

April 27      He Keeps Showing Up!!

John 20:19-31

The Easter season of alleluias can sometimes seem to leave little room for other kinds of feelings. We tend to forget that for the first disciples, there was fear, doubt, pain, and confusion before there was understanding and joy at what had taken place on that day. This is why I like that the story of Thomas is included in our Gospel accounts of post resurrection appearances. It would have been so easy for the editors to leave out this story. To say that some of the disciples doubted might cast suspicions on them as being people of faith. Let's first of all reexamine this account.

John makes the timing and circumstances clear when he talks about Jesus' first appearance to the disciples. Jesus had appeared at the tomb to Mary Magdalene but none of the disciples had seen him until this moment. It is evening on "that day" the first day of the week. John wants us to know it is the same day as the resurrection. The same day as they had heard the words of Mary proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead. John also makes it clear that these words of Mary had done little to embolden the disciples for he notes that they were hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Jesus appears and says "Peace be with you!" These are his first words to the men with whom he had spent so many months. There was no scolding for their running away in the garden or for not believing Mary; just a word of comfort. He could have said don't be worried, or don't get excited or as some other gospel accounts say, do not be afraid. His words of peace mean much the same thing. He then shows them his hands and his side. John had first let us know that the resurrected Jesus was not like the Jesus they had been with because he could pass through a locked door. Yet he goes out of his way to make sure we know that the one who had been crucified was among them.

In showing them his hands and side it makes a difference. It says that the disciples rejoiced. Jesus again gives them the blessing of peace and in John breathes on them and they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the Pentecost moment for John. It doesn't happen fifty days later. There are no tongues of fire. It is Jesus who gives this gift.

For some reason, we are not told why; Thomas was absent and missed out on this first Sunday evening encounter with the risen Jesus. Although he has gotten a bad rap as “doubting Thomas,” he asks for nothing more than the others have already received: to see Jesus, wounds and all. The wonder of this story is that Jesus shows up again one week later to provide exactly what Thomas needs. And Thomas responds with the highest declaration of faith found in the Gospels when he says “My Lord and my God!” He is the first to grasp the ultimate significance of the Easter event. That this man Jesus, whom they had followed and believed to be the Messiah was more, so much more. He was God with us.

When Jesus appeared again to his disciples we are told that they were once more hiding behind locked doors, suggesting that Thomas was not the only one still needing reassurance that Jesus had in fact conquered death. Those first ten had seen Jesus, seen his wounds and received the Holy Spirit and were still hiding in fear. They, though it doesn't say it in so many words, still had their doubts and questions. If they had been erased they would have already been moving out to share the good news, as we hear happened after Pentecost in the Book of Acts.

Jesus' response to Thomas can be seen in two ways. Some see it as a rebuke for his doubt. But others, and I am among them, see it as a blessing for all those who will come to believe without having had the benefit of a flesh-and-blood encounter with Jesus. Indeed, the author of John goes on to declare that this is the very purpose of this book, addressing all of us who have not seen but have heard this testimony: “But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

So what does this say to us? Doubts are acceptable. We don't always hear this, especially in the church. But I know we all have doubts or if you don't want to use that word, we have questions. We wonder how some things that are reported in the Bible could have happened in the way shared. We question whether something written in the Bible should be taken at face value or evaluated because time and culture have changed. We go through difficult times and wonder if God hears us, is with us, can or

will help us. We feel guilty for having these questions and doubts. To have them seems to imply that we don't have a very deep faith. So we keep silent about them and this silence saps our faith more than admitting we have questions ever would. So we need to be like Thomas, admit to our doubts and realize that God still loves us.

Next we need to be open to how they will be addressed. The events recorded in John tell us that Jesus shows up to help us deal with our doubts. God is willing to work with us just as Jesus worked with Thomas. I go back to the fact that Thomas was not asking for more than the other disciples had received. Yes, it would have been better if he didn't need that kind of proof and ultimately we have had to accept the power of Easter without flesh and blood evidence. But Jesus came back and Thomas had his doubts erased. We may not get the precise answers to our doubts like Thomas who had a very specific list that he needed for belief. But God will struggle with us and help us to answer our questions if we but believe. God will keep showing up in our lives until we too come to a new and deepened faith.

The good news of this story is that Jesus keeps showing up. As he came back a week later for Thomas, Jesus keeps coming back week after week among his gathered disciples. We experience the presence of Christ each week in our gathered fellowship, in our music, in our listening to the word proclaimed. We come each week expecting that presence. We come each week because we don't want to miss out on the life and peace he gives. We come each week to wrestle with our questions and we are never disappointed.

There was a couple in my last church who were faithful in attending. Age and arthritis had so slowed them that they had to come 20 minutes early to church because it took them that long to get from their car to the sanctuary, about a half block distance. After church, he always had to take a brief nap in the car before he could drive them home. They came because they said they needed the power and support a community of faith gave them. They especially needed it now that life was so challenging. And their faithfulness became an example to many others. I remember talking to a college student who was full of questions and doubts which is not unusual at that age of life.

She admitted that she had thought about chucking going to church but then she saw this couple slowly and painfully coming into worship each week and thought, if it is so important to them it must be important, and so continued to worship. As she did so she began to understand the power of community.

The last thing we need to hear is that beyond our doubts and Jesus offering us peace and understanding he also challenges us. Like the disciples he keeps sending us out of our safe, locked rooms, into a world that, like us, so desperately needs his gifts of life and peace. He sends us out, not necessarily to knock on doors or accost our neighbors and proclaim our faith whether they want it or not, but to go out and live this faith. Live it in spite of our doubts and fears. Live it with expectation and celebrate what God has done and is doing and give thanks.

Thomas, once his doubts had been answered, shared the great confession, "My Lord and My God!" For him the doubts were over. He became the second greatest traveling missionary of the church after the Apostle Paul. Legend has it that he made it all the way to India where he became the patron saint of the Thomistic Christian Church, as ancient as our own.

So let us give thanks for a God who continues to show up in our lives and may we accept the challenge to share, by word and deed, the powerful message of his love and grace.