

There's something special about the second Sunday of Easter. There are three major holy days in which the gospel lesson is always the same, regardless of which liturgical year we are in. Christmas Eve is always from the gospel of Luke, Christmas Day from the gospel of John, and Good Friday from the gospel of John ... and we always hear the gospel lesson about "Doubting Thomas" on the second Sunday of Easter. The rest of the Sundays in Easter have different readings, mostly from the gospel of John, but they are all different and are not repeated in the other liturgical years.

Therefore, we can assume that there is something significant, something that warrants special attention in this lesson – and no it's not just about poor Thomas who has been given a bad rap.

Thomas is the disciple who asks Jesus the hard questions, the ones that reveal his uncertainty. When Jesus talks about going and preparing a place for the disciples in his Father's many dwelling places, Thomas doesn't get it and says that he doesn't know the way and Jesus responds, "I am the way the truth and the life..." (John 14:4-6) Thomas is probably voicing the concerns of the other disciples who were too embarrassed to reveal their ignorance. And if metaphysics isn't Thomas' strong point, being faithful certainly is. After Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead and insists on returning to Judaea although disciples protest because the authorities want to stone him but Jesus is resolute. Thomas then says "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16) Lastly, Thomas misses Jesus' first resurrection appearance and declares that he won't believe until he can see and touch the marks of the nails in his hands and put his hand in his side. (John 20:25) His perspective is a bit gory, but when Jesus does appear, and invites Thomas to touch him, Thomas doesn't reach out but declares "My Lord and my God." He gets it on the first try.

Thomas is important for us and for our faith because his interactions show examples of people wrestling with their belief in Jesus and Jesus having the patience to bring him along...as Jesus will bring us along if we give him the opportunity.

But it's not all about Thomas. If we trace Jesus' resurrection appearances, we can see how he responds to different people with different needs.

On Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb, she sees that the tomb is empty and begins to weep. (John 20:11-18) Not only is her Lord dead, but they have taken his body; she is bereft of hope and the comfort of taking care of the body of the Lord she had loved. When she sees Jesus she does not recognize him until he calls her by name. She then goes and tells the other disciples.

Jesus comes to us with love and understanding when we are grief-stricken, when we do not know where to turn, and if we have ears to hear he will call us by name.

Who knows how the disciples heard the words that Mary told them? The next scene is when they are huddled behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. Clearly, they were not confident that all would be well, probably they were not sure what to make of what Mary had told them. Neither do they recognize Jesus when he materializes until he shows them his hands and his side. Only then do they rejoice. And, despite their fear, their hesitation, their earlier desertion, he commissions them. He gives them the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins. (John 20:20-23)

Jesus comes to us among our deepest fears, our abysmal failures, our shame, and our self-reproach and offers us his peace. This is not the peace of gentle calm, it is the peace that goes with the courage of conviction, the confidence that what is done in Jesus' name will have its own reward, will bring us what we ask of God in Jesus' name.

Now we are back to Thomas whose marked suspension of belief seems less radical in view of the experience of Mary and the other disciples. Jesus does not dismiss Thomas and in fact, Thomas suddenly gets it even more than the other disciples when he calls Jesus Lord and God. Jesus can help us make the transition from the material world to the multi-dimensional reality of what it means to be in relationship with God, or more simply, what it means to have faith. (John 24-21)

Some, like the disciple whom Jesus loved, can more easily grasp that faith is beyond what our physical senses tell us is true. When the disciple saw the empty tomb, he realized that what Jesus had said was somehow true even though he still does not understand it on a rational level. (John 20:8-9)

John's gospel was written for a community that was being persecuted, for believers who needed reassurance that even though they might not have seen Jesus, known Jesus. The signs and stories were written so that they would come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that in believing they might have life in his name (John 20:31). Jesus' words cut to the heart of the matter, not only for community for whom John was writing but for us, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:29) Let that sink in for a moment. By the grace of God we have come to believe.

Jesus will be there to comfort us in our grief, to quell our fears, to forgive us our sins, to satisfy our doubts, and to help us see what it means to have eternal life. John's gospel is a densely woven narrative that defies linear presentation. But have faith, we will hear more as we move through the Sundays of Easter.

Amen.