

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away. At first she didn't know where Jesus's body had gone – and she was desperately sad, because she wanted a proper burial.

And then ... she saw him. Jesus, in the flesh, bearing the wounds of crucifixion, yet walking around anyway. And she was overjoyed, and she went to tell the other disciples... and it doesn't seem like they believed her.

Because where we picked up the story today, on the evening of that day of resurrection, the disciples are gathered together in a locked room. They were afraid. Maybe they thought the police were going to arrest them, one by one. Maybe they thought the Temple authorities were going to raise up a mob and kick them out of Jerusalem. We don't really know what they were afraid of – only that they were.

And then Jesus shows up. He says those four beautiful words – peace be with you. And then, he proves to the disciples that it is really him – he shows them his wounds. The marks from the nails in his hands. The place where the spear went in, in his side.

Only then, the gospel says, did the disciples believe – and then they rejoice. Because they knew it was real.

But it turns out that one disciple was not with them. And so later on, maybe that night, someone found Thomas and said to him, “Hey, we have seen the Lord!” And he said, “Yeah, right.”

Then one week later – which, incidentally, is today – Jesus appears to the disciples again. This time, it’s the whole group. He comes back to that same house, and says those four beautiful words again – peace be with you. Then he approaches Thomas – Jesus *seeks him out*. He says, reach out your finger and touch my hands. Reach out your hand and touch my side. See for yourself.

Only then, the gospel says, does Thomas believe – and then he rejoices. Because he knows it is real.

Now, we need to pause here. Two thousand years have gone by, and in that time, by my count, approximately one hundred billion paintings have been made of this moment. The most famous one is called “the Incredulity of Thomas.” Artists and theologians alike call him Doubting Thomas. And that phrase has even made it into our own vernacular in the English language – someone is a ‘doubting Thomas’ when they don’t believe what they can’t see.

And over the centuries we Christians have said that Thomas is a bad believer because he doesn't take things on faith.

Well, that's not very fair.

For one thing, all of the other disciples got to see for themselves that this was true. They all got to see the holes in his hands, the wound on his side.

For another thing, nobody seemed to believe Mary Magdalene on the basis of her word – everyone waited until they had proof of their own.

And it's interesting. In our culture we often use this phrase, "you'll have to take it on faith." And what we mean by that is, "you have to just believe me without proof."

And as this passage from the Gospel of John comes to a close, Jesus even seems to say that himself.

He says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

There is a way we Christians have often interpreted that sentence, and I think our interpretation is wrong. We often translate what Jesus has said, which is just a blessing, and we turn it into a rule: "You don't need proof if you have faith." In other words, a good Christian... is just supposed to believe. Not wonder. Not doubt. Not ask questions. Just... believe.

And that might work for some people. But “just believing” has never really worked for me.

I’m a scientist. I need to see things that are real. And not just observe them or think about them in an intellectual way – I need to experience them, with my senses, with my body, with all the parts of me that are me. Maybe you’re the same way.

And the thing is, that maxim we created, that new rule of who gets to be one of us – that you shouldn’t need proof if you have faith – that isn’t found in the Bible. That isn’t part of our story.

Our story is more like this: “Come close, and see for yourselves.” And that’s exactly what Jesus says to Thomas! Come close and see for yourself.

And lest you think that coming close requires time-traveling...

Today we had a reading from the letter of 1 John. It was written to the church in Ephesus, around the year 100, seventy years after Jesus died and rose again. So I can all but guarantee that nobody who received this letter had seen Jesus themselves. Most of them would have been several generations removed.

And this letter begins, I think, in the most beautiful way anything from scripture could begin: “We declare to you what was from the beginning: what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have

looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life. This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it. And now we are telling you.”

This letter – this advice to the new generation, which we are very much a part of – has nothing to do with ‘taking things on faith,’ and it has everything to do with what is real and tangible. The authors of 1 John, like the author of the gospel of John, believed that lived experiences are the foundation of faith. A real faith, rooted in real things, rooted in the sensations of the body and the experiences of the soul – of what you can feel, and taste, and hear, and see, and know.

And let me tell you, dear people. I have never seen Jesus’s hands. But I have seen yours.

Did you guys see the photos posted this week, of people from our community meeting our refugee family at the airport? The same hands that polish this silver and pour this wine and arrange these flowers – those hands fluffed pillows, and made beds, and filled cabinets, and held signs in the airport that said, “hello and welcome.”

Last week – it was Easter, and when it was time to rejoice we had a thousand flower petals floating through the air. Did you guys see how that happened - the people standing in the balcony to do that work? They came early, they got ready. They stood back and felt Easter in their bones and said alleluia before it came to anyone else because the

alleluia came from their hands.

Your hands. Hands that sharpen colored pencils in the prayospace and vacuum up sand and do fellowship-hour dishes and make coffee and pray and clap and open the doors of God's house.

I could not take the impossible story of Christ's resurrection on faith. But I know that God is alive because I have seen God's work through you. I know that God has overcome fear and death and pain, I know that God joins us in our work, I know that God leads our hearts and calls us ever towards justice, because I know you.

My dear people of the resurrection, my dear people of wonder and doubt and questions and revelation and a faith built on what is real... in these next few moments of meditation, I wonder... where have you lately, seen God alive in this world? Where have you seen – or felt – or heard – or tasted – the truth of God's holy, relentless, everlasting love?