

John 20: 19-31 Reality: Old and New

Our reading from John's gospel this morning begins "when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week" which sounds very similar to the way the reading from John began last Sunday, the description of that first Easter morning according to John. Except then it was early on the first day of the week while it was still dark. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb in darkness grieving the reality of the death of the one she has followed from Galilee to Jerusalem. After her encounter with the risen Lord, she goes to the gathered disciples and proclaims with joy and excitement: "I have seen the Lord." John does not give an account of their reaction, although the synoptic gospels indicate that the disciples' reaction was to disregard the testimony of those who first encountered the empty tomb. Now it is on the evening of that same day. The disciples are gathered together in a locked room in fear of those who plotted to kill Jesus. The disciples are there because they are afraid for their own lives; the future without the one they followed is uncertain. The reality they are facing is scary and gloomy. The disciples are not celebrating despite what Mary Magdalene has told them-the good news she brought. The report about seeing the risen Lord has not changed their understanding of reality, of those events in their world which they witnessed. Into this locked room where the disciples are gathered, Jesus comes and stands among them, literally according to the Greek in the midst of them. He greets them saying: "Peace be with you." This is a traditional greeting which corresponds to the Hebrew greeting, shalom. It expresses a wish for complete health and well being for the other, the one being greeted. That is what Jesus brings to them, appearing in their midst. Giving them inner well being, a relief from their fear and anxiety about the future. Before we are given any description of their reactions to this encounter with the risen Jesus, we are told that after he greeted them with that wish for shalom, he showed them his hands and his side. It is at this point that we are told that the disciples rejoiced. Their understanding of the world changes, their grasping of the things they were told when still in Galilee is now very different. The old reality that Jesus' life had ended on that cross was supplanted by a new reality: Jesus was still there among them. The marks of the suffering were still present, but he was there with them and they knew him. The tomb was indeed empty in a way that they had not been able to conceive before seeing their risen Lord. Throughout John's gospel there is a strong connection between sight and belief, those seeing are those who believe; those who are blind physically are not be blind in the ways that matter most. Those who are blind spiritually are those do not believe. When Jesus appears to the gathered disciples, they join Mary Magdalene in the new reality. They have seen the Lord. They believe and rejoice. In addition to giving them shalom, Jesus tells the disciples that he is sending them as the Father has sent him. He breathes on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is not as dramatic as the accounting of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples found in the book of Acts, but this is how John's gospel describes it. Jesus breathes on them.

Then he sends them out to spread the good news so others may believe. What is striking is that it is at this point that we discover that one of the eleven remaining disciples is absent on this momentous occasion when Jesus appears to them. Thomas, who was called the Twin was not there. The text does not say why he was not with them, but he is still in Jerusalem with their group. When Thomas returns to where the other disciples gathered they shared their news: "We have seen the Lord." (Sounds very much like what Mary came and told them, doesn't it?) But Thomas' reply resembles their reply before Jesus stood among them. He discounts the report, saying "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." From this verse many have given Thomas an appellation: not Thomas, the Twin; but doubting Thomas. Yet was his reaction very different from the disciples' when Mary Magdalene first brought the news? The report seems to fantastic to be real. Reality is what we see as normal. Normal is what is seen and touched. It is what we experience. It is what we find awaiting us each day as we go about living our daily lives. Confrontations with normalcy—encounters with things that alter our experiences, things that change our understanding of reality are often hard to deal with because they destroy both the hopes and the illusions on which we often rely. That is what has happened to those gathered disciples after the crucifixion. It is that confrontation with the reality of the world which has had them gathering in fear—the reality of the lost hope that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah who had come to deliver them because the death by crucifixion was real. Jesus had died on the cross, and hearing Mary's news did not change that reality for them. But then Jesus appeared among them and their reality was changed forever. But for Thomas, who was not among them that day, reality had not changed. I would suggest as we read this passage we should consider the possibility that Thomas has gotten a bad rap with our designation of doubting. I would suggest that this passage is about reality, not doubt. It's about how we construct our view of the world. We often don't recall it, but our first introduction to Thomas occurs before Jesus goes to Jerusalem that last time. In John 11, when Jesus talks of returning to Judea, it is Thomas who recognizes that doing so will result in Jesus' death. He is not naive, but a realist who counts the cost and then urges all the others to follow Jesus to Jerusalem to die with him. In the 14th chapter where as part of his farewell discourse Jesus tells the disciples he is going away to prepare a place for them...and adds "You know the way to the place where I am going." It is Thomas who pragmatically and truthfully replies, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Thomas throughout the gospel is portrayed as a realist, a man with a pragmatic view of the world. He had witnessed the crucifixion, he had fled and survived but the hopes and expectations which had formed during the three years of his discipleship were as dead as his beloved Lord and Master. That was his reality. Being the pragmatic person he was, he may have been absent from the others that evening because he was trying to put his shattered life back together. So when his friends give him this joyous news, saying "we have seen the Lord", he reacts skeptically. He doesn't say he doubts the

disciples, he states he will not believe that what they are saying can be real. The demand to see and feel the marks of the nails is not really a request for proof but a mocking of what they are telling him. He knows that the demand cannot be met. It is impossible. The dead do not return to visit their friends. After this declaration, a week passes and all the disciples are again gathered together in a locked room when Jesus again appears in their midst, again saying "Peace be with you." After the greeting Jesus specifically addresses Thomas telling him to look at his hands and touch the marks in them and his side. Do not doubt but believe, says Jesus. Thomas does not respond by taking Jesus up on the offer to see and touch, instead he says, "My Lord and my God!" What has happened is not really the presentation of proof. Thomas does not need to touch anything because when he is confronted by the risen Christ, Thomas is confronted with a whole new reality. In that moment, Thomas recognizes and knows that he is in the presence of God, that he has been saved and redeemed by God, and that he will never be the same again. This story is not really about Thomas' doubt at all; but is it about an encounter with the grace of God which has come down from heaven and been embodied, enfleshed in Jesus Christ. Although Thomas' words to his friends expressed his unbelief, when Jesus comes and invites Thomas to believe by touching him using those same words Thomas had spoken, it changes his perception of reality— a new reality is formed for him by showing him that his vision of what God could do—what is possible with God—has been too small—too limited. The new reality is transformative, but it does not replace the reality of the world. Thomas is still in Palestine. The disciples would still face opposition as they followed the bidding of Christ and the Holy Spirit to spread the good news. But there is something different, something new present in their lives. There is a sense, a conviction that God's grace, God's new kingdom has intruded into this world and nothing will ever be the same again. This is what Easter means—that because the risen Lord is still present in our midst through the work of the Holy Spirit we are forever transformed. That is why this Sunday is not called the second Sunday of Easter as we refer to those Sundays in Advent, or the second Sunday after Easter as we refer to those which come after Pentecost, but it is the second Sunday of Easter. In this way we remind ourselves that Easter isn't just a day, it's every day. Easter isn't just a celebration, it's a way of life. Easter is knowing that because we have been joined by baptism to the risen one, Jesus the Christ, we participate in his new reality and are, indeed, new creatures as Paul calls us. Therefore, it is we, and not the oppressive realities of this life who are, as Paul writes, in everything "more than conquerors through the One who loved us." For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And nothing will ever be the same again. Thanks be to God. Amen.