

The second Sunday of Easter, Year C, 2010

John 20:19-31

The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

In Mark's Gospel there is a story about a young child that our Lord touched by his presence and healed by driving out 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 our Savior, Jesus told the father that all things are possible for those who have faith. The man responded, "I have faith. Help me where faith falls short."

When we are honest with ourselves, we know that this exclamation, spoken as a prayer to Jesus, is one that we have uttered many times and, no doubt, will pray again. This is so because even though faith is a gift given us by God, as humans 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 that any of this Easter stuff is real. At some level we all 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 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 knows that doubt is endemically part of human nature. In its wisdom, the Church, each Second Sunday of Easter, tells Christian people 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 Jesus exclaimed, with his last words, "It is finished," you know that hopelessness was the reigning feeling of the day. It is this feeling that Thomas took with him from the Cross, and it is this feeling that Thomas carried as he met with his friends some time after the Resurrection. Saint John tells us, in his Gospel, that Jesus had 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. We do not know where Thomas was, but we know, from John, that he was not with the rest. Our Lord appeared to the other 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."

Scripture tells us that Thomas was not there. This is crucial to our understanding. The last experience that Thomas had of Jesus was death on 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. Thomas was present, with the others. The doors were still shut, because they still lived in fear. Jesus came and made himself known, once more. Now, it is easy to take John as suggesting that Jesus was critical of poor Thomas. I think it is better that we assume the statement as later editorial, to strengthen the resolve of early Christians coming to Jesus some time after the Resurrection. I think that Jesus didn't chastise Thomas. We should not read the passage as a chastisement of Thomas. Instead, in his love Jesus made himself known to Thomas and gave him 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, for faith when our humanness prompts us to doubt. “Lord I have faith. Please help me when faith falls short.” *Amen*