

Seeing

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Acts 5:27-41, John 20:19-31

Christ is risen. ***He is risen indeed!***

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Perhaps you can relate. This week, the “Hallelujah Chorus” has been stuck in my head all week—a kind of holy earworm—and the final chord of Widor’s “Toccatà” is still ringing up and down my bones.

Last Sunday, in the space of 90 minutes, we journeyed from a gray-skied, pre-dawn encounter at the empty tomb to the full light of noonday certainty that Christ is risen—risen, indeed. Not so long ago, Third Church billed its Easter service as “Festival Worship” and last week’s joy-filled gathering leaned in to that description. The worship space of Holy Week and Easter led us on a pilgrim’s journey, through deepest dark into the dawn.

So it might come as no surprise that after a week overflowing with prayer and worship, this Sunday feels—well—ordinary. After all, we’ve mourned, we’ve celebrated, we’ve even taken home the chancel flowers (the bright yellow gerbera daisy is still in bloom on my desk). We’ve maybe even finished the last of the Easter ham and packed away the Easter baskets as we’ve come to the end of School Break, and are prepared to slip back into our normal lives.

But Easter is not over.

The rhythm of our worship will take us through seven weeks of Easter, of which this is the second. Gail O’Day reminds us that we have “Fifty days” in which to live “into the reality of the resurrection, of what it means to be a community shaped by the dying and rising of Christ...”¹

This year, as we do each year on the Second Sunday of Easter, we return to the same text from John’s gospel. We return to the day of resurrection.

Thinking back on Easter, we might remember how before dawn, Mary Magdalene and Peter and the beloved disciple stood beside the empty tomb. We might remember how the disciples “did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” and so returned to their homes. We might remember how Mary stays in the garden and is met by the risen Christ; how, running to find the disciples, she becomes the first to proclaim, “I have seen the Lord.”

As we take the story up this week, night has fallen—and the disciples, in response to Mary’s news—have gathered together. John helps us gauge the mood. We can glimpse the disciples’ fear and their lingering uncertainty as they hide behind locked doors.

I've always imagined the quiet debates raging in that locked room; every reaction under the sun from heartfelt acceptance to incredulous skepticism tinged with a whiff of despair. What must it have been like for them to hear testimony that this death in their pilgrimage in faith and hope and love was not the end they had imagined it to be?

What must they have wondered, when this woman brought the news: The one who was "born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried..." He was alive!

Could it be true?

Then right in the middle of their hush-voiced debate, Jesus stood. And his first words are words of Peace. Can you imagine the silence that falls over the room? For when Jesus speaks "Peace" gale force winds and storm tossed waves are stilled.

Jesus commissions the disciples to go into the world, breathes the Holy Spirit upon them. So they join Mary Magdalene in proclaiming, "We have seen the Lord."

Then, there is Thomas; "doubting" Thomas.

I have a friend who is a chaplain and who substitute preaches in Dallas. She is always booked the week after Easter. Earlier this week, she posted on Facebook the poignancy of worshipping from the pews and not the pulpit on Easter Sunday. Her silver lining—she'd done a lot of dynamite work on Thomas.

By all accounts, Thomas missed Easter. And in that all-too-human way, Thomas wants what the other disciples have already experienced—the reality of standing before the risen Christ, of being close enough to see and touch and KNOW beyond doubt that the words of his friends are true.

I can relate, can't you?

After all, we live in a culture that most often conflates truth with fact. We believe only what we can describe through sight, sound, touch, and taste, we believe only what we can theorize and measure and results we can replicate. In these days after Easter, perhaps we all can relate to the disciples' uncertainty about what it means that Jesus is raised from the dead—after all we cannot see it, touch it, or measure it. Can it possibly be real?

So I resonate with Thomas, because I am Thomas—and perhaps you are too. I want to see, because "seeing" is believing.

And it's not just us. The whole of John's gospel is written for a community that wants to see and to know and to experience the risen Christ. It is written for a generation beyond first person, eye witness accounts, a generation who still long to see.

Our text moves forward and we rejoin the disciples—on the Second Sunday of Easter in fact. And this time, Thomas is part of the crowd. Once again, Jesus comes and stands in their midst. The spotlight on our drama narrows—there is Jesus, there is Thomas—eye to eye Jesus commands, "Bring your finger

here, and see my hands..." Like a blind man, Thomas is invited to see with both hands. Jesus charges him—and all the generations of Thomas's to come—"do not be incredulous, but believing."

On this Second Sunday of Easter, we too stand before the one who calls us to leave our incredulity behind, to see with our hearts (and not our hands) the power and promise of resurrection and its call to new life.

When I was a girl, I thought that believing meant a life that was shiny, without troubles or imperfections. But as an adult standing with Thomas, I realize that resurrection leaves scars. Death is real, pain is real, brokenness is real—but resurrection, resurrection is also real and we are invited to experience it.

Today, I see resurrection: in the recovering alcoholic's daily decision not to drink; in a RAIHN family's long climb out of homelessness; in the rising voices of the oppressed calling the powerful to account; in the peace that stills the fearful heart disarming violence and hate; in vigilant love extended on behalf of neighbor, stranger, enemy, and friend. I can see God in the midst of it all.

I wonder, where have you witnessed resurrection?

In a few moments, we will sing Tom Troeger's beautiful hymn "These Things Did Thomas Count as Real." In notes to the hymn, Troeger explains, "I wrote [this] hymn to help people sing their way past doubt and skepticism to belief in the risen Christ."

Yet, belief is only the beginning.

I've always thought that Thomas got a bad rap—I've never heard the others tagged "the doubting disciples." But, despite their experience of the risen Christ, who empowered them with the Holy Spirit and gave them work to do, they remain behind closed doors that are still locked.

Gail O'Day proclaims it good news that "Jesus comes again and again to these scared and confused disciples."² And the good news for us is that Jesus continues to come to us, again and again, even as we retreat from our commission to go out into the world. It is good news because Jesus' presence allows us, again and again, to take our "worries, concerns, and doubts and hand them over to the power of resurrection."³

We know that the doubtful disciples became People of Easter. Today's reading from Acts 5 bears witness to just how far the power of resurrection had brought them. That we still gather—two millennia later—gives us a glimpse that resurrection is powerful indeed.

So in these 50 days, as we rehearse the journey of that first Easter, we receive renewed invitation to be and become Easter People too—to see and embrace and support the power of resurrection in the world that God loves and cares for so much.

Let me share that ancient invitation today, reimagined in the lyric poetry of Iona's Peter Millar.

*With the beckoning and dawning of another day,
can the fragile, yet extraordinary
words of Jesus
propel us to a wider awareness,
a gentler compassion?
To the rediscovery of the sacred in ourselves,
and in our world?
To that risk-taking place
where the imprisoning bonds
of our self-enclosed lives are finally shattered?
To a different journey
in a listening companionship
with the prophets of our time—
the wounded and weary
who announce the Kingdom
and carry in their stories the seeds of the morrow?*

Let us pray...

God of the empty tomb and our empty hearts, when we are afraid to speak our faith in the world, help us to find our voice. When we are afraid to stand up to misguided authority, join with the weak to make us all strong. When we are confined by our hurts, touch us with your wounded hands and set us free. When we are locked behind our doubts and fears, pass through our barricades, open our hearts, and give us peace. Amen.⁴

¹ Gail O'Day. "Homiletical Perspective on John 20:19-31" FOTW. YR B, Vol 2. Louisville: WJK, 2008. 401.

² O'Day. 403.

³ O'Day. 404-405.

⁴ Adapted from the "Prayer of Confession" found in the *Feasting on the Word Worship Companion*. YR C, Vol 1. Louisville: WJK, 2012. 148-149.