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Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church
Chattanooga, TN / Diocese of East Tennessee
The Second Sunday of Easter / Year C / April 24, 2022

Acts 5:27–32

Psalm 150

Revelation 1:4–8

John 20:19–31

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

As you may or may not know, the Scripture readings we hear each Sunday are part of a three-year cycle called ‘The Lectionary.’ Each year is given a letter – A, B, and C – and we are currently in Year C. The idea is that over the course of three years we will hear a variety of different readings and thus cover much of the Bible.

As you may or may not *also* know, this Sunday – the Second Sunday of Easter – is traditionally called ‘Low Sunday.’ Liturgical scholars think this name derives from its contrast to the high feast of Easter, but pastors know better. Pastors know that the name ‘Low Sunday’ *really* comes from low attendance: the low attendance which invariably follows Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter. After all those services, most people decide they need a break from church – present company excepted, of course! You can all give yourselves a pat on the back.

But the point I want to make is that, even though the lectionary cycle is designed to spread out various Scripture readings over a three-year period, the Gospel reading for today – Low Sunday, the Second Sunday of Easter – is always the same, every year. In Year A, Year B, and Year C, we always hear exactly the same Gospel reading on this day: the story of Doubting Thomas from John, Chapter 20, verses 19 through 31. Now, why is that? Why not stick to the pattern and give us this gospel reading on one Low Sunday, but something else for the other two years? Why do we need to hear *this* story every single year on the Sunday after Easter? Isn’t that a bit redundant and monotonous? Variety, after all, as they say, is the spice of life.

But there are some very good reasons for us to hear the story of Doubting Thomas today, on the Sunday after Easter. First of all, according to the text, Thomas’s encounter with the risen Christ occurred precisely on this day. Yes, the story *begins* on Easter Sunday, the day of Christ’s resurrection: ‘When it was evening on

that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." So the story begins on the evening of Easter Day, but that's when Thomas *wasn't* there: 'Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord.'" And Thomas, of course, famously replies that he will not believe unless he sees the mark of the nails in Christ's hands, and places his finger in the spear-wound in his side.

But as the story continues we are told that it is exactly one week later – that is, the next Sunday, today – when Jesus again appears among his disciples and says to them, 'Peace be with you.' And then before Thomas can utter a word Jesus turns to him and says, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.'

So the first reason we hear this story on each Sunday after Easter is that this is when the story took place. As with Holy Week, we are coordinating the Biblical account with its actual time frame, listening to a story on the day it happened. In so doing, we take part in the action, in real time: we join Thomas and the other disciples in that locked room a week after Jesus' resurrection. We become characters in the story itself.

But the second reason we hear this story on each Sunday after Easter is that we are very likely to be in the same skeptical mood as Thomas. After the agony of Good Friday and the ecstasy of Easter, we may settle down in the calm aftermath and think, 'Now, what was that really all about?' But also, in the midst of a world of war and hunger and hurricanes and terrorism and disease and climate change, it is natural to wonder fearfully about the fragility of our lives. Has Christ really conquered death, as the Easter message proclaims?

I think it is very important to notice that such doubt is anticipated for us in this Gospel reading. And not just here in John. In the Gospel of Matthew, even as the resurrected Christ appears to his disciples, we read, 'When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted' (28.17). I find such references reassuring rather than alarming. I think it is good to know that doubt is such a natural reaction to the resurrection of Christ that even his disciples felt it. Even, in Matthew, some disciples who were standing in the very presence of the risen Lord.

For his part, however, as soon as Thomas sees Christ his opposition folds. He declines Christ's offer to touch his wounds and simply exclaims, 'My Lord and my God!' And Jesus says to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

And this is the third and final reason why we read this story today. In his response to Thomas, Jesus speaks across the centuries to us as well, to us who 'have not seen and yet have come to believe.' As John's Gospel goes on to say, this was written so that 'you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'

Immediately after this sermon, we will stand and say 'We believe.' Not, 'we know.' Not, 'we are 100 percent sure.' Not, 'we are right and everyone else is wrong.' No, we will stand and say, 'we believe.' There is great wisdom in this. It has been said, I think rightly, that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Faith is greater than doubt, not because it *excludes* it, but because it *includes* it. Faith always includes an element of doubt because faith acknowledges that it *could* be wrong, it *could* be mistaken, it *could* be in error. But faith is greater than doubt because while faith includes doubt, it is not controlled by doubt, or dominated by doubt, or crippled by doubt.

In the book of Hebrews we are told, 'faith is the assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things *not seen*' (11.1). That is why Jesus says, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Because the blessing comes to those with faith. It's not the case that seeing is believing, but rather the other way around: believing is seeing. And if we don't have faith, we can ask for it, like the man who said to Jesus, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!' (Mark 9.24) So it is important to affirm that while doubt is normal and natural, so is faith. Faith is not believing things that we know are false, faith is being continuously open to God's reality and goodness in the midst of puzzling and often painful ambiguity. Faith is thus a necessary part of life, essential to both human relationships and divine worship. Faith is not a vice but a virtue, one of the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. We need all three.

That's why we hear the story of Doubting Thomas each and every year on the Sunday after Easter. So let us stand and affirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed.