

We Have Seen the Lord

John 20:19-31

May 8, 2011 – Browns Point UMC

Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

Continuing in our Easter Season series on resurrection appearances: "I have seen the Lord!"

It's funny to me that we have to remind ourselves of what season it is: it's Eastertide, the 50 days after Easter. But in perspective, we have never lived in any *other* time except the weeks after Easter. It's been a *lot* of weeks now – about 100,000 or so. But we are post-Easter people through and through. Even though we cycle through the liturgical calendar year after year, imagining and exploring and honoring all the days of the year, we can never be anything other than an Eastertide church. We are post-resurrection people.

But can you imagine what it was like for those first disciples, who saw Jesus condemned to death, then ran and hid for fear of their own safety, only to hear that he had been dead – and then he was alive? To transition from pre-Easter to post-Easter must have been crazy. They had to be in shock, those closest friends of Jesus; they didn't have the perspective that the years have offered us. And yet, sometimes we wish we could trade places with them. It seems they had an advantage in the realm of belief, because they got to actually see Jesus. They could hear his voice and ask him questions and watch him sing and cry and pray; they could feel his hands washing their feet, and even smell his skin when he came close. They knew him – by sight, by touch, by sound, by mannerisms and accent and habits. And what do we have? Stories. Stories written down by people who may have been there, but more likely heard from others. Stories written down a full two generations after Jesus' life. Stories missing details. Stories with assumptions about readers that aren't true for us anymore. Stories that have been read and written and passed down for 100,000 weeks or so. Stories that are supposed to make us believe, according to what we just heard from John's gospel.

And if you're like me, then at times, you've wanted more. You've been disappointed by these stories that don't give a lot of detail, that don't tell exactly what happened, that can't *prove* anything; I've wanted more than stories. I've wanted proof. And that's why I feel such a connection with the portrayal of Thomas in John's gospel.

Thomas has gotten a little bit of a bad rap – "Doubting Thomas," we call him – but I don't think that's really fair. For one thing, Thomas is not the first one to doubt: Mary didn't believe what she saw at the tomb until she talked to Jesus himself; the other disciples didn't believe Mary's story until Jesus showed up in the flesh. So he's not all that different than the others. Thomas is simply thoughtful, careful, and honest. He doesn't do things because everyone else is doing them. He doesn't agree because everyone else agrees. He is a loyal disciple, but only when he can follow authentically. He is not a status quo kind of guy, nor does he just follow the crowd. When he stands out, it's because he has legitimate questions – probably questions that are swimming in the heads of others, who are not as brave or as self-assured and do not ask them (but are thankful Thomas does).

So I'm thankful for Thomas, too, and for his honesty in this post-Easter story. John's gospel tells us that on Easter evening – perhaps just after Jesus has disappeared from the feast at Emmaus, the disciples are locked in a house together, afraid of what's going to happen with the Jewish authorities. But locked doors are no issue for the risen Christ – Jesus appears in the room

with them. And while they might deserve to be scolded: “What are you doing in here, scardey-cats? Is this what I taught you to do?” that’s not Jesus at all. In usual fashion, he comes in to calm their fears, saying immediately, “Peace be with you.” Then he wastes no time, immediately sending them out to tell the story of what they’ve heard.

But Thomas wasn’t with them when Jesus appeared. We don’t know where he was, but he wasn’t in the locked room with the other ten. And then he showed up, a little late to the party, the other disciples wouldn’t stop talking over each other: “We have seen the Lord! We’ve seen the Lord!” Can you imagine the scene, with each one trying to be first to tell Thomas about the risen Christ, each with his own version of what’s just happened, all of them excited and shocked and waiting for Thomas’ reaction?

But Thomas doesn’t go along with the crowd. He wants what they’ve had: a chance to see Jesus. He wants to touch Jesus –and what’s more, he wants to make sure that this Jesus that’s appearing to the disciples after the resurrection is the *same Jesus* that called the disciples away from their homes and families and put them to work healing the sick and cleansing the lepers and showing people how to love one another. He wants proof that *his* Jesus is the one walking around saying he’s risen from the dead.

And Jesus doesn’t get frustrated by this. He doesn’t say, “You fool, your brothers have told you; why do you not believe?” Though that sounds like something we might expect to read in the Bible. It’s like Jesus knows that the resurrection is a tough concept, especially for these guys who lived through the transition of Easter. And a week later, when Thomas is with the other disciples, Jesus shows up again, this time to allow Thomas to see and feel his hands and feet, to show Thomas that he’s alive; and that he’s the same Jesus that walked and talked with them; the same Jesus that was crucified.

Maybe Jesus understands that we all learn differently – that some of us can believe with just a few words from a trusted friend; and others of us need to feel the truth or wrestle with it or discuss it ad nauseum before it sinks into our bones. For some of us, belief happens like the flipping of a switch – we didn’t believe and now we do. But for others, it’s a gradual process of steps forward and steps back, until one day we realize we’ve crossed over into the land of belief. Through his interaction with Thomas after the resurrection, Jesus shows us that it’s okay to come at belief a number of different ways; and then he says something that makes me think he realizes in that moment that the post-Easter people will, in some ways, be at a disadvantage: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” That’s us. We haven’t seen. We haven’t touched him or put our fingers in his hands. We haven’t heard him sing or cry or felt his embrace. We haven’t seen, yet we’ve believed.

Except maybe we *have* seen. In some ways, we *have* seen the body of Christ – in its brokenness and in its beauty; it’s all around us. In some ways we *have* heard his voice: in the stories, in our prayers, in our hearts. In some ways, we *have* felt his embrace: in the embrace of our friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ. In those ways, we *have* seen the Lord. *We* have seen the Lord. Do the stories help you to believe? Does the community help you to believe? Have you practiced the faith until you realized you believe? Or did you believe in an instant, and then start practicing?

Talk to your neighbor about when or how you have seen – or heard or felt – Christ’s presence. What has helped you to believe? How have you seen the Lord?

Help us, O God, to believe where we have not seen; but help us also to see, that you are all around us, offering us what we need to put our trust in you. And when we have seen, let us not keep it to ourselves, but share our stories with the world, that others might believe, as well. Amen.