

Sermon – “See My Hands”
Sunday, April 19, 2020
Scripture Readings: John 20:19-25; John 20:26-29
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Our scripture readings today tell us of the uncertain times following after the crucifixion of Jesus, when he has been resurrected but not everyone knows this yet, nor do the few who are aware of it know what to make of it. Hear God’s Word to you from the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 19 through 25.

¹⁹ 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.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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.”

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Our second reading picks up the story where we left off a moment ago. We continue with John 20, verses 26 through 29.

²⁶ 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.” ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ 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.”

There are definitely some features of today's Bible passage to which we can relate right now. Certainly familiar to us here, above all, is the aspect of being shut up in a house, with only a very small group of others, out of fear of some kind of threat.

Something important to the context of this story, but which may not be clear from this reading starting where it does, is that it follows *immediately* after the Easter morning story. That was a story of an empty tomb, witnessed by a couple of confused apostles after Mary Magdalene sent them running to the scene, and Mary herself having then seen Jesus and reported that to them as well. The first part of today's scripture, with the disciples locked up in a room, happens that very same night. Nobody there understands the resurrection situation yet, and nobody but the two Marys seem to have seen Jesus up to now.

It's a worried gathering we see here, and for good reason. Remember as of that moment we are only a few days after the promising Jesus movement was cut off, violently, by an angry crowd with backing of the local authorities who had gotten these disciples' leader put to death. The mood around the town would not have been friendly or safe toward followers of Jesus, and his closest followers of all clearly did not feel that emerging publicly or being seen in public was a prudent thing to do at this point. All of this is to say, the first Easter was experienced with a good deal less triumph and a lot more perplexed uncertainty and fear than our typical way of celebrating.

Now we are right to celebrate, since looking back, we do understand what those living through it only would come to understand later. The glory in that moment, and the meaning of an empty tomb, is apparent to us, seeing the whole story as we do, and we're thankful, and we praise God with magnificent music and great ceremony. Typically, anyway. But this time around, it's a little different for us, isn't it? Maybe we can relate a little better than usual to the experience of those who went through the first Easter day.

Well, we can relate to most of it, anyway. Jesus shows up and breathes on them, which is kind of an unthinkable thing to do to someone at this moment. But a whole lot else about this gathering seems pretty recognizable: the sense of insecurity and danger, the uncertainty about the future, even the apparent fact that (until Jesus appeared) this gathering did not exceed 10 persons,¹ since Judas had abandoned them and Thomas was not present.

Chances are that most of us also can relate to the doubt. We live in a time of loss and uncertainty, with a brand new disease having leapt from nowhere to become the leading cause of death in the United States, and with jobs and businesses having taken a hit unlike anything in living memory, but with none of us having clear knowledge of what the path forward will even look like. And in times of loss and uncertainty, doubt is a regular companion.

¹ Or so it appears on the surface. There is certainly the possibility that Mary or someone else was still with them; it only says, "the disciples," which suggests but technically might not strictly mean the twelve alone (minus Judas and Thomas).

Of course, humans are odd creatures, because we do a funny thing with faith and doubt. In times of deprivation, when we can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, what do we see? We see needs not being met; we see the things that are wrong and but not how they will be made right, and we tend to veer toward doubt. Yet what do we do when things get better? In times of plenty, we get complacent, used to having enough. The need for salvation and all of that sort of thing seems distant and anything but urgent, and the whole Gospel thing tends to feel fuzzily unrealistic and implausible, and we then *also* veer toward doubt. I'm not actually sure which of these things—a moment of gain and plenty, or a moment of loss and scarcity—is harder for our faith to endure, because we readily make both of them into reasons for not believing.

Maybe we are all really just made of the same stuff as Thomas, which is to say, we believe what is right in front of us, and anything we cannot see right now seems dubious. "Show me, and then I will believe."

But Jesus knows us, as he knew Thomas and the others. He knew their doubt, and it was okay. He did not abandon them for it. *All* of them are recorded as rejoicing after seeing him, including his hands and his side, and not before. In fact, he knows them, and us, more deeply than that. He showed up there, in that place of uncertainty, and the first thing he said was not about their belief or unbelief at all, but a blessing: "Peace be with you." Those were the first words he uttered when he arrived, both times.²

Maybe you could use that blessing yourself.

All the stresses of demolished plans, and cabin fever, and loneliness, or too much time with no breaks from sharing the same space with others, of homeschooling while working, or of paying the rent while not working, of bodies vulnerable to disease, whether our own or those of people we know, of not knowing when things go back to...whatever they are going to go back to. Just as it was for the disciples hiding out in fear, not knowing when to emerge or what sort of life to go back to now that Jesus had been crucified, it may also be true for us: peace, spoken and given into all those anxious stresses, might be for all of us the first thing we need, and we can be thankful that it is the first thing Jesus thinks of and offers upon entering the room.

After that, well, he speaks of a future that truly does still have hope. With the very marks of what he has endured still on his body, he speaks of sending people onward, of a future that is still built on the same hope as he spoke of in days past. He speaks of receiving the Holy Spirit, and of forgiveness.

² He actually said it to them *three* times: twice in his first visit to them (in John 20:19, when he first arrived, and John 20:21, after they saw him and rejoiced), and then upon his arrival in his second appearance among them a week later (in John 20:26).

If, then, we can relate to the disciples in the space they inhabited on that day, then the Gospel they carried from there has something to say to us, too, and the Jesus who met them there, who re-lit the fire in them which then spread across the whole world, has something for us as well. It may take a while to hear it, receive it, recognize it, understand it, and believe it, but that's okay. Whether today we are Mary Magdalene, encountering Jesus right at the very tomb, or Thomas, spending much longer in his period of struggling uncertainty, the bold hope proclaimed in the very first chapter of John is found to be true here in its concluding chapters as well, and remains so for us: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

To God be the glory. Amen.