

Sermon – John 20:19-31
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Grace Lutheran Church
2 Easter – Year A
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“Not Seeing is Believing”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. He is risen? Poor Thomas, whose initial unwillingness to believe is so believable. Poor Thomas, who for doing nothing other than reacting as would any other reasonable person, gets saddled for all time with the nickname, “Doubting.” You’ll note that he’s not the only one who disbelieves on that first Easter when God was changing the world upside down. Mary Magdalene saw her Lord that morning in the garden and went to tell the disciples. Her news does not seem to change their outlook; they remain gripped by fear, locked away, unable to imagine the truth of Mary’s witness. Thomas, in fact, is the only one with the courage to be out and about. He returns to hear outlandish stories of Jesus being alive. Who can blame him for his doubt?
2. I, for one, do not blame him one bit. For am I not Thomas? Aren’t you? For one thing, we live where Thomas lives, between two Sundays. We, like Thomas, have heard the good news of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. But we have not yet seen him face to face with our own eyes. Seeing, as they say, is believing, and we have yet to see. We, like Thomas, doubt. Do we not? Sometimes? In the midst of suffering, we wonder where God is. In the face of grief, we question the promise of life. In this world that more and more

- seems to want less and less to do with God, we ask if faith matters. In the night, as past sins and failings gnaw away at us, we become bitterly certain that whatever God has to offer, it is for others, not for us. Doubt comes to all of us, or at least I imagine it does. It sure does to me. Not as something that calls me away from faith, but that occupies space within that faith, and that will likely do so until I see myself face to face with my Savior in the world to come.
3. Jesus, on that second Sunday, comes to Thomas and gives him what he needs. Thomas sees the wounds that now mark Christ forever, the God who has taken our suffering and death into his own body. Thomas sees and believes! Christ is alive! We, however, are among those whom Jesus speaks of next: Those who have not seen. Still, you diehards who come to church the week after Easter Sunday, you are among those who have not yet seen but believe. Why? If we have not yet seen, how do we see and believe?
 4. Perhaps Thomas's problem, such as it is, was not that he wasn't there that night but that he wasn't there that night. What I mean is this: Belief is about more than intellectual assent. Believing is about belonging; belief is nurtured in community. Thomas was alone. Doubt feeds on isolation. Alone, we fall prey to our own worst voices and that of the Tempter. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in the classic *Life Together*, "Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from community." In coming together, for celebration and consolation, we help one another see what would otherwise remain hidden. In our communal gathering, Christ himself appears even today, showing us his pierced hands and wounded side as his flesh and blood, given and shed for the sake of the world in bread and wine. In our communal actions, faith is restored. For me, when I *think* my faith, I sometimes wander into doubt. But when I *sing* my faith, my voice no longer solitary but part of the Body of Christ alive in this world, my faith is certain and sure. Thine the amen! Thine is the glory! Yes, Lord, I believe.

5. With eyes focused to see the Christ we have not yet seen, we behold the reign of God breaking into this world. When Jesus appears on those consecutive Sunday evenings, he speaks the same words: "Peace be with you." In our weekly repetition of these words to one another, we join the revolution against the forces of sin and death. Would we not expect a word other than peace? A word from Jesus chastising those who denied and abandoned him? A call from Christ for his friends to take up arms to punish those who dared put him to death? Those are the stories this world would write. But God's *yes* to Jesus in the resurrection is God's *no* to our ways of vengeance and violence. Peace be with you. And then he breathes on them the Holy Spirit, that same wind that once brooded over the waters at the dawn of creation. The disciples, in this precursor to Pentecost, breathe as if for the first time. Soon this whole world, choked by sin and suffering, will breathe the fresh air on the far shore of Gods' Kingdom. And finally, Jesus gives the church a great weapon in the quest for peace, what we call the office of the keys. Jesus gives us the power to forgive. It is our sin that keeps us separated from God and one another. So away with our sin! And into communities in which Christ appears and true peace and reconciliation are found. This is how we see Christ as together: fed by Christ, we enact his reign here and now in anticipation of the great revelation in which we, fully seen, shall fully see.

6. Not long ago, I heard a story. The person with whom I was speaking was telling me how her parents had met. They were from farm families in Poland, in different communities, but found themselves together in the same labor camp after the Nazis commandeered their farms. In a time of suffering and war, they found love and life. The woman made her own wedding dress using the best material she could find: a discarded parachute left by their Allied liberators. As the daughter told me this story, she smiled a bit wistfully and said, "No pictures." There is no visual evidence of this bride so adorned. But the evidence is in the family that lives on. The power is in the simple fact that

the story is still being told. In a world wracked with war and death, these two people chose peace and life.

7. So it is for us, friends, we who have been chosen by God. Tombstones and locked doors no longer mark the limits of our lives. In Christ our lives extend beyond such barriers into the forever of God's reign. Until you see Christ, look around and see Christ. Look to your neighbor and see the Body of Christ. Come, eat and drink, and see the wounds he endured for you. Sing, your voice one of many, and chase away for a time your doubt. Forgive one another and join in the revolution of peace. And we'll go easy on Thomas. Who among us hasn't doubted, won't doubt again? To every doubt comes the loving answer of our God: Christ who was dead is alive. In him you, too, shall live. As a no-longer-fearful Peter preached on Pentecost, death could not hold Jesus in its power. Death is dead. Christ is alive, Easter forever. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.

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He is risen indeed! Alleluia!