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St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Easter II – Year C - April 28, 2019

Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 20:19-31
John 20:19-31

“Beloved Disciples”

Welcome to you, faithful remnant! It's the second Sunday of Easter, a day that's often referred to as Low Sunday because the attendance at churches everywhere is usually materially less than what was the case on Easter Day. Last Sunday, we estimate that over 2,500 people passed through the doors of St. Stephen's. It was a big day indeed.

You know, it's very tempting to go through Easter Day and think that this one day has everything we need to sustain us for the long run. It's certainly true that the resurrected life of Christ *is* all we need as people of faith. But without an adjustment to our thinking—which can take time—we run the risk of glossing over what's necessary in our response to resurrection to allow it to breathe new life in us.

So I ask this question: How do we actually incorporate the resurrected life of Christ into our lives? I think part of the answer to this question lies in how we encounter *and respond* to Christ every day. And here, Gary's sermon from Easter Sunday was so helpful. At the heart of our Gospel reading last Sunday was the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the resurrected Jesus at the tomb—the very first resurrection appearance as recorded in Scripture.

Now you'll recall that, in her despair over the empty tomb, Mary initially believes that Jesus is the gardener. But her encounter with the risen Christ shifts her perspective entirely, so that while she thinks she sees the gardener, she actually experiences the Christ within the person she sees. And so last Sunday, with the eyes of faith, Gary encouraged us to see, like Mary sees, the face of Christ in *everyone we encounter*.

Noted theologian and activist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, understood so well that our life together as people of faith depends on our embracing a perspective that sees the presence of Christ *in all people*. “Christian community means community through and in Jesus Christ,” Bonhoeffer tells us.¹ So that when we see Jesus in each other, the only natural response is reverence and love. At the Last Supper Jesus told the disciples, and us by extension, to love one another. It sounds so simple, but there's no more profound action than this.

The first resurrection appearance of Jesus to Mary at the tomb reminds us of where Jesus now rests—buried within the lives of all people—and so provides a logical pathway into the second and third encounter, as revealed in the story of Thomas in our Gospel text today.

In the second encounter, Jesus appears to all the disciples *but Thomas*. The disciples had abandoned Jesus in his final days, and they're now hiding out of fear behind locked doors in the

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 27.

darkness of evening. Jesus appears to them out of nowhere: there's nothing that can keep him out of the room; there's nothing that can keep him out of their lives—not darkness, not even locked doors. By Jesus' presence, the eyes of their faith are opened to a new way of seeing, and in this second encounter, we learn an important lesson underscored by St. Paul: that nothing can separate us from the love of God—absolutely nothing.²

Renewed by their change in vision, the disciples then tell Thomas what they've experienced. But Thomas has left the station, if you will. He was a disciple, yes, and at one time even proclaimed he would die for Christ.³ But after the death of Jesus on the cross, he seems now to have abandoned his faith, reverting back to his life before he even knew Jesus—by re-embracing his tendency to think that nothing can be believed unless it makes sense according to his own logical framework. Sound familiar?

This perspective holds no room for mystery, for the power that exists in what cannot be seen or explained away. You might remember that moment, earlier in John's Gospel, when Jesus has just told the disciples that he's prepared an eternal place for them, and that he himself will soon die and go to that place. Not wanting to accept Jesus' rather cryptic claim, Thomas blurts out in exasperation: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”⁴

It's precisely behind the closed doors of his own thinking—his narrow line of sight—that Thomas ultimately proclaims boldly that he will not believe that the disciples actually encountered the risen Jesus unless he sees and touches the marks of the nails in his hands and the wound in his side. As soon as Jesus is hauled off to be crucified, Thomas is back to his “regularly scheduled program,” as if he's learned nothing during the three years he spent with Jesus.

But then our Gospel text reports a marked shift in Thomas' perspective, when he actually encounters the risen Christ—not unlike the shift that occurs with Mary Magdalene outside the tomb. A week later, as all the disciples including Thomas, are now back behind locked doors, Jesus suddenly appears and commands Thomas to touch and see his wounds. He then encourages him not to doubt but believe. In the presence of the risen Christ, Thomas suddenly snaps out of his need for proof and believes what he sees with the eyes of renewed faith: the very Christ that stands before him.

Jesus closes his encounter with Thomas with a noticeable admonishment, “Blessed are those who *have not seen* and yet have come to believe.” On one level, he's warning his followers that a time will come when he will no longer be with them physically, so that they will ultimately need to rely on their faith to understand the truth of his on-going presence.

And interestingly only one character in the biblical narrative believes in the presence of the risen Christ without first seeing him in resurrected form. And that person is the beloved

² See Romans 8:38-39.

³ See John 11:16.

⁴ See John 14:5.

disciple, the one whom Jesus loved the most, the one reclining beside him at the Last Super,⁵ and the very one who ran ahead of Peter to the tomb as soon as Mary Magdalene reported her own divine encounter.⁶ Peter enters the tomb first and sees only the linens that had wrapped Jesus' body. The beloved disciple sees the linens by peering into the tomb's opening, but initially holds back, as if to ponder what he's seen—so that when he finally enters, despite a lack of physical evidence of Jesus' actual presence, he believes.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Jesus' final blessing is a tip-of-the-hat to the beloved disciple, but also I think it's Jesus' way of addressing everyone who experiences this Gospel after the fact—and that most certainly includes us.

The other day I was talking to Allison Seay, who was telling me about what the children have come to learn in their spiritual training in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd program here at St. Stephen's. They've been learning about the Eucharist, and she tells me that they now have grasped one of the most profound truths: that when they eat the bread and drink from the cup, they now know that Jesus is truly within themselves. The other day, after taking communion, one little boy, when asked where Jesus was, simply looked around and then pointed to his chest and proclaimed, "in here, in me." The child is father of the man, you know.

During the forum hour this morning, children in the Catechesis program, and their parents, will be taking part in a beautiful service here in the church called the "Liturgy of the Light," where what they've learned will be carried out in a worship setting. Please come if you can to this service. I have a feeling that you just might find your own eyes opened to a larger truth:

Divine encounter, in all its various forms, reminds us of the power of God's grace in our lives—a grace that pours out from the very presence of others in our midst, a grace imbued by God's steadfast love for each of us, and a grace that comes to us when we least expect it, out of the very mystery of the resurrection of Jesus.

The children seem to know this, I think, and we would do well to listen to them, and see what they see—for they really are beloved disciples, you know.

Thanks be to God.

⁵ See John 13:23.

⁶ See John 20:2-10.