

John 20: 19-31 Faithful Doubting

The lectionary operates on the basis of three cycles— primarily visiting each of the three synoptic gospels for a year. In other words most, but not all of the texts chosen for a particular year cycle will be from one gospel account. Each year begins with Advent. This is year A, the year of Matthew’s gospel so during ordinal times that will be the source of the gospel text. This creates some issues as you move through the church calendar year and the special events which are remembered every year. At Christmas, only two of the synoptic narratives introduce Christ as an infant and those accounts narrate different events. All of the gospels, including that of John describe the ending of Jesus’ mission on earth with an account of the Passion and the Resurrection—again they are somewhat different but agree on the essentials: betrayal, suffering, death and resurrection. This organization leads to the description of some particular events within the narrative appearing every third year. As I mentioned earlier, the texts chosen for Advent and Christmas don’t exactly follow that cycle. The text I read this morning from John’s gospel is another exception to the general rule. There are certain passages from John which are scattered throughout the each of the lectionary years. Many of the events narrated in John are unique, they don’t appear in the other gospels—like the wedding at Cana, the meeting of Jesus and Nicodemus or the raising of Lazarus, so these are introduced within the year even though the main story of Jesus’ ministry is being carried by one of the synoptic gospels. The appearance of Jesus in a locked room is told in both Luke and John, but only in John do we have the narrative of the exchange with the disciple Thomas—and unlike many of the unique narratives of John, this particular texts appears every single year at this time. In fact, one commentary put it this way: “It’s the Sunday after Easter, it’s time for Thomas. Unless you choose to talk about Peter’s speech given on the day of Pentecost which is still about six weeks away—or about the Psalm or about the Epistle directed toward an already founded church—then you are going to be talking about this two-fold post resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples. And translations and history have not been kind this particular disciple—in the way that he is remembered--tagging him with a nickname which has become embedded into popular speech and widely used: Doubting Thomas. This phrase is widely used to describe skepticism; a demand for proof instead of faith. In doing this, I think we have done Thomas and ourselves a disservice. In fact, if we recall last week’s reading, the assumption upon finding the tomb empty was that somehow the body of Jesus had been taken away—hidden in some manner from those who followed him. Mary runs with this lament to the disciples, two of them go to the tomb and also discover it empty. We are told that one saw and believed—but we are not told what he believed. Both of them were said not to understand. They both returned to their homes. Between that text and today’s John tells us that Mary has come back to the tomb, weeping. After the two disciples leave she again looks into the tomb but his time she see two angels. When they ask why she is weeping, she again bemoans that Jesus’ body is missing from the tomb. Even seeing the angels, she has not understood the significance of the empty tomb. Then she turns and sees someone else who she assumes is the gardener. When he speaks to her, she does not recognize him as Jesus until he calls her name. Jesus tells her to go and tell the disciples. She goes and announces to them, “I have seen the Lord.” Mary is thus the first to actually proclaim that Jesus has risen. Our text this morning begins later that evening. The disciples, even with their knowledge of the empty tomb and Mary’s witness have gathered

together in a room with the doors locked because they are afraid of persecution by those who have crucified their teacher and leader. This is not the action of believers. Into this locked room Jesus appears. The room doesn't immediately break forth with shouts and songs of joy. No, Jesus greets them and then shows them his hands and his side. NOW they rejoiced. According to John's narrative, Jesus gives them a mission at this point saying: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them "Receive the Holy Spirit." At this point in the narrative we discover that only 10 of the 11 remaining disciples are present for this second appearance of Jesus. (Remember he first appeared to Mary, who told the others.) Thomas was absent from the group but when he rejoins them they greet him with "We have seen the Lord." This is the same witness that Mary had given but which left them still gathered in fear. Thomas replies with these well known words: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." So really how different was Thomas' response to the hearing the testimony of others, than had been the other disciples response to Mary's account of having seen the Lord? A week later, Jesus appears in that same room with locked doors. This time all of the disciples including Thomas are there. Jesus invites Thomas to fulfill the requirements he had listed for belief—to touch and feel his hands and sides. Most translations follow with these words of Jesus: "Do not doubt but believe." And so the nickname doubting Thomas. But a more literal translation of these words from Young's Literal translation is this: "then he saith to Thomas, 'Bring thy finger hither, and see my hands, and bring thy hand, and put *it* to my side, and become not unbelieving, but believing.'" The contrast is between belief and non-belief. Thomas and all of the disciples had trouble believing in the resurrection. It changed their understanding of reality. Thomas and all the disciples received the opposite of doubt, they received proof of the resurrection by Jesus' post resurrection appearances. Jesus addresses this issue directly: "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Their answer would have to have been yes. But Thomas' response is an indication of more than just realizing that Jesus has been raised, it is a response which acknowledges fully who Jesus is—Thomas' response is "My Lord and my God". Thomas goes beyond what the other witness have stated: "I have seen the Lord." to the statement of faith "My Lord and my God." Jesus concludes his conversation with Thomas by saying, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Folks, that's us. We have not and will not be able to place our hands in the marks left by the crucifixion on the body of Christ. What we have been gifted with is faith. Faith is what knows that Jesus is risen, that Jesus is Lord and God, the Messiah sent by God to redeem the world. John states within this gospel text that the reason he has written of these things is so that those who come after Jesus' ascension "may come to believe." I am not sure that it was John's narrative, or the others who recorded Jesus' life and ministry which led to the spread of the good news. Instead, I believe that it was that sudden dawning of faith in the disciples which led them to leave their fears behind, to emerge from that room and witness to the world. Their belief that Jesus is the Messiah; their faith transformed them. Faith is not the opposite of doubt; it cannot supply proof for doubts. Faith is belief, a knowing beyond doubt which we have been granted, not by proof of appearance but by the presence of the Holy Spirit moving within us. Thanks be to God. Amen.