

*Second Sunday of Easter*

April 23, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 20: 19-31)

When 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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So 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."

A 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." Then 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and My God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who had not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But 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.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*"When 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 . . ."* I want to think about locks. How many locks do you encounter in the course of a day? You've got the lock on your house, the lock on your car door, the lock on the ignition of your car. Maybe your gym locker, card key for the bank ATM, the bike rack, the trailer. And don't get me started on passwords. So many things to keep us safe and secure. The disciples are locked away in the upper room. I always wondered if it was the doors that were locked, or the disciples that were locked. The disciples locked away for fear. Locks you can't see, with keys that are way harder to find. Locked away.

Like, for example, you are walking down the hallway at school and you never imagined it could be so hard. You're awkward. You don't get the jokes. You don't know what you're supposed to be. Everybody knows more and is more mature and more popular than you are. Why can't you figure it out? You learn how to set your face like stone and not look them in the eye, and try not to feel anything. Lock it all away where it's safe.

Or you're older and someone you love has left you, and you don't know how it happened. Were there signs that you missed? You don't know. And now they're gone and you are devastated. And you don't know who to depend on. You feel so broken, and there is this giant gaping hole in your life. But you lock it away. And you put on a cheerful face, and you say, "I'm fine. It will be fine. I can do this. Don't worry about me." Living behind locked doors for fear.

Or you get the phone call. The latest test showed abnormality. They need more tests, but they can't schedule it until next week. And then there are going to be a few more days after that before you get the results. But you're okay. You try to convince yourself, "I'm fine." But you are terrified. You get through the days, you make the meals, you pay the bills. You try not to think or ask or feel. Tamping the fear down, locking it away.

*"When it was evening on that day the first day of the week, and the doors where the disciples had met were locked for fear . . . ."* Locked for getting through the day. But then Jesus came. Then Jesus was there. Can it be true? He was dead! And now he's walking around. Is that possible? Is it real? Is this a metaphor? Is this wishful thinking? You're hurting or afraid or desperately in need, and you're locked away, trying to survive – and Jesus appears. Can that really happen? Can we really believe that?

That's what it comes down to, doesn't it? Can you believe it? The Second Sunday of Easter always finds us in that locked room with the disciples. The Second Sunday of Easter always asks us, "Can you believe this? Is resurrection real? Does God work miracles? Can I believe that there is a God?"

As the years go by, I hear more and more people admit that they struggle. They struggle to believe in miracles or resurrection. "I know there is more out there than I can know," they say. "But I don't know how to name it, or define it. I don't know how to get my head around it."

Can you believe it? Can a Twenty-first Century rational, educated individual believe the claims of the Christian faith? Can we believe this? My answer is yes. And before you say, "Well, she's a pastor. She has to say that," let me tell you why I think a Twenty-first Century rational, educated individual can believe. And to do so, I want to look closely at the story of so-called "doubting" Thomas.

John writes – and this is starting at verse 24, if you want to look at it in your bulletin – John writes, *"But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came."* Now, I always thought that meant that Thomas got picked to go out and pick up the pizza, or he had to make a run to the bank, and just for some reason he wasn't there when Jesus showed up. But the way John writes it, it's in the imperfect. "Thomas was not being with them." He wasn't hanging out with them. He was done. He was no longer with the disciples. And can you blame him? The whole situation is getting weirder by the moment. Dead people walking around and coming through locked doors. And, besides that, it was getting dangerous. Of course, people would back off. Of course, someone would walk away. Thomas was no longer being with the disciples.

But then the rest of the disciples go after him, and they say, “*We have seen the Lord!*” We have seen! Seen. Throughout the Gospel of John, “seeing” is more than just something you do with your eyes. Mary’s gospel proclamation on Easter Sunday is not “*Christ is risen!*” The proclamation is, “*I have seen the Lord.*” Seeing, in John, is a full sensory experience. It is engaging with Jesus. It’s not just looking at him. It’s not seeing him from afar. The disciples have seen Jesus, which means they have interacted with him. They are engaged with him. They are passionate about him. They’ve gotten annoying.

And so Thomas says to them, “*Unless I see, I won’t believe.*” Not fact, not reports, not history, not culture, not because you say so. Unless I have a deeply experiential, hands-on, incarnated, embodied experience with Jesus, I’m done. I will not believe.

So Thomas was no longer with the disciples. He said, “*Unless I see,*” which means, “unless I experience this.” And now he says, “*I will not believe.*” The Greek word used here for believe is “pistos,” from the root, peitho – which means, “to be persuaded.”

To believe is not to give up on logic or to not ask questions. To believe does not mean never doubt. To believe does not mean assent to certain propositions. To believe is to be persuaded by an experience. Thomas says, “*Unless I experience this, I will not be persuaded.*”

And then Thomas does a remarkable thing. Thomas does a wondrous, beautiful, hopeful thing. Thomas shows up. On that next Sunday evening, on that second Sunday of Easter, Thomas shows up in the upper room. Despite doubtful questions, despite everything he that has locked up within himself, he’s there. He opens himself up. He unlocks himself. Puts himself in a place where he might just encounter Jesus. He is willing to ask the question, he is willing to entertain the possibility, to go searching for that risen one. And that evening Jesus comes.

I think too often we hide locked behind what we know, what we can prove, what we can rationalize, and we call that faith. I think we forget that faith is relational. It is about an encounter, an experience with the divine. It’s about prayer and hearing answer. It’s about acting and seeing Jesus in your life. It’s not knowing about Jesus. It’s knowing Jesus, and being willing to put ourselves in situations where we might just run into him.

Okay. So it’s a beautiful day, the sun is out, summer is coming. So I have a sailing story, always have a sailing story.

Our family started sailing when my children were in elementary school, well, they were pretty young. And during the summer, every summer for a week, we would get on a sailboat and we would go out in Lake Superior. And our daughter Kim took to it really fast. She was learning about the wind and the waves and how to get the boat set up.

Matthew, our son, not so much. When the sails caught the wind and the boat would start to heel, which is what boats do, Matthew would get anxious. “We’re going over!” he would say. “We’re going in the water!” “We’re leaning too much!” We would try everything to keep him from being scared. We would try reading books. We would try singing songs. We tried physics. “No, it can’t possibly go over. There’s a ballast on the bottom.” Nothing worked. He would just panic. And if we kept at it, he would cry or scream. We went very slowly in those days.

One day, Brian and Kim were invited to be crew on a racing boat, and Mathew decided he wanted to go. We said, “Not a good idea. It will be fast. And they can’t stop to let you get off if you get scared. It’s not going to happen. No, you’re not going.” But he kept at it, and he kept at it. And he asked the captain of the boat, and he said, “Sure. Come on.” So he went. And I spent the day on the shore worrying. I kept wondering how hysterical my son was on this boat in the middle of Lake Superior. Matthew, on the other hand, spent the day watching and listening and learning from the other sailors, and falling in love with sailing. He came back thrilled and unafraid. And after that, his favorite line was always, “Dad, go faster! Get the railing in the water!” Who would have thought?

The difference came when he put himself out there, despite doubts and fears, to have an experience with those sailors. Like Thomas, who stepped up and said, “I won’t believe it until I experience Jesus.” But then he shows up where Jesus might be.

None of us – believers, unbelievers, semi-sort-of believers – none of us can force ourselves to believe. We can’t and shouldn’t stop doubting or asking questions. We can’t think ourselves into faith. But we can show up where we might see Jesus. We can make ourselves a little vulnerable. We can show up where we might have a deeply experiential, hands-on, incarnational encounter with the risen Lord. We can show up at worship. We can show up among the poor and hurting. We can show up among people who are locked away inside themselves, needing, wanting more, but not sure how. We can show up, and we will see Jesus there.

Today is the Second Sunday of Easter. It begins with the disciples locked away for fear. And it ends with an invitation to show up where Jesus might be, so we, too, can encounter the risen Lord.

Amen.