

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Sermon 4.16.23

**Acts 2:14, 22-32**

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him, ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’ “Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, ‘He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.’ This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

**John 20:19-31**

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.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But 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.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are 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. (630)

We’ve been in this room before. You: you’ve been in this room before. If you’ve ever been to church on the Sunday after Easter, then you’ve been in this room before.

Always here, on this Sunday: this is where the disciples had gathered with Jesus on the night of his arrest, where they'd had their last supper together. This is the place to which they retreated when everything had gone mad, when the annual Passover festival became overshadowed at least for these unfortunate few—overshadowed by the cross, their friend and teacher hanging from one.

“How *exactly* had that happened?”

They gathered here in fear, the text tells us, in fear of the Jews, a detail that's played out terribly in history. This has at least tacitly endorsed untold violence against “the Jews,” as if the Church continues to have reason to fear them and therefore is justified in committing violence against them, preemptive-like.

We don't. We have no reason to fear Jews, and there's no justification for violence against them, or even suspicion of them.

As for those remembered in the story, the fact is, of course, every one of them was “a Jew”—from Jesus to Judas, from Peter to Herod, the heroes and villains and everyone in between. The only one not a Jew was Pontius Pilate, he who was the one actually to authorize the crucifixion, he who actually could commit violence. If anyone here is to be feared....

But the story speaks of fear of these not for reasons internal to the story. The story makes this unfortunate point for the sake of the hearers, the sake of the community for which this was written. The Johannine community, the community that produced and kept the books of John—one gospel and three letters: this was comprised of Jews in the late first century who'd been expelled from their families and villages and synagogues all for following in the Jesus way, all for “believing in Jesus.”

Which is very much the aim of this gospel narrative, by the way. This gospel is written so any who read it, or better to say any who hear it read and proclaimed, will come to believe in Jesus. This is a refrain not only in the passage we just heard, but throughout the gospel, in many of the encounters Jesus shared with people and in the interpretation of encounters offered by the narrative voice: “Do not doubt, but believe.”

But to believe: this can be quite a facile thing. To believe: how this imperative has played out in these latter days of the Church is to notionalize this faith nearly beyond recognition. Now, so much of Christianity plays out as individuals having merely to conform their thinking to right belief, this while doing very little else. You just have to confess the right thing. You just have to

believe the right way. It has very little to do with what you do, how you live, how you organize your living, what priorities we all together hold.

It has very little to do with how we treat the poor, for example, or how we conduct ourselves in regard to conflict, especially armed conflict. It has very little to do with any enactment of God's reign or anything that might be recognized as embodied. Our *bodies* are very seldom on the line when it comes to how we understand the imperatives of the gospel and of following Christ. We figure, or much of the American Church especially seems to figure, that all we need to do is believe in Jesus. We figure, thanks to John, that all we need to do is to have right ideas about Jesus.

Which would have been inadequate to the earlier Church. Unimaginable, really, not to mention impossible. There's something unique about our time: we're capable of operating as if our minds are divorced from our bodies, and even more so from our bodies together, actual connection or mutual accountability of one to others. Our society is so big, and our living is so abstract that what we *think* can have no recognizable bearing on how we live.

Time was, there was greater immediacy between our thinking and our behaving, our imagining and our enacting. The world, our world, held us more tightly than that, for all the good and bad of this. A tight hold: it can form and inform. It can also strangle and smother.

Now, though: it seems enough, more than enough, that our hearts are in the right place. As long as we think rightly. Thoughts and prayers: that oughta be enough.

I once had someone reach out to me about this nearest-by church. The question: they were new to the area and were committed to climate justice. How active was the church's climate justice activism?

"Not that active," I had to admit. "But open to becoming more so."

The decision they would eventually come to as a household: they'd found a church in Amherst, hour-away Amherst, that fit the bill, so they'd join up there.

I thought of that long drive and hoped (darkly) that they had an electric car and solar panels to charge it. Or maybe they would take the bus? Or would it all be virtual, never to present themselves to one another as church in body? How does this work?

Of course, what I think: just get local. That's where regular people can enact climate justice. Get local. Dig in. Deal with those closest to you, figure out how to live without the safety hatch of possible escape.

Really, that's how regular people can also enact the reign of God and be as the body of Christ: get close and get real.

Time was, you had no choice in that sort of thing. Time was, you couldn't imagine yourself as much different than others knew you to be.

To believe in Jesus: this would have *meant* something, would have dictated something. And some would have found that lovely, and others would have found it incongruous, intolerable, the "Jews" of the Johannine understanding and experience. When society holds you tight, beautiful things can happen. And stifling things can happen.

To be honest, when I think of the Johannine community, the closest analogue to our time that I can conjure is the queer community, those who've been kicked out of their households—their often "Christian" households—because of this newly undeniable fact of themselves.

They come to seek each other out. They often eventually build family and community among those of like experience, especially important for having been denied such things because of this irrevocable aspect of themselves, this thing they couldn't go back on. Not now. Come out, they couldn't now go back in.

I wonder if they ever gather in what could be characterized as fear of "the Christians."

But there's more to what it means to believe in Jesus than just to see in him the very presence of God, the very Word of God made flesh.

I mean, this would have itself been scandalous enough. To imagine that the God of all transcendence could become as imminent as any of us, that the God of all matter and spirit could become any particular matter and one particular spirit, so limited and limiting: to imagine moreover that God not only could but also would: would choose to so become: this is nonsense and offensive. I mean, if you were *all* things, would you then become *some* thing? I think something this when I see birds walking down the street. I think, "What are you doing? You can fly." So it is with the Lord God: you are the all-in-all, so why on earth would you become one on earth; and why moreover *this* one, this Jesus, humble, illiterate, childless, transgressive, crucified?

*Crucified.*

Which gets to the heart of the scandal here: that God became not only flesh in Jesus, but crucified flesh. God, the Lord God, the most holy and powerful, the most creative and mighty: now a criminal, transgressive of the law that God himself was said to dictate, and thus a crucified one.

Because, of course, Jesus wasn't only a wonder-working miracle man. He was also—is also—the crucified one. To believe in Jesus was to believe in the crucified one as the Word of God, the crushed one as the glorified one of God. To believe in Jesus *is* to believe that the God of all glory would come to glory through crucifixion, which says something about those in the world whom we condemn to the worst of it. That they are, perhaps most of all, beloved of God? That they are, perhaps most of all, the site of God's manifestation and astonishing redemption?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said from his prison cell, "Only a suffering God can help." A German Christian, theologically trained; a victim of the Nazis after he was caught conspiring to have Hitler assassinated, which would end in his death instead, hanged in a concentration camp just days before it was liberated: "Only a suffering God can help." To redeem this poor, sorry world; to redeem this beautiful, painful, powerful, compromised world: only a suffering God can help.

Thomas gets a lot of flak for doubting. Right? Do you know this? His name gets dragged through the mud. But what did he doubt?

I find it interesting that, when poor Thomas was back in the room with the other disciples, what he wanted to see of what he'd missed from the week earlier when he was out and Jesus, resurrected, appeared among them in that room: what Thomas wanted to see wasn't Jesus in general.

Knowing, of course, that Jesus had been killed and had been buried and that the disciples had gathered back in that room where we've been before, gathered in fear for what more of expulsion might come, what more of rejection and retribution and wrath and punishing violence might come, Thomas was though out—and who knows why, whether because he hadn't yet made it back safely to home base or because he was out gathering provisions for what might be a long hiding away or because he was scouting the streets to see if things had calmed down and maybe it was becoming safe again out there. But when he came back and heard what must have been crushing news: "We have seen the Lord!" which, oh, I guess you missed, what Thomas wanted then to see wasn't Jesus full-stop. What he wanted to see was Jesus' *wounds*. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." It's as if it wasn't the resurrection of Jesus that Thomas found most unbelievable, but the crucifixion of Jesus, this one who would then be raised. Really, Thomas seems to have doubted the crucifixion of the one whom God would then raise.

Those two things simply don't go together. They didn't then and they only hardly do now.

Have you noticed in the American church, amidst so many self-identified Christians, a kernel of cruelty, or a strain of un-sympathy, for those who now suffer the world at its worst?

I've noticed it, and this is how I've come to understand it: people, some people, continue in this tradition of believing in the resurrection, as a show of God's muscle and might, while doubting in the crucifixion, that God might also be weak and vulnerable, that God might prove easily pierced and torn by the world, and might therefore stand in closest solidarity with those who likewise suffer—which, spoiler alert, will be all of us at some point.

We will all of us come to suffering at some point. Life's just like that.

No one gets out of here unscathed.

No one gets out of here alive—except all of us.

“Our God is an awesome God,” goes one particularly beloved praise song. “Our God is an awesome God. He reigns from heaven above in wisdom, power, and love. Our God is an awesome God.”

Sounds more like Zeus. By contrast: Jesus' God is a suffering God. He comes from heaven above to join us in vulnerable love. Christ's God, a self-emptying, redeeming God.

This is what it is to believe in Jesus. According to John, and the literature and practice of the Johannine community, what it is to believe in Jesus is to stand in solidarity with the poor of the world, those who suffer, those whom the world most profoundly wounds.

And what that means is possibly putting your life on the line, or at the very least your life-style on the line, your body and the body of your relationships and community.

But this isn't the reason we hear this story every Sunday after Easter. Important a point as this is, worthy as this point might be for annual remaking, the reason for the frequent including of this story in liturgical retelling is that, with this story, we continue in real time with Jesus. With this story our liturgical time joins narrative time on the Sunday after Jesus' resurrection.

The first appearance of Jesus to the disciples according to John happened on the evening of the resurrection, when Thomas, tragically, was out.

The second appearance of Jesus to the disciples, this time when Thomas was there too, happened on the evening of the week after the resurrection—which is today.

From here, we part with Jesus as he moves in the world in real time. From here, we move more exclusively into liturgical time. We'll see more of him, of course. The season of Easter, seven weeks long, has Jesus appearing all over the place, all over time. But that real-time tracking that begins with Palm Sunday ends here.

For this, then, we are given to one another. We are here the movement of Christ in the world. We are here the real-time appearance of Christ, which the Holy Spirit, breathed unto us, might make so.

Thanks be to God.