

OPENING SENTENCE:

Peace be with you. Jesus is among us. Peace be with you. The risen Lord is here.

PRAYER OF ADORATION:

Almighty and eternal God, the strength of those who believe and the hope of those who doubt, may we, who have not seen, have faith and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

Sermon: I Have to See It to Believe It

Scripture: John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that 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.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

In John Irving's novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator John has a number of conversations with his friend Owen Meany about the meaning of belief. Owen illustrates his faith in God by pointing to a grey granite statue of Mary Magdalene as twilight falls. When it was so dark that the statue is no longer visible, Owen asks John if he knows that the statue is still there. John says that of course he knows. YOU HAVE NO DOUBT SHE'S THERE? Of course, I have no doubt! BUT YOU CAN'T SEE HER – YOU COULD BE WRONG. No, I'm not wrong – she's there, I know she's there! YOU ABSOLUTELY KNOW SHE'S THERE – EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN'T SEE HER? Yes, John screamed. WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD, I CAN'T SEE HIM – BUT I ABSOLUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE! Owen is an example of the kind of faith the gospel John celebrates in John 20. Because Owen believes so fully and completely in God, he stakes his life on his conviction.

He does not need to see; he does not need signs and wonders; he believes and orients his whole life around this belief.

To understand this kind of faith as the central message of Thomas's encounter with Jesus, we must remember that practically everyone in the upper room sees the resurrected Jesus. Surely Mary Magdalene does, (At the tomb), but so do the disciples who encounter Jesus behind the closed doors.

So why should we be so hard on Thomas for demanding the same opportunity to see Jesus as everyone else had? If he insists that there is no way he will believe such an unbelievable story, why do we fault him? Why preach about poor Thomas not having enough faith to believe without seeing? He wanted what almost everyone else got.

Notwithstanding the strong message that Mary Magdalene announced to the disciples earlier in the day, the curtain rises on the scene of this passage with them fearfully meeting behind locked doors. Now John shifts the focus from the empty tomb as testimony to Jesus' abiding presence in the life of God, to a resurrection appearance of Jesus to these frightened disciples.

Without explanation, Jesus is among them, speaking directly to their fear: "Peace be with you." Not once but twice Jesus gives the greeting (vv. 19, 21), inevitably recalling the words of comfort that he had spoken at the Last Supper: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (14:27). No sooner is the word of peace offered than the sending of the disciples in mission is enjoined; "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (v.21). As Jesus breathes on the disciples and tells them to receive the Holy Spirit.

Verse 22 states, "He (Jesus) breathed on them". Consider engaging that sentence with your imagination: What did that breath smell like? Was it sweet with the smell of springtime? Was there something of Heaven in it, beyond an ordinary experience? Or was there still the smell of the wine and the food He had shared with them three nights before? Or maybe the disciples smelled what they recognized from the meals back in Galilee – fish and olives and bread perhaps.

Or was it the gall he had been given to drink on the cross, or the heavy odor of the spices with which he had been anointed for burial?

Was there something of the grave that clung to him still now – as they could also see the wounds in his hands – even as he stood so wonderfully alive again before them?

Each such possibility makes the story slightly different, but of course none is described in either text or dogma, and neither is the answer vital to the Gospel. Nevertheless, I suggest this to the congregation as a preparatory reflection, because it drives the metaphor of inspiration back to the flesh and blood experience involved, namely, that the Holy Spirit given to us is the breath, the *pneuma*, of the crucified and risen Jesus. He gives it not as words on a page, but breathing it out, breath that is the shaped exhalation of speech but also air for our lungs, life for our lives. As God breathed into a creature of dust, and humanity first came to life, so here the Christ enlivens these disciples. It involves real breath and real flesh. Let us consider, let us seek to feel and believe, that the breath we now draw into our lungs is infused with that of the risen Lord.

If this breath of ours is indeed that of Jesus, it is not in our lungs only for the purpose of sustaining our flesh with life giving oxygen. It is there for us to breath out as well, giving it the shape of words, expressing it in speech and sign to inspire others. Jesus appears in the locked room of fear and speaks his word of Peace.

In some parts of the Christian church this Sunday after Easter is called Low Sunday. This Sunday is also the second Sunday of Easter and is meant to be the joyful continuation of the Easter Celebration, but in many churches, it feels like Low Sunday. The Easter Lilies have been taken away; the fanfares are but an echo of what bounced joyously around the room the week before. There are fewer people and less hoopla. To be in worship on such a day can feel like showing up at a party after most of the guest have left and those who remain report on what a grand time you missed by coming too late. You know what, we missed Easter also, by a mere two thousand years. We have never lived at any time other than the time after Easter. We can hear the accounts, but we were not really there. We did not see and touch and experience it for ourselves.

It is common to focus on Thomas and his doubts, He is even given the nonscriptural moniker "doubting Thomas," as if he is the designated doubter. So, it can be helpful to be reminded that Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, but she did not believe until the risen Christ appeared and spoke to her directly, personally. Then, when she told the disciples about her encounter ("I have seen the Lord"), they dismissed her words, because they had not seen for themselves, and locked themselves in a room to hide. When on Easter evening, Jesus did appear in the dark corner to which they had retreated, he showed them his hands and his side, and it was only then that the disciples rejoiced.

So, Thomas was not the only one to have doubts when merely hearing about the resurrection appearances. Like other characters in the story, he wanted to see for himself: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and put my hand in his side, I will not believe" (v 25). Notice that when Jesus a week later appeared to the disciples, this time including Thomas, Jesus did not express impatience with his disciple's skepticism and his need for something more. Instead, Jesus told

Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side, do not doubt but believe” (v 27).

In other words, “You need something more than a secondhand encounter with me? You want to see for yourself? I do not condemn you. Touch. See. Believe.”

We are not told if Thomas took Jesus up on his offer of tangible demonstration of his existence. What we do know is that Thomas’s response to that offer – “My Lord and my God!” – is one of the strongest declarations of faith recorded in all the New Testament. Perhaps it is enough for Thomas just to know that Jesus cared enough to give him what he needed, that Jesus did not despise his doubt. Perhaps that was enough for Thomas to see the risen Christ for who he is and to address him with reverence and awe.

To be sure Jesus did go on to say, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (v 29). It seems like a particularly fitting blessing for those who show up in worship a week late for the Easter celebration. That also describes the blessing that is offered the previous week as well.

Those who gather for worship on Easter morning did not go to the empty tomb and see the risen Christ for themselves, and yet many of them believed. Blessings on you, says Jesus.

It is awfully good news that Jesus blessed Thomas as well. We can be thankful that Jesus did not set up obstacles by expecting his followers to perform acts of credulity that seem beyond us. He was, and is, in the business of meeting people where they are. He is like a good doctor; in that he does not give the same prescription to everyone. Instead, he approaches his followers in different ways because, after all, our experiences are different and our approaches to life are different. He finds a way to bless us.

According to John, that is the way Jesus handles doubt. He gives us what we need. John concludes this passage by commenting, “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 (us) may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through him you may have life in his name” (vv. 30-31).

That is the way most of us have come to believe. We did not see or touch. We were not there. We heard. Someone told us the story in a way that invited us to say yes. We heard someone say something, perhaps a small something, that spoke to us, as if calling our name, from depth to depth. There was a sermon, a passage, a prayer. We heard.

If those in the congregation need something else, something beyond the verbal, beyond the simple telling of the story, something that looks and feels more like life, then that is OK also, John seems to say, Jesus can still give them – each of us – what we need. So, for instance, we are invited to come to the Lord’s table, to open our empty hands, to touch and taste for ourselves. On this Sunday – whether we experience it as Low Sunday or approach it as the second Sunday of Easter – Jesus still has the power to give us what we need.

CLOSING PRAYER:

God of mercy, we no longer look for Jesus among the dead, for he is alive and has become the Lord of Life. From the waters of death, you raise us with him and renew your gift of life within us. Increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ and help us to grow as your people toward the fullness of eternal life with you, through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Owen believes in God and God’s work in his life, without clear-cut evidence or proof. His lifelong friend does not have the same solid conviction. What John has is a confidence in his friend that carries him through his own skepticism and into a new life. We as Christians have that same kind of friends to solidify our convictions. GO IN PEACE.

