

Sermon on the Second Sunday in Easter, Series C: John 20:19-31

Preached April 15, 2007 @ Custer Lutheran Fellowship by Pastor David Van Kley

From Doubt to Belief

Some years ago, a man in a different community told me, “if I ever come to church, you’d have to build a doubter’s pew just for me.” I told him, “Ron, in our church, every pew’s a doubter’s pew.”

It **is** still Easter. Yet, somehow it seems harder to believe the resurrection this week than last. When the trumpets sounded at 6:30, with the chancel decked out in lilies, and the church full to overflowing, it was almost impossible **not** to believe that Christ had risen. With the kids home for the weekend, colored eggs adorning our tables—not to mention all that chocolate—it was easy to believe that the world was turning!

But the second Sunday of Easter is like a helium balloon a week after the party, no longer flush with the ceiling but hovering 18 inches above the carpet. The kids are back at college. The lilies look spent. The colored eggs in the refrigerator have become so stale that no one will eat them. The newspaper proclaims old news about suicide bombings and the effects of greenhouse warming. The personal burdens we were told to leave in the empty tomb seem to have ended up on our backs once again.

Throw into that mix the fact that we cut our teeth on the scientific method and so do not believe in anything that can’t be proven and, well, it’s not easy to believe the Easter gospel.

I’m glad St. John saw fit to tell us the story of “doubting Thomas,” because many of us can identify with his words: “I know what you think you saw, but unless **I** actually see him and touch him, **in person**, I will not believe.”

What happens next to Thomas? Precisely **when** he is lost in doubt, the risen Christ comes to him. Though the doors are locked—not only the doors to the house, but also the doors to Thomas’ **heart**—Jesus comes. Jesus does not condemn him for doubting, but transforms his doubt to faith by appearing. Thomas could not believe on his own. So **Jesus** came to **him**.

I believe that the risen Christ also comes to us on this second Sunday of Easter, not to condemn our doubt, but to inspire faith within us.

How does he do this? He showed Thomas the place where nails penetrated his hands and a spear pierced his side. Does that strike you as strange? Wouldn’t you expect those wounds to be gone! But no, they remain. And these wounds were the key to overcoming Thomas’ doubt.

You see, Thomas followed Jesus because he thought he was a **winner**. He expected to crown Jesus King of Israel. As the miracles mounted and crowds grew, his

expectations soared. But when Jesus was arrested, whipped, ridiculed, wounded, and executed, the air went out of Thomas' balloon. When he heard about the empty tomb, he couldn't believe. It wasn't so much that couldn't believe in a resurrection—he'd seen Lazarus raised! What he couldn't believe was that God would glorify a loser.

When he saw the wounds, he began to understand that winning meant something other than what he'd been taught. That in God's dictionary, losing and winning, death and life, go together. "My Lord and my God!" he confessed.

On my 53 year old body, there are five scars. The place where a surgeon in Iron River, Michigan, removed my gall bladder the old fashioned way. The gash below my kneecap, from the time I was shoved from behind during a seventh grade soccer game and fell on a concrete block. A small scar right underneath my glasses where my favorite cousin Karen kicked me when I was 9. A huge scar covering most of my trunk, from reparative surgery after I fell out of the pine tree behind the church. A scar on my forehead, which glows brightly when I exert myself, a reminder of skin cancer a few years back. Each wound has a story to tell.

Each of you also has wounds or scars. Not all of them are physical. In fact, your deepest wounds may be emotional and spiritual. Some of these may date back to early childhood. The result of abuse and loneliness. Poverty or injustice. Ridicule and failure. They tell the story of an illness, a divorce, the death of one you loved, a poor choice you made. You try to cover them up, but they have a way of showing. And the truth is, our doubts about the resurrection of Christ have more to do with these wounds than with anything else.

Precisely in our wounded-ness, the risen Jesus comes to us. He comes to us through today's word of Scripture as One who is wounded like us. That's why the cross still hangs there—we didn't get rid of it on Easter. Christ's wounds **remain**. That's why, in Holy Communion, we eat the bread which is the body of Christ broken; we drink from the cup, the blood of Christ poured out. Our meal together reminds us of the wounds of the risen Christ. More than that, our meal is the very **touching** of those wounds. "Put your finger here and see my hands," Jesus says. "Reach out your hand and put it in my side." It was not for Thomas alone that Jesus said those words.

The risen Lord also comes to us in others who are wounded, "the least of these." At the same time, when we bandage the wounds of others, the risen Christ is at work in **us!** Today, we recognize an awesome new thing called Peer Ministry. Young people in our congregation and community have taken the time to learn how to listen to those who are hurting and to offer their care and love. In this undertaking they show the rest of us the way. They help us see that Christ is risen. That Christ is indeed alive! For they are "wounded healers," like him.

About fifteen years ago, I went through a time when my doubts were very intense.

I went to talk to a friend of mine, who has functioned much like a father to me. I told him: “I’m in a terrible funk. I’m not sure I believe the gospel anymore. What if Jesus was never raised? What if none of this I preach is true. I pray and pray for faith, but it escapes me; sometimes I just can’t believe. I think I should quit my job. I’m not fit for this calling.”

My friend listened and listened well. He reminded me that the great Christians of the past, from Thomas to Augustine to Luther, all endured periods of intense doubt. Why should I expect to be different? Then he said something that has stuck with me. “Sometimes, the gospel **is** unbelievable. At those times, focus on the parts of the faith you **can** believe. Do you know someone who is broken, wounded, and yet alive in Christ?” I said I did. “Can you believe in **that**?” I said I could.

There are so many people I’ve known who fit that description. I tell you today about my wife’s sister, Anita, who was brutally raped at gunpoint while she was in college. The wounds in heart remained long after her bodily wounds had healed. In truth, Anita will always bear the marks of that hideous night. Yet, Christ raised her from the death of that night. Of the nine sisters, she is one of the most committed to Christ and the church. And she is perhaps the most passionately involved in the struggle for racial and gender equality and economic justice in our world. In her, Christ is pleased to dwell. She is one who gives me faith and hope on this second Sunday of Easter, when the lilies have wilted and the air has gone of out the balloon. And there are many others.

Today, Christ stands among us. The doors may be closed—we even may think we’ve locked our hearts tight—but he knows how to pick our locks. “Peace be with you,” he says. “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” May we say, with **believing** Thomas: “My Lord and my God!” Amen.