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St. James', Mt. Airy
4/3/16

Easter 2C
Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 150
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

How many of you heard the Gospel today and thought to yourself, “Oh, it’s the doubting Thomas story?”

How many of you heard the Gospel today and thought to yourself, “Oh, it’s Pentecost already?”

Ah, I caught you a bit off guard, didn’t I?

Well, listen up – here’s my sermon in a nutshell: Happy Pentecost! Get to work! And forget that doubting thing, we should all be so lucky to have faith like Thomas!

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Last week’s Gospel ended with Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning and sending her off to tell the others she has seen the Lord. Today’s story picks up on that same day in the evening. Despite Mary’s proclamation, and Peter and the beloved disciple running to inspect the empty tomb, we hear that the group remains gathered in a locked room as night draws nigh. Talk about a group of doubters!

But then Jesus came and stood among them, and once again he transformed their lives.

He greeted them, and then showed them all the wounds in the hands and side. He gave them his peace and he breathed on them saying, *“Receive the Holy Spirit.”*

Happy Pentecost folks!

The Easter / Pentecost split that we reflect in our liturgical calendar – Pentecost being 50 days after Easter – is itself a reflection of the storyline from the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.

But in the Gospel of John, Easter is the locus of the gift of the Spirit, and of the community’s mission.

So I say again, Happy Pentecost! And get to work!

Are you wondering what work I am referring to? After breathing on those gathered Jesus said, *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*

He charged them with reconciliation.

This has nothing to do with priesthood. Jesus’ commission to forgive sins was addressed to the entire faith community, and so this is the work we all need to do.

And in order to do this work, we need to understand that in the Gospel of John, sin is a theological failing, not a moral one. To have sin is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus. And so the commission to the community is to continue the work of making God in Jesus known in the world, and in so doing bring the world to the moment of decision and judgment in regard to sin.

This is the black and white world of John – either you're in or you're out. You believe in Jesus, or you don't. I don't think this sat any easier with those gathered 2000 years ago than it does for many of us today, though for different reasons.

For them, it was likely because they knew this would mean persecution from the wider society, and the Roman leadership.

For us, in our global and multi-cultural context, this can feel exclusionary at best – and at its worst justification for countless atrocities throughout history.

So what exactly is our work, our mission? I think it boils down to this: Our mission is to love one another as Jesus loves us – this was after all the last commandment the living Jesus gave his friends. In doing this we reveal the love of God to the world. By revealing God to the world, we make it possible for people to witness the love of God, and offer them the choice of accepting this love. The rest is between them and God.

It is our mission, therefore, not to be the arbiters of right and wrong, declaring who is in and who is out, but to bear witness to the limitless love of God in Jesus – which is something I think this community does very well.

Think of the mite boxes that are being collected to support the work of *A if for Africa* and the building of a library in Tanzania. Think of the hundreds of people in our community we serve through our Thrift Shop. Think of all of the food gathered year round for Mt. Airy Net – and the holiday meals and gifts given with love. Imagine the countless other ways that we, as a community, can show forth the love of Christ.

That is our work.

We are able to do such work because of our faith. Here's where the story of Thomas comes in. And yes, I said faith, not doubt.

Doubt is important, and I would argue, essential to faith, or at least it has been in my life. Doubt has often been my door into further learning, into prayer, into relationship with God. A wise woman I know once said if you keep your conversations with God polite, all you'll ever have is a polite relationship. I can assure you that God and I are beyond polite – in large part because of doubt.

But if we're looking for someone to teach us about doubt, Thomas just isn't the guy.

In today's Gospel passage, for reasons not mentioned, Thomas wasn't with the group the night when Jesus came to them. When he returned they said to him, "*We have seen the Lord.*"

Now, where have we heard that before? Oh yeah, that's what Mary Magdalene told the whole group after she saw Jesus on Easter morning. And just as they were unbelieving of **her**, Thomas is unbelieving of **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."

Thomas acts no differently than the other disciples, except that he has the courage to say what his faith demands – tangible proof that Jesus is alive again. Should his faith have been the kind of faith that didn't need proof? Should the disciples have been able to believe Mary's proclamation? Should faith take on only one shape and form?

Be that all as it may – the center of the story is not Thomas' so-called doubt, or even his demand to touch Jesus' wounds.

The center of the story is Jesus' response.

Jesus appeared a second time to the gathered community, and he offered to give Thomas exactly what he demanded, saying, *“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”*

And Thomas then exclaimed, *“My Lord and my God!”*

This is the most powerful and complete confession of faith in the entirety of the Gospel of John – an acknowledgment that God is fully revealed in Jesus. It is given by a person who doubts, and believes; it is given by one who knows his faith so well that he asks for what that faith needs – to touch the wounds of Jesus.

And yet, it is not touching Jesus that makes Thomas confess his faith, it is Jesus' offer of himself.

Jesus was not trying to shame Thomas by offering him the signs of the crucifixion, he was giving him what he needed for his faith to take root in a new way – as a witness to resurrection life.

Thomas, then, is an example for us of how to believe after the resurrection. Thomas teaches us that we need to know ourselves, and our faith, well enough to ask God for those things we need. This story shows us indeed, ask and you shall receive.

So, what does your faith need?

Have you asked God for it yet?

When will you ask God for it?

How will you then show forth the love of God in the world?

It's Easter. And it's Pentecost. And there is work to be done.

Alleluia! The Lord is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

~AMEN~