

Easter 2B 2015 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.

I read an article this past week which talked about how computers and the internet are changing how our brains are structured and operate. When we older folk were children, we memorized our multiplication tables, countries and their capitols, states and their capitols. We were taught how to spell words correctly. So our brains were structured and programmed to store facts.

With the advent of personal computers, smart phones and tablets, however, there is far less need to know facts, since they are always at hand, easily accessed by our tablets and smart phones. The brains of a generation of young people growing up under this new reality are organized and function in a different way: they are wired to know how to *access* facts, rather than store them.

And along with any change in the way our brains are organized and function comes a corresponding change in the way we view the world and the way we function in this world.

It's easy to see how this phenomenon has occurred down through the ages. Before the dawn of the Protestant Reformation, for instance, the mindset and awareness of most people on this planet included a strong belief in the reality of a spiritual world – a world beyond what we can see, hear, feel, smell, taste, touch with our five physical senses. Granted, most people did not develop what the 13th-Century Franciscan Saint Bonaventure called the “eye of the heart”, the ability to perceive more *directly* this ever-present spiritual realm; but they never doubted that it existed.

The period of the Enlightenment brought further focus on rational thought and scientific proofs. The great philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes famously said, “I think, therefore I am,” making thinking the very basis of being! By the time Thomas Jefferson came on the scene, he was taking a scissors and cutting out the parts of the New Testament that didn't make rational sense to him. In the early 20th Century, biblical scholars like Albert Schweitzer began asking questions about the historicity of the Bible, Rudolf Bultmann set about “demythologizing” Scripture, and by the 1950's, mainline Christian scholars were doubting that Jesus actually performed miracles. The 1960's brought the “God is Dead” movement.

Oh, Christianity was still a strong part of our American culture in the 1950's and early 60's, and when I was in grade school I assumed that all of my classmates attended some church – and that assumption wasn't too far off the mark. But the Christianity I learned and practiced consisted of going to church on Sundays, saying grace before meals and prayers before bed, and asking God for forgiveness for the bad things I did, and to give me the things I wanted. I had no clue that there was such a thing as a spiritual reality interpenetrating this world which I might have access to through some 6th sense that was built into my DNA but which I had not been taught to use.

Even in Jesus' day, a large part of the Jewish religion had been reduced to sets of rules and laws. That sixth sense, the ability to discern spiritual reality, the presence of God, the kingdom of God, was, for many, unused, and therefore forgotten.

Which may be a big reason that nobody, at first, recognizes the risen Christ. They have not developed their ability to see spiritual reality, and the risen Lord is, in large part, a spiritual being. As St. Paul says about the resurrection of the dead, “What is sown is a physical body, what is raised is a spiritual body.” (1 Cor. 15:44)

On Easter Day, when night falls, the disciples are huddled behind locked doors out of fear of those who had turned Jesus over to be crucified. Yes, the disciples had heard the report from Mary Magdalene that (after first mistaking him for the gardener) she had seen the resurrected Jesus early that morning; but they obviously didn't believe her. (Which of us would?) Suddenly, the resurrected Christ appears to them behind the locked doors and imparts peace. Then they rejoice – but only after he shows them his hands and side, bearing the marks of crucifixion, proving that it really is Jesus.

Thomas wasn't there that night. When the other disciples tell him that they have seen the Lord, he retorts, "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." (John 20:25) A week later, the disciples are gathered together again, and Thomas is with them. Again, the risen Christ appears to them (without opening the door), imparts peace, and says 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 answers him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:26-31)

Why is it that nobody, at first, recognizes the risen Christ? Most likely because, while this is definitely the same Jesus whom they followed for three years, who bears the marks of the crucifixion, he is at the same time *different*. This Jesus can go through walls and locked doors, appear and disappear at will. This is the spiritual body Paul speaks about. There is something just different enough about the resurrected Jesus that he isn't recognized at first by those who knew him best.

"He comes and goes as though he belongs *both* in our world *and* in a different world," writes Biblical scholar N.T. Wright, "one which intersects with ours at various points but doesn't use the same geography."

Both in our world and in a different world -- a different reality which most of us, most of the time, are unaware of.

David Lose believes that Thomas is not so much a *doubter* as he is a **realist**. "Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when they were cowering in fear in the upper room," Dr. Lose writes. "We don't know where he was, but I'm guessing he was out getting on with his life, figuring out what was going to come next and getting on with it. Because Thomas is, first and foremost, a realist.

"And here's the thing: reality came like never before on that Friday just two days before this scene, when Thomas watched as they nailed his Lord, teacher, and friend to two slabs of wood. Jesus was dead, and with him all the hopes and dreams of the past three years had perished as well.

"So when the disciples come saying that they had seen Jesus, Thomas doesn't merely doubt them. He out and out just plain doesn't believe. And so I suspect that his demand to see and feel the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands is less a

request for proof than it is mocking the disciple's claim. He makes that demand, in other words, because he knows it will never happen...

“Which leads me to believe that what changes when Thomas is confronted by the risen Lord is not that he is no longer a doubter – he never really was – and certainly his realism was not changed. No, what changes is his perception of reality itself. Of what is possible. Of what God can do. Even of what God can do through him.

“Jesus comes and takes his mocking words and turns them back on him, not to humiliate or scold him, but simply to confront him with the possibility that his reality was too small...”¹

His reality was too small.

I know I am guilty, too. *My* reality is too small. All too often I live as though reality is only that which I can see, hear, taste, touch, smell. As though reality is what I read in the news headlines, which are never good and always paint a distorted picture of a world gone **totally** amuck, with no possibility of redemption.

And I suspect that I am not alone in this. Which is one reason – a BIG reason – that we need each other. To remind one another that, in the words of N.T. Wright, “The resurrection is not an alien power breaking into God’s world,”² but that it reveals a deeper reality that has always been there, a spiritual reality. We do not see it because we are totally consumed by seeing with the eye of the flesh and the eye of the mind, as Saint Bonaventure put it. We need to open up in ourselves and in one another the eye of the heart, which is the instrument of sight created to see that **bigger** reality, the spiritual realm interpenetrating this physical realm. “We fix our eyes not on what is seen,” writes St. Paul, “but on what is unseen.” (2 Corinthians 4:18) We need to have the way our brains are structured and function changed, not simply by the internet and smart phones, but by a regular practice of prayer and a greater awareness of -- and openness to -- that larger reality which is always there, and which Thomas finally sees. For let’s face it, my friends, when someone says to you, “Get real!”, we hear that in the sense of, “Get your head out of the clouds, and focus on what can be seen, heard, smelled, touched, tasted.” “Get real!” in the mindset of our age means not to **expand** your reality, but to *contract* it. It means to be more like the unbelieving realist Thomas.

“Part of what it means to come to church,” writes Dr. Lose, “is to have our view of the world challenged with the possibility of something more.” (*ibid.*) Certainly that is a big part of what it means for our church to be a “learning community” – that we are open to having our reality expanded. That we, as people of faith, are ever opening ourselves to the reality of the spiritual world which interpenetrates

the world of our senses like the risen Christ appearing in his spiritual body to his disciples.

So ponder for a minute: Is your reality too small?

“You don’t have to surrender your realism; rather, expand it to include that spiritual reality revealed so powerfully and clearly in Jesus’ death and resurrection.” (Lose, *ibid.*) Through disciplines of prayer and intentional awareness, our brains can be rewired to access this expanded reality, and we can see more often that which Thomas the realist sees at last.

AMEN

¹ (<http://www.davidlose.net/2015/04/easter-2-b/>)

² Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (p. 154). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.