

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

April 16, 2023 – 2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Jesus Shows up When We Need Him Most*”

First Lesson	Acts 2:14a, 22-32	(Peter preaches about Christ being raised from the dead)
Psalter	Psalms 16	(The Lord is our protector and refuge)
Second Lesson	1 Peter 1:3-9	(Christ has given us new life and a living hope)
Gospel	St. John 20:19-29	(Thomas meets the risen Lord)

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Our Gospel lesson for this morning is a familiar story. We know it well, at least those of us who attend worship on the Second Sunday of Easter. It is always the appointed lesson for this day, regardless of which Lectionary Year we are in. And I'm sure you've sat through your share of sermons that have focused on Thomas, who has, for his moment of questioning the witness of his friends, forever been mislabeled “Doubting Thomas.”

The truth is, we should be grateful to poor Thomas, for he's a lot like most of us, if we are honest about ourselves. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not the easiest truth to grasp and believe. Throughout the ages, both Christians and non-Christians have struggled with the Church's Easter proclamation. Yet, the fact that Thomas was not shunned by the other disciples, but was together with them a week later, and neither did Jesus condemn him when he made his second—albeit tardy—appearance, should encourage us.

This morning, I'd like us to do a little more digging into this text, to understand its importance for our faith. Biblical scholars classify this story as a post-resurrection narrative. These types of stories usually include the disciples mourning the loss of Jesus, then He appears to them, greets them, and they recognize Him, which results in a word of instruction or command from Jesus. John, Chapter 20, includes two other accounts of disciples encountering the risen Lord, as illustrations of how their post-resurrection faith is evolving. First, the Beloved Disciple—John the Evangelist—is presented as believing immediately when he arrives at the empty tomb, without ever having seen the risen Lord. Second, Mary Magdalene is described as seeing the risen Christ but without recognizing Him until Jesus speaks her name.

When it comes to his account of Thomas, St. John presents us with an important transition: Thomas *sees* the risen Jesus, *recognizes* Him, and *believes in* Him. Thomas illustrates for us a post-resurrection faith that can be described as “seeing is believing,”<sup>1</sup> as there is nothing in the text to indicate that Thomas ever *touched* Jesus, although he was invited to do so. Interestingly, St. John's Gospel opens with a hymn (1:1-5) to Christ's Incarnation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Twenty chapters later, John further describes the Word made flesh with Jesus' *second* Incarnation—as the Risen Lord. And no, Jesus was not *reincarnated*. He was not an avatar, a ghost, or a disembodied spirit. Jesus's physical reality and spiritual presence is as strong and steady as that of any living person, for indeed, *He lives!* And it is *Believing Thomas* who finally “gets” this ... for all of us!

Mark writes that the women following Jesus went to the tomb, were told by angels that He was not there, but they were not believed when they ran to inform the other—male—disciples. Given the social and political culture of that era, women's testimony had no value. It would have been dismissed as an idle tale, or some sort of delusional thinking because of their grief.

But today's Gospel tells a different story. John writes that the disciples of Jesus are gathered behind locked doors in abject terror of both the Jewish authorities and the Romans. The Jews might accuse, try, and sentence them to crucifixion because they followed Jesus. Also, according to Matthew, the Romans could have accused them of stealing a corpse and perpetuating a hoax; both crimes were punishable by death.

Amidst their panic, yet behind the relative safety of their heavily barricaded door, the crucified and risen Christ comes and stands among them. Imagine the surprise of that moment (to put it mildly)! I can picture Peter being the first to fall to the floor, trembling in despair for having denied even knowing Jesus. Or the rest of the disciples following suit—for they all deserted him. Quite possibly, the terror over what mortal harm might come to them was replaced by the immense awe—and let's face it—*fear*, of being in the presence of the risen Christ, who is very tangibly alive!

So what's the very first thing the risen Lord says to them? "Peace be with you." Basically, "Calm down. Don't be afraid." Without stretching the text too much, we might even venture to believe they heard Jesus' words as "I love you," or "I forgive you." Then, after showing them the agonizing wounds from His crucifixion—as if to assure them He is indeed Jesus who died—He again says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And just like that, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Church was born! This is St. John's version of Pentecost.

A week later, the scene is repeated, only this time Thomas is present with the other disciples. Again, crowded together behind locked doors, Jesus comes and stands in the midst of the disciples, and says those same words, "Peace be with you." And without question or condemnation, He offers Thomas the proof that will answer his doubts, although there is no hint that Thomas actually touched the risen Christ. He simply utters the profound statement of faith: "My Lord and my God!"

Retired Methodist Bishop William Willimon comments, "The resurrected Christ goes back to, and appears before the very same ragtag group of people who so disappointed him, misunderstood him, forsook him, and fled into the darkness. He returns to his betrayers. He returns to us... That's what you see in today's Gospel from John; the followers of Jesus, hunkered down alone, behind locked doors, but then the risen Christ comes to them. They are full of fear and doubt. They don't come to him. He comes to them."<sup>2</sup>

This is the great good news of the Easter message. We don't find Jesus—none of His disciples did!—*Jesus finds us*. And in today's Gospel, the terrified disciples are not out seeking to find the risen Christ. They're hiding behind heavily bolted doors, in dread of being killed, and the risen Jesus comes and finds them, appears to them, empowers them—and gives them the unstoppable *courage!*—to go and tell others about His victory over sin, death, and hell. Later, they would become fearless apostles!

Perhaps Thomas expresses this lost-and-found dynamic best. After hearing the report of his fellow disciples about the risen Christ appearing to them, he doesn't go to the tomb to confirm that it's empty. He doesn't go searching the streets to find the risen Jesus. He simply joins the others who are cowering. He, too, is in fear for his *own* life, and continues questioning in his heart what the disciples announced. And then, Jesus comes and finds him.

I mentioned that Thomas' faith was a step up in the types of post-resurrection faith, in that it was "seeing is believing." But Thomas' faith also presents an occasion for the risen Christ to kick post-resurrection faith up another notch: "Blessed are those who have *not seen* and yet have come to believe." Ah. Forever after Christ's ascension from the earth, our post-resurrection faith must, necessarily, be "believing without seeing." Thankfully, Jesus blesses that. Otherwise, there's a fine line between faith as trusting in things we don't see, and insanity as believing in what is not there.

May we, through the power of God’s Spirit, come to trust and affirm those words of Jesus to His followers, such that even though we have not personally seen Him risen from the dead, we can trust that Jesus still seeks after us and comes to us when we most need Him. And, as He did with Thomas, that Jesus can offer us that which will calm our fears.

We Christians are people who don’t simply know something the world does not know, or believe something that non-Christians don’t believe. We are people to whom something has *happened* that has changed our lives! We have *experienced* Jesus as real, and alive! We can’t believe just because someone presents us with a set of facts—although we do need to know the Gospel truths. But as complex human beings, we need to combine our knowledge with experience.

When we experience *in our hearts* that the risen Christ has come back to us; and that Jesus is present with us, despite our sinful selves, bringing love, peace, and absolution, that encounter truly does make a difference in who we are and how we live.

When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, time and again we look up and realize we do not walk alone. When we come to some dead end in life, we peer into the dark abyss, and, to our surprise and relief, there is Jesus, waiting for us with open arms to catch us if we fall in. We give up, give in, come to despair, and find Him near to us.<sup>3</sup> In life, in death, in life beyond death, Jesus is there for us, our best and *only* hope. Our faith rests upon an experience informed by biblical and Church teaching, and upon thousands of years of countless experiences of Christ’s *presence*—such as St. Thomas had, that day long ago. As Jesus did for him, the risen Christ comes to us, especially when we need Him most.

**Let us pray:**

Heavenly Father, the Resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, is the greatest news the world has ever heard. It turns our priorities upside down, and draws us into an ever-deepening relationship with You, the source of life itself. Grant us the gift of Your Holy Spirit daily, that we might continue to grow in our post-resurrection faith; witness to others about Your marvelous gift of redeeming grace; and live our lives in praise and thanksgiving as our Lord’s disciples. This we ask in Christ’s holy Name.<sup>4</sup> *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, “Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A: Lent/Easter,” (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) pp.121-122.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Adapt. Ronald Harbaugh, “The Risen Christ Comes to Us,” 18 April 2009, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-risen-christ-comes-to-us-ronald-harbaugh-sermon-on-doctrines-of-grace-134320?page=1&wc=800) <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-risen-christ-comes-to-us-ronald-harbaugh-sermon-on-doctrines-of-grace-134320?page=1&wc=800>> 5 April 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Adapt. Harbaugh, *op. cit.*