Second Sunday of Easter – Easter 2A – Sunday 19 April 2020

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 / Psalm 16 / 1 Peter 1:3-9 / John 20:19-31

Episcopal Church of the Holy Apostles – on WebEx

M. C. Gillette

This lesson from John’s gospel is read every year on the Sunday after Easter; and if you have heard any of the previous sermons I have preached on the text, you will know I stand with myriad others who consider Thomas much maligned when spoken of as if he were somehow inherently lacking some quality of high character or faith abundantly present in his colleagues.

-----

In other words, I believe that to single him out as “Doubting Thomas” allows us to overlook many things we might be better off opening our eyes to see.

----- -----

When we come into our story here, it is Sunday evening.

-----

It had been what was probably the world’s worst weekend already, Jesus having been crucified on Friday, but the disciples’ day had unfolded in a bewildering, disturbing way yet again.

-----

Early that morning, Mary of Magdala – for reasons unstated – had gone to the tomb in which Jesus had been hurriedly laid the previous Friday.

-----

It was it empty.

-----

The way John tells the story, there were no soldiers standing guard, no men dressed in white robes, no angels.

-----

Nothing. Just an empty tomb.

-----

Now John tells us Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had placed Jesus in that tomb on Friday, but unlike his colleague Matthew, he does *not* tell us it belonged to either man – simply that it was handy.

-----

So the discovery that Jesus’ body was no longer there was not something from which clear conclusions could be drawn – and it was certainly no cause for rejoicing.

----- -----

Mary, confronted with this stomach-flopping sight, went dashing off and, encountering Peter and the never-named “beloved” disciple, shared the troubling news with them.

-----

The men went to the tomb themselves, confirmed Mary’s story, then went back to wherever they were staying, apparently making sure they locked the doors good and tight behind them while they pondered this confounding news.

----- -----

I would love to have been a fly on that wall.

----- -----

Mary, however, went back to the tomb once more.

-----

And there, Jesus appeared to her and commissioned her as an apostle to the apostles, after which she went dashing off again, this time to tell the others she had *seen* the Lord, and to relay his message to them, because – well, because that’s the job description of an apostle.

----- -----

So here we are. It is Sunday evening. The response to Mary’s news and the results of the other disciples’ contemplation seems to have been underwhelming, as the doors are still locked and everyone is still afraid.

-----

But locked things – hearts, minds, doors, whatever – locked things are no barriers for the resurrected Christ.

----- -----

Now, if it I were Jesus, I probably would have appeared to the disciples much as Jacob Marley appeared to Ebenezer Scrooge – with lots of creaking and clanking, jangling bells, keys turning of their own accord, that sort of thing.

-----

Jesus, however, perhaps having had enough drama recently, just showed up in the room.

-----

He offered them Shalom, showed them his hands and side – yup, they had to admit, it was him, all right – and breathed his Spirit on them; John’s version of what the other gospel authors tell us happened at Pentecost.

----- -----

Thomas, as we know, was not with the others when this happened.

-----

Scripture is silent on where he was, or why, but in keeping with this year’s circumstances, I picture him as a “behind the scenes essential employee,” who was off picking up garbage, or delivering groceries, or processing chicken parts, or sorting mail, or driving the refrigerated truck that was being used as a make-shift morgue, or something similar.

-----

That particular evening, when he got back from a 10-hour shift doing what was most likely under-paid, under-valued, under-recognized, under-supported blue-collar work – work that those who could *afford* to have their groceries delivered were shocked to realize – if they stopped to think about it – actually *was* essential – that particular evening, when he returned to the others, they told him the risen Lord had appeared to them.

----- -----

Now one of the essential things about scripture, of course, is that you can see a different picture each time you hear the same text.

-----

And this time around, I see Thomas standing there, his face rubbed raw from wearing a mask all day, his hands cracked from a hundred washings, exhausted, afraid, angry, still grieving the loss of someone he loved – I see Thomas standing there, hearing that Jesus had been raised from the dead and had spoken peace to the others and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them, and imagine him saying “Yeah? Really? Well if this is all true, why in the world are you all still locked inside this little room like a bunch of baby bunnies?

-----

“I tell you what, your words and your actions are grossly mis-matched my friends, and I honestly do not have the time, energy, or interest to listen to a bunch of cheap talk from folks who claim to have heard the Good News, who boast they have received the Holy Spirit, who invoke resurrection life – spoken from the same old shuttered, dark, dead place.

-----

“If you have heard Good News, why are treating it like insider-trading information, keeping it here among yourselves for your own benefit?

-----

“If you have been given God’s peace, why aren’t you offering to others?

“If you have been inspired by the Breath of God, why are you still hiding here?

-----

“Why aren’t you out taking Jesus’ place in the world beyond these walls, not shouting about your “right” to go where you want and do what you wish when you feel like doing it, but listening haring with others what Jesus told us all along about freedom being found in obedience to God?

-----

“Why aren’t going where you are needed to support and serve God’s “little ones,” submitting your own will to God’s will that the most vulnerable be protected, speaking out for the voiceless, challenging those who seek to keep themselves in power no matter the cost to creation or its creatures, being compassionate and merciful?

-----

“If you have witnessed resurrection life, why aren’t you living it?

----- -----

“I tell you what, my friends, your words are empty, you do not have a lot of credibility, and I am not buying your story.

-----

“When I see something that puts meat on its bones, when there is some tangible evidence that your hearts and souls and minds have been opened to a new way of thinking and being, when you actually start to live differently than you have before, really seeking and serving Christ in all persons and respecting the dignity of every human being – then, and only then, will I believe what you are saying.

----- -----

“Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to have a small bowl of this fava bean stew and go to bed. I have to be back at work by six.”

----- -----

Sleep well, Thomas. I think you made some solid observations.

-----

Asked some good questions.

-----

Made some legitimate challenges.

-----

And maybe Jesus thought so, too.

-----

Maybe *that* is why he came back a week later to give you what the others had already been given but had not passed along in any *meaningful* way.

-----

Maybe Jesus’ words to you – “Because you have seen me, you have believed” – were as much meant for the rest of the disciples as for you – “You know, folks, if you would do what I want you to do, need you to do, have equipped you to do, maybe people would believe in me *without* my having to show up personally every. single. time….

----- -----

If this story were taking place today, and we were the gathered disciples with whom Thomas was staying, I wonder what he would say to us?

-----

He would understand why we were staying inside for the time being, of course, because that is the work of patient support for the most vulnerable God has given us right now, and the last thing he would want is more people out there spewing aerosolized micro-droplets of death-dealing virus.

-----

But how would he respond when we announce we have heard the Good News?

-----

How he would greet our insistence that we have been filled with the Holy Spirit?

-----

How would he react when we invoke the resurrection life and claim the resurrected Christ as our Lord?

-----

Would he find our words matched by action? Would he think us credible? Would he buy our story?

-----

And even more importantly – would this risen Lord, Jesus Christ?