

The Second Sunday of Easter
April 22-23, 2017
John 20:19-31

“Back at the Crossroads: Beyond Belief”

This Second Sunday of Easter is sometimes called “Low Sunday.” I did a little research, and found out it’s a term that’s been around for hundreds of years, but the origins are a little fuzzy. Best guess is that it refers to low attendance and low energy after the high festival of Easter Sunday. And the Gospel lesson for this “Low Sunday,” the Second Sunday of Easter is always the same: the story of doubting Thomas. There’s something about today’s Gospel reading that we can identify with. And this is so, I believe, because there is something of Thomas in each one of us. We see Thomas in ourselves! As we all know, he’s come down to us as “doubting Thomas,” and that’s the connection: Thomas is something of an everyman for every man, every woman, everyone. If we are honest with ourselves, we have all struggled at some point in life with believing in what we do not see; in what we cannot touch. This is especially true when it comes to faith. There are things in life that are just beyond belief. Think back on your own life when you received news, whether it was good news or bad news, that you simply could not fathom. Our mouths drop open, we catch our breath, and we say something like: “What? That can’t be true!” There are things that are just too much to take in, and we may have great difficulty grasping the reality of something that has occurred. That is the setting for today’s Gospel lesson as the disciples, first without Thomas, and then a week later with Thomas, encounter the risen Lord Jesus Christ. I’d like to go back and revisit that Lenten and Holy Week preaching series, “At the Crossroads,” and re-title it: “*Back at the Crossroads.*” As we look at those first disciples and Thomas through the lens of Jesus’ resurrection, we are “back at the crossroads” with this amazing and life-transforming good news that is beyond belief. That is the theme for preaching this day. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

Those first disciples were once again at a critical crossroads on that first Easter evening. They’d been at a lot of these crossroads before as they followed Jesus, especially during the past few days. In one way or another, they all failed the test of discipleship as they turned tail and ran when Jesus was arrested. Some did come out of hiding, like Peter, who appeared in the courtyard of the high priest but caved in under pressure and openly and repeatedly denied ever knowing Jesus. Or, like John, whom we are told stood by the cross along with Jesus’ mother and Mary Magdalene. For the most part, though, the disciples were a very dispirited and disillusioned group on that first Easter evening. Even though they had been told by the women, who were the first witnesses of the resurrection, that Jesus had been raised from the dead, just as the angel had told them (Matthew 28:1-10), they really didn’t believe. It was beyond belief for them to think that Jesus could now be alive! No doubt, they *wanted* to believe this, but like us, they really weren’t sure they *could* believe this. That was about to change.

On that first Easter evening, we get a pretty good picture of how the disciples felt: **“the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews”** (John 20:19). They were in hiding; behind closed doors that were locked up tight. Their concern was for their personal safety. After all, if the authorities did what they did to Jesus, they might just do the same thing to those who were with him. And so they were in a state of high anxiety and great fear. In our own lives, when we are locked away because of fear, we turn in on ourselves, don’t we? And it is precisely then that the crucified and risen Savior comes into their midst, and into our midst as well. And the first word out of Jesus’ mouth is this: **“Peace be with you”** (John 20:19). I think you probably could’ve knocked those disciples over with a feather! Of all the things that they may have expected Jesus to say to them, this was not one of them. No doubt they expected to be upbraided and rebuked for their faithlessness, but that’s not what Jesus said or did. And here is hope for people like you and me today: that when our risen Savior comes to us when we are locked away behind closed doors and eaten away by fear and anxiety, when we are expecting to be chastised and condemned

for our faithlessness, Jesus says to us what he said to them: **“Peace be with you.”** That is the Easter gift which Jesus brings to you today: peace which passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7); peace which the world cannot give (John 14:27).

How did the disciples know that it really was Jesus? After all, an empty tomb could mean many things. They were in such a state of fear and anxiety, maybe they were seeing an apparition, a ghost. What convinced them, what moved them from uncertainty to belief, was seeing Jesus’ nail-pierced hands and his side that was wounded by a spear. Then they knew it was really Jesus! But what about Thomas? He wasn’t there to see all of this, and he declared: **“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe”** (John 20:25). And this is where we see ourselves in Thomas, or Thomas in us. We, too, may stubbornly refuse to believe except we can see for ourselves. No matter where you may be from, we’re all really from the state of Missouri with its motto, the “Show Me State.” We want proof! We want evidence! Show me! The Lord Jesus graciously comes again into the midst of the disciples a week later. Notice that they’re still gathering behind locked doors (John 20:26), and this time, Thomas is there. Jesus challenges Thomas to come and see and touch for himself. Scripture doesn’t record whether Thomas actually did this or not. Paintings of this scene usually depict Thomas as putting in his finger, but we are not told if he did or he didn’t. Regardless, he then proclaims: **“My Lord and my God!”** (John 20:28). Jesus doesn’t praise Thomas for his skepticism and doubt. What he does say is this: **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”** (John 20:29). And that would be us. We are those who have not seen and yet believe that Jesus is risen from the dead, and that he lives and reigns to all eternity. As Peter tells us in today’s Epistle lesson: **“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls”** (1 Peter 1:8-9). It may be beyond belief, but we do believe. Against all odds, we do believe. Thanks be to God we do believe.

Those closing words from today’s Gospel lesson are a summary of why John the apostle was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write his account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is a fitting way to close out this sermon on this Low Sunday, the Second Sunday of Easter: **“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”** (John 20:30-31). Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.