

The Second Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

In Mark's Gospel there is a story about a young child that our Lord healed by exorcising a demon. A fragment of a conversation between Jesus and the child's father almost slips by, because we are caught up in the healing story. During the dialogue between the boy's father and the Savior, Jesus told the father that all things are possible for those who have faith. The man responded to Jesus, "I have faith. Help me where faith falls short."

If we are true to ourselves, then we know that this exclamation, spoken as if a prayer to Jesus, is one that we ourselves might have said on at least one occasion and, no doubt, will likely say again. Even though faith is a gift given by God, in our humanity our faith often falls short of the mark. Fear and anxiety lead to worry and doubt. Logic gets in the way of our ability to trust in the intervening love of God through Jesus Christ. And hope as we will, pray as we will, plead as we will, there lingers a doubt, for all of us, that any of this is real. At some level we fear that we have been duped by the whole Christian message, and that we are simply being unrealistic fools.

The Church recognizes this. The Church understands human nature, and even as the Church tells us of the greatest act of love in the history of the universe - the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the redemption given us by the same, the Church recognizes that doubt is endemically part of human nature. And so, in its wisdom, on the Second Sunday of Easter of every year, the Church has us read this story, in Saint John's Gospel, about Saint Thomas, the "patron saint of doubters."

History has been hard on Thomas. Throughout most of the Christian era, Thomas has been known as "Doubting Thomas," and this title is placed as a moniker on anyone who questions that which others suggest is unquestionable. But go back, if you will, to Golgotha, the hill outside Jerusalem's gate where our Lord hung on the Cross. When you recall the finality of that moment, when dying Jesus exclaimed, "It is finished," you know that hopelessness was the reigning feeling of the day. It was this feeling of hopefulness that Thomas took from Golgotha with him; and it was this feeling that Thomas carried with him as he met with his friends, sometime after the Resurrection. Saint John tells us, in his Gospel, that Jesus appeared to some of the disciples, as they hid in a house on Easter evening, the doors shut because they feared for their lives. Thomas was not present with them. We don't know where Thomas was. However, during that evening, the Lord appeared to the gathered disciples and, offering them his peace, he showed them his hands and his feet. The reason that he did so is very simple. "See my hands," he must have said, "and see my feet." "Believe that I am raised from the dead. Now, as my Father sent me into the world, so I send you. Go out in my name and spread the good news of Resurrection and build my Kingdom."

Let me emphasize that Scripture tells us Thomas was not there. The last experience that Thomas had of Jesus was the Cross. And so, when Thomas came among his friends and heard this incredible story, it was natural that he could not muster belief. It is not that Thomas did not want to believe. It is not that Thomas did not want to know that Jesus

lived. Thomas was simply a human being, like you and like me. And he responded just as you or I would have responded, “Yeah, sure! Right! Well, he showed you his wounds, did he? When he shows me his wounds and I have touched his wounds then I will believe, too.”

Eight days later, Jesus appeared again. This time, Thomas was present, with the others. The doors were still shut, because they still lived in fear. Jesus made himself known, once again. We need to pay careful attention to the dialogue in John’s story, at this point. I do not believe, after considerable study and reflection that Jesus chastised Thomas, and we should not read the passage as a chastisement of Thomas. It seems to me that the stuff about “blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” is simply a later gloss to encourage inquirers or catechumens to believe in the Resurrection and accept Christianity. What happened at this meeting a week after the Resurrection is that Jesus made himself known to Thomas, just as he had for the others, on the evening of Easter Day, and gave Thomas the experience that could lead to faith.

This story tells us, in our lives in this crazy world, that we, too, need the experience of Jesus. Without the experience of the Risen Christ, faith is hard. Without the experience of the risen Jesus, perhaps faith is even impossible. But we have the experience of Jesus day in and day out, if we but open our eyes to see him active all around us. The Holy Spirit brings us to the encounter and prompts us to know Christ in myriad ways; in the Eucharist, in the proclaimed Word, in prayer and, most powerfully perhaps of all, through experiencing the love of Christ in others in this Christian community, this parish, this Church. Christ is here and Christ makes himself known in this place.

The experience of Jesus is possible to you and to me because God sent his Holy Spirit into this world to lead us to Jesus. Jesus says to us, just as he said to his disciples in the Gospel that we read this morning, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Be open to the Spirit’s prompting that you may know the Resurrected Lord. I think it is appropriate that Christians pray, just as the parent of the little boy in Mark’s Gospel prayed, when our faith seems inadequate and our humanness prompts us to doubt. “Lord I have faith. Please help me when faith falls short.” *Amen.*