

Easter 2C 2016 Sermon

John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

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.

"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."

The risen Jesus appears to his disciples, but Thomas isn't present. They tell Thomas that they have seen Jesus, but Thomas demands visual and tangible proof before he will believe. Then, the following Sunday night, Thomas **gets** what he demands: this time, he "sees" for himself the risen Christ, and he makes the strongest statement of faith in the New Testament: "My Lord and my God!".

Episcopal monk Mark Brown, noting that **we** 21st Century Americans are not that different from Thomas in our tendency to want physical proof, asks, "Why doesn't God do a kind of refresher incarnation every hundred years or so, a reincarnation so we can enjoy more *certainty* in our beliefs, so we can feel absolutely sure?"¹ In other words, why doesn't the risen Jesus appear to **us** – *here today!* – and show **us** the wounds in his hands and side, invite **us** to touch them? If only the risen Jesus were to show up here and now, *our* faith would be so much stronger, any lingering doubts put to rest!

But I can see two problems with periodic reappearances of Jesus. First, if Jesus were to show up right here and now, what makes any of us think that **we** would recognize him, when so many of his closest **friends** did *not* recognize the risen

Jesus? Mary Magdalene, who thought him to be the gardener (John 20:14-15); Peter and his friends out fishing when a stranger appears on the shore (John 21:4); two disciples on the road to Emmaus are joined by someone they do *not* recognize (Luke 24:13-35). How would **we** recognize him, if those who knew him so well did not? Would he be wearing a dazzling white robe, as in so many paintings? Would he look like the pictures of Jesus in our Sunday School rooms? Would he have a glowing halo or nimbus around his head? I doubt it. I doubt that any of us would recognize Jesus if he were to appear before us today – any more than Mary Magdalene, Peter and his fellow fishermen, or the 2 disciples on the road to Emmaus. Who knows: maybe you and I have seen Jesus countless times, but didn't recognize him!

But there is an even more important problem with periodic reappearances of Jesus, and it has to do with Jesus' sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. For on Pentecost, God in the form of the Holy Spirit raised up a *new* kind of body, a *new* embodiment: and that is the body of which we are all members, the Body of Christ; the Church. You and I are the Body of Christ in this world, called to embody his love, his, grace, and his truth in our lives, spreading that love, grace, and truth to every person and creature we meet. In the First Letter of John, we read, "...if we love one another, God lives *in us*, and his love is perfected *in us*." (1 John 4:12) That is why there is no need for Jesus to reappear every 100 years, for he is now embodied in us; **this** is the divine plan for the ongoing presence of the Risen Christ in the world. Brother Mark Brown calls it a "phase two" of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹

This should give a sense of urgency to our lives, an urgency of mission. In today's Gospel, Jesus doesn't appear to his disciples simply to prove that he is alive. No. He appears in order to *send them out*, to commission them, empowered by the Holy Spirit: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

My friends, I fear that we often think that Easter Day is the *end* of the story. "Jesus was crucified, but then he rose from the dead, conquering death and winning for us eternal life. The End." But in reality, Easter Day is only the beginning. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul – the stories of the early Church, Phase Two of the Resurrection – take up more of the New Testament than do the Gospels, and they tell us that *we are* the embodiment of the Risen Christ in *this* place, at *this* time in history. That gives an **urgency** to our calling and mission. Christ Church is not about gathering together each Sunday and then going home; it is about gathering together, being strengthened by Word and Sacrament and Community, then being sent back into the world as the embodiment of the Risen Jesus. "Let us go forth in the name of Christ," we proclaim at the end of each Eucharist; and then we add the part that reminds us that we **are** Phase 2 of the Resurrection: "Alleluia! Alleluia!"

My friends, I don't have to tell you how desperately our world needs **us**, the Church, the *embodiment* of the Risen Christ, to rise up and live out the Gospel, to

be who we are! All around us are wars, terrorism, genocide, addictions, mean-spiritedness, division, factions, selfishness, unforgiveness, racism, classism, indifference to what we are doing to our environment, an incivility and crudeness in our election process... Is it not time that we, the embodiment of the Risen Christ, courageously rise up and be Christ's presence in real and tangible ways?

The end of this month, we will take one small step along that path, when we start our ministry of Laundry Love. I would like to end by showing you a brief video of how one Episcopal Church is implementing this ministry.² They understand what they are doing as "modern-day foot washing". Jesus said on the night before he was crucified, "If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet." (John 13:14) It is what our Lord has commanded us to do.

¹ <http://ssje.org/ssje/2012/04/15/gift-of-doubt-br-mark-brown/>

² <https://vimeo.com/99275167>