

John 20: 19-31 (4-7-2013)

So what's next...

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When 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."
²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.
²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."
²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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."

²⁶A 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."
²⁷Then 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."
²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"
²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."
³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.
³¹But 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.

Well, Lent is officially over. It began with Ash Wednesday the springboard for us to spend the next forty days in penitent reflection and awareness of God's presence in our lives. Palm Sunday began our Holy Week as Jesus was heralded with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem with palms waving, cloaks falling down and people shouting his name. Maunday Thursday came and we remembered the scenes that occurred on that night. The disciples gathered in the upper room to share the Last Supper, the prayer of Jesus on the mountain, and finally the betrayal of Jesus by one he had called his disciple and Jesus' arrest. Good Friday came and we remembered the crucifixion in all its horror. Jesus nailed to a cross abandoned and denied by almost all his followers asking God to forgive all who knew not what they did. Then it was finished and Jesus was laid in his tomb. Then came Sunday, that glorious Easter Sunday where we celebrated how the Son of God rose from the dead and lived again! Hallelujah and Amen!

Whew! There is a lot of buildup to Easter morning. And this year especially as Lent began mid-February we had barely a month to breathe after the end of the Advent and Christmas season. To be truthful we have been going, going, going since Thanksgiving. But now Easter is over and all that buildup is pretty much finished. While we are technically in the 50 day period called Easter that leads us to Pentacost often in the life of the church the two biggest days of celebration are over and we fall back to our "normal" pattern of worship and Pentacost becomes just a blip of fun amidst the normal. It is almost like we hosted a party and now that it is over we have a little let-down and are just a little bit adrift.

We must ask ourselves what now, what's next? How do we keep the momentum of Christmas and Easter going? How do we make normal feel just as amazing and wonderful as the holiday's we have just been witness to?

Let's take a look at today's scripture. Oh that wonderful doubting Thomas, made infamous because of his doubt. We are told that Thomas was not present the first time Jesus appeared and during Jesus' blessing. He only heard about it from the other disciples and his response was "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."

The Gospel of John from where this passage is taken is unique amongst the four Gospels. The others Matthew, Mark and Luke form what is called the synoptic Gospels because they have a similar feeling and utilize many of the same stories and parables from the same sources. John is unique and utilizes a lot of stories that are not found in the other three. Another difference is in the embodiment of Jesus as the Christ. John places a lot of emphasis on the physical presence of Jesus as the Son of God living amongst us. Jesus is present physically amongst the disciples both before his death and after his resurrection. In our passage from today Thomas is able to literally touch him, see him, and talk with him. In the following story by the lake Jesus cooks food for the disciples and talks with them again. These images of the embodied Jesus are distinctive and central to John's theological understanding of Jesus as God's presence in the world. This embodiment of Jesus means that we can be in relationship with Jesus as a physical person and therefore with God for whom Jesus represents.

Yet John for all his emphasis on the embodiment of Jesus gives us the story of poor Thomas who is ridiculed as the doubter who then turns to confessor when he wants to see and touch Jesus. In verse twenty-nine 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." But Thomas has to have something to hold on to. He has to touch Jesus' hands and feet. He has to see the hole in his side. He has to see Jesus right in front of his face. He has to be just like each one of us. We are each of us at some times just like Thomas, struggling to see Jesus, and struggling to believe even when Jesus is right in front of us.

So what's next? Easter is over and we have almost nine months until the Christmas season begins again. How do we keep our holiday momentum going? How do we hold on to our faith and see Jesus even when we can not physically see or touch him. This being able to believe even when we can not see is part of the challenge in the Gospel of John as illustrated by Thomas' doubt. Thomas's doubt is a message for all of us to remember.

I am reminded of the movie the Santa Clause, where Scott Calvin, played by Tim Allen, has just been whisked off to the North Pole and is in conversation with an elf. He is exclaiming over and over again about the wonderment of this magical place and he tells the Elf that he sees it but doesn't believe it. The elf then responds that seeing isn't believing, believing is seeing.

Seeing isn't believing, believing is seeing. A poignant and catchy phrase isn't it? The crux of this passage and the emphasis of the Gospel of John according to biblical scholars and decidedly emphasized by our passage today is that many who followed Jesus would not have the luxury like Thomas of actually being able to touch him physically and yet we must all still believe in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of the living God and Lord and Savior of our lives. We must believe without seeing.

I ask you to watch this video of the song by Nickel Creek appropriately called "Doubting Thomas".

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3c_8hYK0eo

This song kind of kicked me in the gut when I heard it the first time. The chorus just resonates the words cause me to think and then that last part of the song. "Please give me time to decipher the signs/Please forgive me for time that I've wasted/I'm a doubting Thomas/I'll take your promise/Though I know nothing's safe/Oh me of little faith/ Oh me of little faith."

Oh we of little faith. We have the wonderful promise of eternal life through our belief in Jesus as the Christ and yet I, you, we, can not see Jesus physically, as we do not have the same luxury as the Disciples did to live and work in his presence. We say we believe it but sometimes we are just like Tim Allen and question that the concept of eternal life and the promises that Jesus made are almost too amazing and incredible to really believe in even when they are right in front of us. So it begs the question, how do we believe without seeing? We are like Thomas and honestly most of the time do not have the faith momentum behind Christmas and Easter to really showcase all that God promises through Jesus the Christ. We in some way some how need to see it. We have an inherent craving to see it.

So where, where do we look for this amazing promise, this amazing faith? Where do we look for Jesus? How do we see Jesus today in the here and now? We see Jesus in one another. We see Jesus in our actions towards one another and how we live out our faith. That is what is next. Living in faith and continuing to live in faith sharing what we know about the power of God through Jesus' love. And we do this in spite of and perhaps through our doubt.