

The 2nd Sunday of Easter is one of my favorite Sundays in the whole year. The scripture is the same - it's always the story of Thomas. This Sunday has a few nick names. Sometimes people call this "low" Sunday - because after the high of Easter - the music, lilies, people, today is usually a little lower - fewer flowers, fewer people. A lot of times big churches with a large staff call today "Associate Pastor Sunday." That's b/c the associate pastor always preaches the 2nd Sunday of Easter. I was an associate pastor for 10 years, and I have a perfect preaching record on this Sunday. Maybe this is why I love this story of Thomas so much - I've studied it every year, and honestly, it never feels as if I've learned all there is to know, or experienced all there is to experience. Here is what I mean. For centuries people have called this the story of "Doubting Thomas." Recently I discovered that Thomas isn't doubting at all. Once again, this is based on a poor translation. So over the last two years, I've been thinking about Thomas differently. This may be one of the reasons I love the Bible. It really is a living word. New discoveries can change our understanding. There are more and new paths to the heart of God.

To spend some time with Thomas this morning, let's the story back in context. John 20 begins with the resurrection of Jesus - Mary is at the tomb, crying. Everything has gone wrong. Nothing is the way it's supposed to be. It's in this unscripted spiritual moment that Mary discovers that God named Jesus is alive, that life is stronger than death, that love is stronger than hate, that God is present with us, in us, for us. It's in this moment that Mary learns that God's power of Agape love and abundance has defeated the power of domination, scarcity, and fear. Today this is where we pick up the reaching, at v. 19.

That evening - so Easter evening, the doors are locked because the disciples are afraid. Afraid of the religious leaders. The actual word is the Jews. However, I have changed this to religious leaders for two reasons. First, John is referring to the religious leaders who colluded with the Romans to have Jesus killed. John isn't referring to all the Jewish people. I'm changing it to religious leaders so that we understand who specifically John means. The second reason to change this is because for centuries Christians blamed Jewish people for Jesus' death. One of the reasons Christians blamed our Jewish brothers and sisters is because of the Bible translation - literally accurate - fear of the Jews - but the meaning is not accurate - fear of the religious authorities is the real meaning. I'm going into detail to make the point that the Bible is an ancient text written in ancient languages. We need both the accurate translation of the words and the context of the time to reach a closer understanding and to take the next step to see our the scripture addresses our lives today.

God named Jesus has returned to life. Agape love and abundance have won. And yet, that evening of the resurrection, Jesus' people are sliding back to the old way ... locking doors from fear of the authorities. Resurrection isn't only a moment. Resurrection - New Life - Real life - Jesus' people choose to live this.

When our minds and hearts are locked, the Living God shows up anyway. What fear(s) keeps you from noticing God's presence? What fear(s) keep you from taking the steps to live from from the truth that Love wins?

Risen Christ appears to the disciples. Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit -- But Thomas isn't there. The writer doesn't tell us where Thomas is, or why he missed this. But doesn't this happens to us all the time - we miss these moments - we're there but not there, present but absent. This is the whole practice of prayerful meditation and mindfulness - to become grounded in our body in our spirit. To breathe in God's Holy Spirit, to breathe out fear. When the disciples told Thomas what happened, Thomas said, "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."

Unless ... I will not. This is what Thomas says. Once again, Thomas is living from the powers of domination, fear, and scarcity. When people live from fear, everything is a transaction. If I give you this, then you will be loyal to me. If you don't do what I say, then you won't have enough. Thomas says, "Unless I see..." transaction... "I will not..." Thomas is on the side of "seeing is believing."

Believe. Remember what this word means. Believe comes from the old English word *belove*. To be love means to hold something in our heart. In the Bible, believe doesn't mean to say yes to a bunch of statements about God. Instead, to believe is to love God, to hold God dear. To believe in God means that I have given my heart to God, the God we come to know through the life, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The God we come to know through the church - the living body of Jesus on earth.

Thomas understands this. Thomas gave his life to God named Jesus. Jesus called him and he left everything and followed. He gave Jesus his heart. When Jesus decided to go visit Lazarus even though it was dangerous, Thomas got up to go with Jesus - saying, "Ok, I'll go and die with you." Thomas knew what it meant to give his heart away - to say, "I will love you until death parts us."

But that was the problem. Death parted Thomas and Jesus. And it broke Thomas' heart. So when the disciples told Thomas, "Jesus is alive!" Thomas's heart was too broken. Too tired. Too weary. Too sad. So Thomas said, "I'm going to have to see the Risen Christ if I'm going to give my heart away again."

What happens next is well documented in Christian tradition. A week later, the Living Christ showed up. Which is partly why we always have the story of Thomas the 2nd Sunday of Easter. It was, in fact, the today. Thomas is in the room with the other disciples. The Risen Christ appears, gives out more peace, invites Thomas to touch his wounds, and then in v 27, comes "the most famous line that Jesus never said - do not doubt but believe."

And now we arrive at our third and final word study. At this moment, to Thomas, Jesus didn't say do not doubt. Jesus says this at other times in the gospel. When Peter got out of the boat to walk on water and started to sink, Jesus says to Peter, "You of little faith, why do you - doubt." Another place we see this is at the end of Matthew's gospel - it's a resurrection appearance that says, "Some worshipped him but others doubted. (MT 28:17) This kind of doubt means to waiver between different thoughts. Is this Jesus or not Jesus? Is this God or not God? As a side note, it's comforting to me to know that at times the disciples wavered - doubted. But that isn't what's going on here between the Risen Christ and Thomas.

In today's story, a more accurate translation of Jesus actually says "Don't not-believe, but instead, believe."

Thomas isn't wavering between doubt and faith. Instead, Thomas is wavering between belief and not belief. That is the moment the Living God named Jesus shows up and says to Thomas, "Here I am. Do not not believe - in other words - do not stop loving me - do not stop holding me in your heart. Instead, give your heart to me." And that is exactly what Thomas does - he says, "My Lord and My God."

In so many ways, this is our defining story. each of us, in our own way and in our own time, we give our hearts to God - and then things happen. Sometimes it's tragedy that causes us to take our heart back - how can a God of love let this happen? Questions of evil and pain are real, and we have to wrestle with this as we decide where to give our hearts. But sometimes, once we've given our hearts to God, nothing happens. Life just takes it's course, and one day we realize that we've been on auto pilot, status quo, letting life happen, and we're not sure what we've given our heart to. Our work? Our homes? Our life style? Our health?

On this second Sunday of Easter, Jesus comes to all of us - in ways that can be dramatic - and in ways that usually are more subtle - but the invitation is always the same. The Risen Christ is here, present, with us and within us. God named Jesus invites us to give God our hearts - to love God with all that we have - know that not even death will separate us from God's unconditional and abundant agape love, forgiveness, and peace. It is for us to receive God's love and say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God."

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen indeed! Alleluia.