

Sermon for Easter II 2011 Year A
St. James' Church, Mt. Airy
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Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Well, it's day eight of our fifty day long Easter party. How are you doing? Partied out yet? Just getting going? It's hard to sustain fifty days worth of celebration, isn't it? Keep trying, though. How are we going to manage to celebrate for all of eternity if we haven't got the stamina to have a go for fifty days? Maybe that's the most important thing that Lent is for – not so much make us ready to enter into the Good News of the resurrection as to build up our strength so that we can celebrate the whole fifty days of Easter.

We mark the time of Eastertide liturgically in several ways. We not only restore the Alleluias that we had fasted from during Lent, we say and sing more of them. It's the first and last word of the service during Easter.

In accordance with a decree of the Council of Nicaea, we do not say confession as part of our worship during Easter. By doing so we act out our faith that in Jesus' resurrection, our sins are already forgiven.

We have particular hymns we sing, and, unlike Christmas when we have at the most two Sundays to get in all our favorites, we have seven Sundays to work through the Easter hymns and carols.

We wear our most festive resurrection clothes and deck the church out in white and gold, the colors that we have chosen to symbolize resurrection.

And we change, somewhat, the customary form of our readings. During most of the year, our first reading is from the Hebrew Bible. Our second reading is usually from one of the epistles, read more or less in sequence from Sunday to Sunday, and our Gospel reading is usually from whichever of the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark or Luke, is appointed for the particular year.

Today, though, we began with a reading from the Acts of the Apostles – volume two in what Luke intended to be a three-volume account of Jesus and his followers. We don't know if Luke ever wrote the third volume, but if he did, it is lost to us. Then we read from First Peter, one of a tiny number of writings that have come down to us that were written by someone who actually knew Jesus when he was alive.

And for our Gospel reading, we heard not from Matthew, whose year this is in our three-year cycle of readings, but from John, who gives us the most detailed account of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to the disciples.

And one of the things we learn from the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus is that faith is a thing that grows slowly. We, two thousand years later, are confident about what the story is and what it means, but the disciples and the other followers of Jesus were not.

In fact it took them many years to begin to work out what this most strange set of occurrences – Jesus alive, then dead, then alive again, and teaching all the while, then taken up into the heavens – what that all meant.

And Thomas is, perhaps our best guide on this journey to understanding.

We have given Thomas the nickname “Doubting Thomas,” but I think it would be fairer to call him “Brokenhearted Thomas.” He had cast his lot with Jesus, given up his former life to follow this man whom he loved, and whom he believed and whom he believed in. And when he saw his friend and teacher dead on the cross, it wasn’t his faith that was broken, it was his heart. Small wonder that he refuses to allow any hope to arise inside him when his friends start telling him they have seen Jesus alive. It’s not that the story is improbable, but that believing his friends will open his heart up to being hurt again, and he just can’t bear it.

You see, doubt isn’t the problem, it’s fear. And fear, not doubt, is the opposite of faith. Doubt is actually a gift from God. Doubt is what allows our faith to grow. Faith that is founded on certainty alone is a pretty small faith, because, when it comes to God, there is very little we can actually know for certain.

That great cynic Dorothy Parker, in her poem “Inventory” said:

INVENTORY

Four be the things I am wiser to know:
Idleness, sorrow, a friend, and a foe.

Four be the things I'd been better without:
Love, curiosity, freckles, and doubt.

Three be the things I shall never attain:
Envy, content, and sufficient champagne.

Three be the things I shall have till I die:
Laughter and hope and a sock in the eye.

Leaving aside the question of freckles, which is, as any reader of *Pippi Longstocking* knows, a disputed point, the remaining three things Parker says she'd been better without: Love Curiosity and Doubt, far from being dispensable, are, I believe, the essential ingredients of faithful living.

And today, the first thing we hear after last week's news that the tomb was empty, is the story of Thomas' great doubt: "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." Thomas, unwilling to open himself up to renewed hope until he is certain his heart won't be broken again, sets a standard that, luckily for him, Jesus is more than willing to fulfill.

If that is anything like the state of your faith; if you want to touch the wounds of Jesus in order to believe, Jesus stands ready to let you touch, even now. For just as we are the body of Christ, the wounds of the world are Jesus' wounds, and you can put your hands in them any day by caring for the sick, the needy and the sorrowful.

This is a standing invitation from Jesus – if you want your faith strengthened, tend to those in need.

But in Thomas' story, there is also another invitation, which is to embrace and explore your own doubts. For they are not a sign of faithlessness, but an invitation to a deeper, richer faith.

Carry your doubts with you. Dance with your doubts. Bring them with you to church and to the world and see Jesus show himself to you, wounds and all.

The story that is at the center of our faith is a hard one to believe – not that people would die for their God but that God would die for people; not that God was immune to death, but that God, by enduring death overcame it – that's pretty fantastic stuff. And we all find parts of the story hard to believe at times.

- We may find it hard to believe that death is truly overcome when it is obvious that the world is still in death's grip
- We may find it hard to believe that this ancient and impossible story has anything to do with us
- We may find it hard, when we are facing our own trials, when touching our own wounds, to believe that God truly loves us

For congregations, a time of transition can bring all those doubts to the fore. Will the new rector be as good as the old one? Better? Worse? Our last transition was pretty painful. Things seem better now but are they really? Where is God in the middle of

all this? What is going to be expected of me during this time? When the new rector comes?

Who the community is, how the members love and support and welcome one another, where the community is going and how it lives into God's love and promise – all of these things change through a transition in leadership. In fact, they change all the time, but transitions force us to notice the changes. And uncertainty, doubt about who we are and where we are going, and how or whether we will get there, makes it hard to know what to do, how to leave all that doubt behind and live fully into the joy to which we are called by God.

But Thomas leads us not to leave our doubts behind, but to bring them to the party. We learn our faith best by experience, and we need to experience that there is new life, better life, beyond what we have known; that change can be life-giving, that the truth can make us free. And if we want to insist, as Thomas does, that Jesus answer our doubts and questions in person, we need to be where Jesus is found.

And Jesus can be found right here, at his table; at his feast; at the party where we are the guests of honor and Jesus is host, waiter, the meal itself, and, literally, the life of the party.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!