

The Second Sunday of Easter, Year A, 2008

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This is the Second Sunday of Easter, sometimes called, sarcastically, “Doubting Thomas Sunday.” The Gospel reading is John’s account of the evening of the Day of Resurrection. The disciples were hiding together, in a house somewhere in Jerusalem, because they were afraid to be out on the streets. There was a reason that they were afraid; they were wanted men, or at least they thought that they were. They were known followers of Jesus, executed as a zealot intent on overthrowing Roman rule.

As John tells this story, the disciples were together with the exception of Thomas, and we don’t know where Thomas was. Thomas’ absence is significant in that he did not experience the vision of Jesus. Jesus appeared to the disciples and reassured them of not only his resurrection, but of his continuing presence with them. “Receive,” Jesus said, “the Holy Spirit.” Jesus empowered the disciples to continue his work in the world and assured them that they not only had his authority to do the work of disciples, but that through Jesus they had the absolute authority of God the Father. This was an incredibly important experience and was most reassuring. Thomas was not there. Thomas did not experience the presence of Jesus. When the disciples told Thomas what had happened, he just didn’t believe it. In fairness to Thomas, ask yourself this: would you have believed such a strange tale?

A week later, Thomas was with the group, still hiding, still afraid. Again, Jesus came to them and this time Jesus specifically addressed Thomas. “Thomas,” he said, “touch me; feel me. Don’t live in doubt. Have faith.” Thomas immediately responded in faith, and it was a faith so strong that it would literally take Thomas to the ends of the known world, proclaiming the good news that Jesus Christ is risen, indeed, and he is the Messiah.

Traditionally, the Church puts Thomas down and faults him for doubting. One reason for this is the way that Saint John presents this story. “Have you believed,” Jesus said, “because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe.” You can make a strong argument that John or John’s own disciples edited this into the text as a way of encouraging converts, asked to set doubt aside and believe that Jesus did return from the dead and reigns as Lord. Whatever the case, we ought to be understanding of Thomas, because we can learn from Thomas.

The story of Thomas teaches us that there is a positive side to doubt and that it encourages us to be inquisitive. Being inquisitive about Jesus leads us to seek the experience of Jesus, and it is by experience, alone, that we come to truly believe. And, over a lifetime of repeated experiences of the grace of Jesus Christ, we build the strong faith that lets us take on the challenges of life, especially the ultimate challenge, death. In Christ, we take the challenges with courage.

Experience brings the faith that drives us to proclaim, even in the face of open hostility or scorn, that Jesus is Lord.

Thomas experienced precisely what the other disciples experienced one week before him, and in that experience he was convinced of the divinity of the Risen Lord. We will not be asked, at least in this life, to reach out and touch the wounds of Jesus, certainly not in a literal and physical way, but we surely will be asked, as disciples, time and again to reach out to a wounded world and, to the extent God grants us, touch those who hurt and heal their wounds. In our experience of Jesus, we cannot be silent, we cannot remain hidden disciples. The Holy Spirit leads us to be Jesus Christ to neighbor, to do his work in this world. We are all called to discipleship.

The Gospel today tells us that we can have the experience of Jesus and that experience will empower and enable us to do our Lord's bidding. Through us, Christ continues to make his presence known. *Amen.*

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