

The Second Sunday of Easter
April 21, 2004
The Chapel of the Cross
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

Acts 5:27-32/Psalm 118:14-29 [A=v.23]/Revelation 1:4-8/John 20:19-31

Almighty God, we have celebrated with joy the festival of our Lord's resurrection. Graciously help us to show the power of the resurrection in all that we say and do; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Seeing For Ourselves

Ah, Thomas – dear Thomas. The guy who **wasn't** in the right place at the right time. The guy who wouldn't take anybody else's word for it. The guy who just "**had** to see for himself." Dear Thomas. Hoping to be the guy in the **right** place at the right time a week later. Hoping to be the guy who can feel peace and joy again. Hoping to be the guy who sees Jesus for himself.

Thomas' story – as recounted in the gospel of John – is a fascinating one. He is mentioned by name twice before our text today. In chapter 11, the disciples question the wisdom of Jesus' going to raise Lazarus, reminding him that some people had tried to stone him the last time he passed through that way. Jesus responds to their concerns by saying to the disciples, "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe [John 11: 15]." Enter Thomas, who says to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with him." A bold declaration, isn't it? For Thomas, following Jesus to Bethany meant most likely dying with him at the hands of his detractors and he's willing to do it. Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time! But...off they all go to Bethany.

A few chapters later, Thomas appears again in a dialogue with Jesus – one which directly follows Jesus' speaking about his death and about Peter's subsequent threefold denial of him. Listen carefully to their conversation. Jesus begins,

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do **not** know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also, and from now on you **do** know him and **have** seen him [John 14:1-7].'

A remarkable conversation, isn't it? Thomas, who knew the way to follow Jesus to Bethany and also knew what it would most likely mean, now can't figure out **where** Jesus is going or how to follow him there. "I am the way," Jesus says. Me – your teacher, your footwisher, your beloved friend – I am the way. Just follow me and you already know the way I intend for you, the truth I entrust to you, and the life I offer to you. So...off they all go to the cross and the tomb.

Imagine the depth of Thomas' confusion and grief in the days and nights between these two pre-crucifixion conversations with Jesus and his meeting with the crucified and risen Jesus that is described in today's gospel text. Following Jesus – the way, truth, and life to which Thomas had committed himself – now meant living through some of the worst life had to offer – first, a growing fear for his own life and at the same time the heart-numbing loss of his beloved friend and teacher. To continue following **this** way was to follow a way that appeared quite literally a dead end. From now on, to be entrusted with **this** truth was to inherit only a cruel joke, and to continue to live **this** life was no life at all. Maybe that's why Thomas had decided to skip the meeting with the other disciples following Jesus' burial – confusion, grief, and also a deep disillusionment about the future of following Jesus' way. Of course, we'll never know for **sure** why Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when the crucified and risen Jesus first appeared to them, but ... off go the disciples to share the good news with Thomas.

"We have seen the Lord!" they told him. "Jesus is no longer dead!" Thomas' reaction to all this was a healthy dose of skepticism, and who could blame him really? After all, **he** hadn't seen Jesus since he watched him die right in front of his eyes. And as Thomas knew nobody ever survived crucifixion. Whoever the other disciples **think** they've seen, it surely couldn't have been the same Jesus he had known and loved and followed. In order for Thomas to believe that the others had really seen **Jesus and not someone or something else**, he would have to see some kind of evidence of the crucifixion he had witnessed. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe," Thomas says.

Enter Jesus once more into that closed room and now into the presence of Thomas' doubt-ridden and disillusioned heart and mind as well. Enter Jesus, whom God has raised to new life. Enter Jesus, eager to show Thomas what he wants and needs to see and feel in order to believe. The Jesus who shows himself is **precisely** the Jesus Thomas has been both longing to see – and fearing he would never again see – the **crucified and risen** Jesus in the flesh – his beloved teacher and friend – nail holes and spear holes undeniably still there.

Our gospel text today is clear about who the Jesus is who comes to Thomas and the others. He is not a glorious “super Jesus,” with all traces of suffering and death somehow washed away and forgotten. He is not an ethereal, ghostly Jesus, but one who invites Thomas to touch him. He is Jesus – friend, teacher, footwisher, crucified and risen one – standing there in the flesh. **Jesus** is there with the disciples in his own pierced and now resurrected body. And **why** has he come? To bring peace and to offer Thomas precisely what he needs in order to believe again in the power and in the promises of God. Jesus – crucified, risen and standing there with the disciples – has come to Thomas to show him the way to the dwelling place God has prepared for him, to reawaken in him the truth about God’s shalom, and to announce to him again the life and future God offers to him and to all. New life and a future for Jesus, for Thomas, and for all those who come to believe that God is **faithful** enough, **loving** enough, and **powerful** enough to speak life, and not death, as the final word. Thomas’ response to **this** Jesus and to **this** word is bold, unequivocal and deeply felt – “My Lord, and my God!”

This Jesus – raised in his wounded flesh, restored to bodily existence by God – is the Jesus we are invited to see and to come to believe in as well. It is this Jesus – alive in the flesh – who testifies without a doubt to the amazing truth that God really **has** done something new and unexpected in raising Jesus to new life. God really **has** taken the very “stuff” of life – flesh, bone, suffering, and even the reality of death, into the divine heart and into the divine future forever.

Do you doubt it? That’s OK. Thomas did too. Go ahead, look at the holes, touch them if you want to. See for yourself. And, don’t be afraid to believe that it is the human Jesus whom God has raised in his human body. Thomas’ story is meant to proclaim something to us that we could have never have imagined on our own – namely that the whole person of Jesus, wounds and all, is precious to God and is resurrected to new life by God. The God of Jesus Christ intends to lose nothing of his precious Son to the powers of suffering and death. The God of Jesus Christ will not be defeated in his loving purposes, not even by the powers of suffering and death. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus, Karl Rahner says, means that

we Christians ... are the most radical materialists, for we say that ... the divine Word of God has a true body for all eternity. ... And this has happened where not simply spirit and glorified soul, but the one human being in his totality who acted and suffered this history of his, attained perfect fulfillment, where everything abides, nothing is lost, and everything is disclosed as meaningful and glorious. [Beginning of Glory, p. 73-74]

In other words, because Jesus' tomb no longer has a body in it, and because he who once was dead has shown himself to be living in the flesh, Thomas knows for sure, and we can know just as surely that God himself has a body for all eternity, that in God's future, **nothing** is lost and everything – **every thing** – is disclosed to be precious to God and even glorious in God's sight. **This** Jesus, who is alive in his wounded body, is precious to God and glorious in God's sight. This Jesus is able to stir Thomas to confess him as both his Lord and his God. This Jesus, resurrected in the flesh, wants to be, and always and already has been **our** Lord and God.

In a few minutes, we will be invited to the table to eat the very body and drink the very blood of this Jesus, our Lord and our God. At this table we are invited to testify with our very own bodies to the unexpected good news that in God's future, nothing is lost and everything is precious, meaningful and glorious. In this meal we are invited to proclaim with our own eating and drinking that Jesus is alive in the flesh and here today, alive in bread and wine shared. Come and eat! Come and drink! Rejoice in our risen Lord, and give thanks to God for such incredible gifts – new life for all and a future for the whole world. Amen.