was the one to say, 'let's go ahead'.

What about now in this exchange with Jesus after he's been raised from the dead? Preachers really want to make this all about Thomas with sermons alternating between exhorting us not to be doubting Thomases to suggesting we emulate Thomas by accepting that faith and doubt are a package deal. This preacher would tell you, "Let's just say that 'it's complicated.'"

When you realize Thomas wasn't with the others when Jesus appeared the first time, his request to see Jesus' wounds makes more sense. On the day of resurrection, Mary Magdalene literally evangelized Jesus' followers when she told them she had seen the Lord—risen just as he said. Later, Jesus appeared to his disciples and Thomas wasn't there. Dr. Karoline Lewis, the expert on John's Gospel and co-host of the Working Preacher podcast has a take that I think is most helpful. Thomas asks Jesus for the same thing the other disciples have already experienced...a first hand, honest-to-goodness encounter with the risen Christ.

Here's where we need to make the most important shift in reading today's Gospel reading. Pay attention to Jesus in this story. The one who bypasses the grave, huge tomb-blocking stones and locked doors comes looking for his people. He meets them where they are...whether at the open grave or in a shut up room. Jesus meets them where they are emotionally and spiritually and gives himself to them in ways each can understand and accept...

Easter is our season to give due our yearnings to experience the risen Christ in tangible, touchable ways in our own lives...Easter is that season to live in hopeful expectation that a tombstone dodging, lock evading, death defeating Messiah will come looking for us too and meet us exactly as we are—right where we are.