

## Easter 2A 2017 Sermon

### *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 have 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.*

Why are you here today? Didn't you get the message of Jesus' resurrection and the new life he brings *last* week, on Easter Day? If you were at the Vigil, wasn't lighting a fire, following a candle in the dark, reading Scripture after Scripture about God's saving deeds in history, participating with Charleigh and her sponsors in renewing your baptismal vows, singing hymns, celebrating communion as the sun was coming up – didn't the message of resurrection come home to you after two hours of that? If you were at the 10 o'clock service, wasn't the smell of incense, the sight of a swirling ribbon in the air, bright flowers on the altar and flowers and crosses in the windows, rousing hymns, wonderful choir and organ music, listening to the joyous Easter Scriptures, worshiping with 85 people

– wasn't that enough for you to get the message that Christ is raised from the dead, and we with him?

For some people, apparently, it *was* enough; for they are **not** back today. Maybe they feel they have had their "Easter fix," and that will hold them for another year. Or maybe they think, "Now I've seen that movie and I know how the story ends. I don't need to see it again."

But here **you** are, *again*, today. Why?

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus' disciples (minus Thomas) gather together on the evening of that first Easter Day, and Jesus appears to them behind locked doors. He offers them the wounds in his hands and his side, and then they rejoice! They now believe the message that Mary Magdalene had told them that morning: that Jesus has risen from the dead!

So why do they gather together **again** one week *after* Easter? They experienced the presence of the risen Christ on Easter Day – they got the message; they know how the story ends. What more can they expect? What more can *you* expect, coming here today, a week after the high point of Easter Day? Surely **you** got the message last week? You know how the story ends. What more is there?

John tells us that Thomas was not there with the other disciples who had gathered together on Easter Day. So why didn't Jesus go visit Thomas sometime during Easter week, and let him in on the Good News? Why did Jesus wait until Thomas had gathered with the other disciples one week later? Fr. John Shea addresses that question. He writes: "[Thomas] is part of the community, and it is **as** part of the community that he will experience the risen Lord."<sup>1</sup>

He is part of the community, and it is **as** part of the community that he will experience the risen Lord.

My friends, as Americans, we cherish our individualism and freedoms. The American spirit oozes independence, the right of self-expression, the right to believe what you want, to choose the lifestyle you want to live. And such freedom is a precious gift, allowing us to experiment, to expand, to believe, to dream, to risk. But there can be a downside to such unfettered independence, for we can come to believe that we can do it all on our own, and we don't need each other. I am convinced that the reason for the decline in the past 40 years in membership in Lion's Club and other service clubs **and** the decline in membership in churches is at least *in part* due to an increasing individualism and isolation. We no longer have to go to the stores to buy things, and there interact with other people; we do it online in the privacy of our home. We don't have to go to the theater to see a movie; we download it from Netflix. It has been noted that 150, 200 years ago, houses were built with big front porches and verandas, on which people could sit and visit with their neighbors as they came to visit or

walked by. Houses built today lack front porches entirely but have huge backyard decks where a family can sit behind a privacy fence and not interact with their neighbors at all. Young people today don't know what the word "veranda" means.

And the Church, too, has all too often fallen into that same trap of being insular, walled off from the community in which we have been planted. And tragically, sometimes church members wall themselves off from other church members, blocking the life-giving flow of the Spirit within the body of Christ just as a clot blocks the flow of blood from one part of the body to another.

At our Homeless Coalition meeting this past Thursday, Dawn and Jeff Ward, co-pastors at the Wellspring Church in Florence where they are joining a national trend and planning a "tiny house" community for the homeless on their church property, showed us pictures of such a community which has existed for years in Austin, Texas. The houses are indeed tiny; yet each one has a relatively large front porch. Research has found that the key to transitioning people out of homelessness is relationships. And so these tiny houses, while they have electricity, do *not* have indoor plumbing. People must gather at a central building to shower, use the restroom, wash clothes, draw water, eat meals together – similar to what people did in Jesus' day, and not so long ago, did in our own country.

So it is that, in today's Gospel, the risen Christ appears to the disciples *gathered in community*; and the risen Christ **continues** to appear to his followers gathered in community today.

Why are you here today? Professor David Lose suggests "... the reason we gather each week [as a church] isn't to make God happy (though I'm sure it does) or to learn sound morals (though perhaps that happens) or even to learn the essentials of the Christian faith (and it would be nice if **that** happens from time to time, too). Rather, we gather so that we might encounter – or, better, be encountered *by* – the Risen Christ one more time and be caught up in faith so that we may experience God's abundant life. (John 10:10)

"We come together... because the life of faith can be joyous and wonderful..., but it can also be – and frequently is – rather challenging. The loss of a loved one, or end of a relationship, or the inability to find a job or [make enough money to support our family], or the persistent ache of loneliness, or a prolonged bout of illness, or a pervasive sense of anxiety about our larger community, country, or world – all these things wear at you. At these times, faith can be a great strength and support..."<sup>2</sup> Faith shared in community.

And so we come together each week to hear Jesus speaking to us through Scripture and sermon and fellowship and song, and in so doing we are renewed in faith and trust; we come together to share a sacramental meal, taking into

ourselves the very life of Christ in bread and wine. And as we gather together each week, we recognize – and are encouraged by – Christ’s presence among and within us.

My friends, we all know that we live in increasingly polarized, dualistic world. But as the Body of Christ in this place, it is not our *agreement* – in terms of politics or theology or taste in worship style – that causes us to come together. It struck me very powerfully during Holy Week that when one of our members who held strong political beliefs recently died, other members who held very opposite political beliefs were just as grieved at the loss of a beloved fellow member of this community as those who were in lockstep with the deceased’s politics. Jesus chose 12 disciples who differed greatly in their background and social caste – from fishermen to tax collectors to political zealots. All gathered around Jesus during his earthly ministry, and **continued** to meet together *after* his resurrection, week after week, to encounter the life-giving presence of the Risen Christ among them, again and again.

But there is something **else** very important in today’s Gospel. Yes, the Gospel account tells us that, like the first disciples, we come together to be strengthened and supported as members one of another in the Body of Christ. But the Gospel also clearly says that we do not come together for our **own** sake, but for the sake of the world *outside* these walls. “As the Father has sent me,” Jesus tells his disciples the minute they get over the shock of his appearance, “so I **send** you.” And then, in what has been called “John’s Pentecost,” Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on these disciples gathered in community.

Fr. John Shea notes: “Just as in the Genesis story God breathed into the clay of the earth and the human person became a living soul (see Gen 2:7), so now the Risen Lord breathes into his disciples and they become a new creation, a creature living by the breath of God. **Living** by the Spirit, they join the *work* of the Spirit...”<sup>3</sup>

This past week I visited with a homeless friend, a retired physician who lives at the Loaves & Fishes shelter. (He is scheduled to speak at our Adult Forum next Sunday.) And he told me what a strong bond of community he and the others at the shelter have developed – a stronger community than in most other living situations he has ever experienced, even when he was a prosperous, practicing physician. (Just this morning, I read in the *Daily Record* about a woman who stayed at the shelter and had the same experience of loving, supportive community.) And, my friends, this has been *my* experience when I have engaged with many of the homeless in our community, at Laundry Love and in other settings. There is a strong bond of community, and almost always a generosity in sharing or giving to one another such as is not found in many **church** communities. It reminds me of the Gospel story of the “widow’s mite,” wherein a woman gives **all** of what *little* she has. That’s the generosity of spirit I often see among the homeless in our community. All they have left is one another.

So, going back to my original question: Why are you here today?

Let me suggest that you and I are here today because the Risen Christ appeared to his disciples as they gathered together in community, week after week; and he *continues* to appear to **this** community, week after week, as we gather in prayer, worship, song, Scripture, sermon, fellowship, and sacrament. And then, just as Christ breathed the Holy Spirit on those first disciples and sent them out into the world to spread forgiveness and unity in a world torn by hard-heartedness and separation, so he breathes the Holy Spirit upon us each week and sends us back out into the world to love and serve the Lord in every person we meet.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 159

<sup>2</sup> David Lose, "Easter 2A: Thomas, John, and the Reason we Gather," <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/04/easter-2-a-thomas-john-and-the-reason-we-gather/>

<sup>3</sup> Shea, *Ibid.*, p. 158