

Easter 2-B
April 7-8, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

It's the second Sunday of Easter – 'Low Sunday' in some churches, but not this one. We're still celebrating, bringing fresh flowers and greens to make the cross beautiful and festive. And we're hearing the gospel reading that we hear every year on this Sunday – the story of Thomas coming to faith.

Some call it the story of doubting Thomas. And often the sermon on this Sunday is a kind of philosophical musing on doubt and faith. I've probably preached that sermon at least a couple of times.

But I want to take it a different direction this morning because there are some other things in this account that are really engaging – things that touch our lives.

This story gives us a glimpse into a gathering of disciples at the beginning of this post-Easter part of the story. And it draws us into the ways they, in a time of grief and disarray, ask that question, **'How will we go on?'** I suspect that was a question that was asked in a variety of ways after Jesus' death. And the gospel readings we hear in the seven or so weeks during this season present us with a variety of ways that Jesus appeared among his followers, giving them hope. Places like a beach or a trek on a road -- or cooking breakfast.

In today's gospel, the risen Jesus appeared among the disciples as they gathered in fear in a locked room on the evening of that first Easter. "Peace be with you," Jesus said. They rejoiced when they saw him, and Jesus commissioned and empowered them.

But Thomas missed that meeting. And he wouldn't take his friends' word for it that Jesus was alive. He wanted proof. He wanted to touch Jesus – be convinced. A week or so later, Thomas was with them as they again gathered behind closed doors. Jesus came again, invited Thomas to touch him – put his fingers into the wound in his side.

Thomas' recognition comes instantly in a dramatic confession: "My Lord and my God."

Frankly, as the story of Easter unfolds we see a whole collection of how people receive this news, just as we have our own ways of receiving and embracing the joy and hope of Easter. Some accept the witness of other, but others, like Thomas, have to see for themselves. Some are overjoyed, some are puzzled, some are awestruck or even terrified.

Even the story of the women at the tomb takes shape in a slightly different way in each gospel. In Luke some women went to the tomb, were met by a man—likely an angel, who gives them the good news that Jesus has risen. They then run to share that news with the disciples, who do not believe them.

In Mark the women also receive this good news from an angel, then flee in terror and amazement.

In Matthew the women receive the news of Jesus' resurrection from an angel and see the empty tomb. Then they encounter Jesus who greets them and tells them to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. (It doesn't say whether the disciples believed them.)

And in the account from John, the one we heard last Sunday, a grieving Mary Magdalene is weeping in the garden, then meets a man she assumes is the gardener. When he speaks her name, she realizes that he is Jesus and shares that joyful news with the disciples.

Clearly, there is no standard way to experience and embrace the resurrection. And even when one individual or group has met the risen Jesus, there is some sorting out to do. Still some need to ask, “How will we go on?”

Of course in each of these accounts, the news of Jesus’ resurrection has reached into places of deep grief, fear, loss and disorientation. They had lost their teacher, friend, a prophet – the one who loved them and who taught them to love in a new way. One who brought them hope. And now he is alive – in a different way than they experienced him in his earthly life and ministry – but still a presence among them. One who says, in the midst of this sad and chaotic time, “Peace be with you.” John Foley describes Jesus’ presence as a river of love that God had poured into the world.

I think another reason this story is so powerful has to do with its setting – a locked room, or a room with the door closed. The room that Jesus entered.

The disciples, we are told, were in that room in fear. They had, after all, witnessed the death of Jesus, framed in a context that was both political and religious. What follower wouldn’t be a bit uneasy about what would happen in the aftermath.

But Jesus entered that room and brought them hope.

I wonder sometimes if we, too, lock ourselves into -- if not a room, a place in our spiritual lives in a similar way. We can lock ourselves into a such place when we are afraid. Or perhaps when we are sad, or confused, or alienated. A room of sorts where we feel protected from or isolated from what troubles us.

And the good news is that Jesus comes into those places, too. Comes into those places and says, “Peace be with you.” Comes into those places bringing hope and healing and love.

I'd venture a guess that there are times in all of our lives when we have been in those kinds of places. Places where we're simply stuck – or feeling defeated, or discouraged. Places of loss – of having to put the pieces of our lives back together. Places where we ask, "How will I go on?"

I have a story from my own life like that that I shared with my small group during Lent when we were working through texts from John's gospel. It was from a time when there were for me, a lot of uncertainties. I was just completing my time at seminary in Berkeley. I didn't have a job yet, and if I had returned to my old job at the newspaper, it would have been a night job—a tough choice for a single parent of junior high age daughters. There were a lot of things up in the air.

I was part of a weekly prayer group – five of us who met at my apartment to listen to a scripture passage, spend about 30 minutes in contemplative silence and end with some shared prayer and conversation. It was a peaceful time in the midst of a very busy life for all of us.

We met one spring morning in the midst of that time when I had kind locked myself into an anxious and fearful place, wondering what would lie ahead for my family. We began with part of Psalm 62: "For God alone my soul in silence waits; from him comes my salvation."

During the silence, it felt almost like I had dozed off and was having a dream. This is how it unfolded: It began at the door of our apartment house where I was carrying three bulky, heavy bags of groceries from the car, through the entry, and up the stairs to our apartment. (Junior high age kids eat a lot of food.)

When I got to the apartment door, I was fumbling with my keys and trying not to drop the awkward, heavy bags. After a few moments, I noticed someone standing next to me. It was Jesus.

Jesus said, "Could I help you with some of that?"

Of course, it wasn't just the grocery bags. It was really the heavy burden of wondering what we were going to do after Berkeley – where we would live, where I would work. It was the burden of being locked into that place of anxiety.

And Jesus had just entered that anxious place and, in a sense, said, "Peace be with you." He had addressed that question, "How will we go on?"

It wasn't a detailed answer, but it was even better. It was the assurance that he was with us. That we wouldn't have to take those next steps alone.

How will we go on? Jesus, who loves us and teaches us how to love, and how to live, is companion on the way. Alleluia.