

Easter is over. The rain that washed away our beautiful Easter Mosaic on the front sidewalk of our church is a fitting metaphor for us today. Our loud celebratory cheers of truth last Sunday that “the tomb is empty! Death is undone! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” seems to have faded into the backdrop of our lives in crisis. Like I said last Sunday, the news has not changed, only the world around us has.

Today, I find it ironic that we call the first Sunday after Easter, Low Sunday. It seems a fitting title for how we feel post-Easter. Is it low because it is as simple as the feeling of coming down from the mountaintop experience of Easter? Or maybe it’s the slump we feel as we continue to see our church doors closed and know there is dust starting to collect on the pews we once occupied? Or maybe more to the point, perhaps it’s the low morale we continue to struggle with as the number of Covid-19 cases around the world has yet to dissipate?

Do you remember what life was like before the coronapocalypse? How good we had it?

Why is it that life consists of these quick mountaintop experiences, these fleeting highs, only to be followed by these long, lingering valleys, these lows? Easter is a high Sunday. This is a Low Sunday.

All of us last Sunday missed Easter. To be perfectly honest, I myself really wasn’t at Easter. I missed it too – but only by about two thousand years or so. It’s true that we have never lived at any time other than the time after Easter. We’ve never known anything first hand other than Low Sunday. Please, understand that there is a real distance between us and Easter, and that there has always been distance.

When we think back to when we were in church, the world was shut out by the four walls of stained glass, we acted as if there was no distance between us and Easter. It made sense to us, as if nothing was anymore normal, understood, and believable than a man, crucified, dead, and

buried on Friday, suddenly charging forth resurrected from the dead on Sunday. But outside our church doors, out in the world where we've had to remain in quarantine for so long, we've begun to feel and comprehend the vast gap between our time and Easter.

To be sure, oh how we wish we could've been there on Easter morning with the disciples! We who are still here today, who are waking up to sing our Easter hymn, “Easter People, Raise Your Voices,” and who are reading this sermon, who are watching our online services, we who are engaged in church somehow this morning, it makes clear and perfect sense. But out there...

You say something to the effect that you're a Christian and someone says, “Really? Can you be serious? Well, I'm quite willing to grant that Jesus was a wonderful human-being, a great teacher. He said some great things. But a dead body, risen from the dead? Get real! You can't be serious?”

Jesus as a wonderful person, a great teacher, a poetic philosopher? The Christian faith claims considerably more for Jesus. Our whole faith is based upon his resurrection, not his great passionate teaching or his pleasing personality. The Resurrection! It's not enough to make you wish that you had been there on Easter.

Founding Father, and third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, stands at the door of Duke Chapel, where Kendall and I were married. During the early 1800's Jefferson took a pair of scissors and carefully and very methodically clipped all miraculous stories from the Bible, including Jesus' resurrection. To him, Easter talk was a pointless obstacle for enlightened people like him. How can a modern person trained solely on observation and experiment rely on anything else to get all the way back to Easter?

Now, if he could've been there at Easter, he wouldn't have had this problem. One can just see Jefferson there at the tomb, acting like Sherlock Holmes, notebook in hand, skeptical attitude, self-confident, scientific and methodical...

“Step over here, please Jesus. Let me examine your right hand. Thank you. Now the other. Good. Yes, I really think something quite unusual happened here, although it's too early to say just what...” but what good would that do us? We would still be stuck with not having been there ourselves.

Say it together with me now, “We wish that we had been there on Easter!”

As we read last Sunday from John, Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb first. But she did not believe until the Risen Christ appeared and spoke to her directly, calling out her name. She told the disciples, Peter and the beloved disciple, what she had seen, but they believed only when Jesus came and stood among them, showed them his hands and feet. And they were glad. And we wish that we had been there too on that Easter evening, seen his hands and side, felt his breath upon our face. That would've made us glad. If we couldn't have been there on Easter morning with Mary Magdalene, we wish we could've been there on Easter evening with the disciples.

But we were not. And in that respect we are unlike Mary or the eleven disciples. In our absence we are like Thomas. Thomas didn't make it out to the tomb in the morning with Mary. Thomas wasn't there in the room behind locked doors with the disciples. When they told him about seeing Jesus face to face, Thomas said, “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and jab my finger in his side (the Greek translations says “place my hand in his side”) then I will not believe.” As it has been said before, “seeing is believing”. Since I missed Easter, since I did not

see Jesus face to face, how can I believe? asked Thomas. And all of us who missed Easter, should take note here.

There are some of you who have, like the other disciples and Mary, been there. You have seen the Lord. You have absorbed through osmosis the Christian faith while sitting on your grandmother’s lap or watching your parents on Sundays. When you hear “faith” or “belief,” doctrines or theories of Christianity don’t come across your minds. No, you think fondly of Mrs. Jannette Mann, or sweet Ms. Mary Ella. You think of the ones who taught you in Sunday School in the fourth and fifth grades, who told you all those Bible stories in a way so real that you came to believe in them and knew. Or you think of all the previous pastors who grew the youth program and took them on skiing trips in the winter and camping trips in the summer. Praying and breaking bread together, you knew for sure that you were a Christian. You were there, seeing Jesus, early.

But Thomas was not there. Belief was not something which came to him naturally, early. And he wasn’t good at understanding coincidences or phenomenon. He had no interest in speculation or accepting the weird. He needed touch. He needed proof.

And what you expect Jesus to say to Thomas, having heard Jesus on the subject of doubt before, is something like, “You people, unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe” (John 4:48). That’s what Jesus said to the man who wanted to see a sign out of him. Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus seems critical of those whose eyes itch for signs and wonders. Voices coming out of people who make the front page of the *Enquirer*. Or those people you’re skeptical of on some local news. “Have you believed because you have seen me?” Jesus asks. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

You expect Jesus to really throw the hammer down on Thomas and say, “Tough luck, Thomas, you should’ve been there on Easter.” But what Jesus says is, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.” You need proof? You think that seeing is believing? Touch. See. Believe. Jesus gives us what we need.

Interestingly, we aren’t told that Thomas took Jesus up on his offer of validation. Thomas answered, “my Lord and my God!” when he said, “My Lord and my God!” Thomas thereby made one of the strongest declarations of faith known to be uttered in the New Testament. My Lord. My God.

Now Jesus did say, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” And I suppose when he said that, he was busy blessing many of you because most of you were not here on Easter, the first Easter, morning or evening. You have not seen the empty tomb or the risen Christ for yourself. But you have believed. Even now. Today on Low Sunday. Blessings on you, says Jesus.

But the good thing is that Jesus blesses Thomas, too. Jesus is not in the business of putting people off by calls to heroic acts of gullibility. He is in the business of calling disciples, evoking faith, blessing into belief. He walked through the locked doors to pronounce peace on fearful disciples. He pulled up his shirt, offering his wounds as visible proof to no-nonsense Thomas. Jesus gives Thomas what he needs. Like many of us today, I too envy Thomas in that regard. But that’s the way Jesus handles doubt, says John. He gives us what we need. John ends his gospel saying, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you (meaning us) may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

These things are written, this story of Jesus and Thomas, this Gospel of John, all this is written so that you might believe. Of course, that puts a big burden on folks like me who preach this gospel to folks like you, especially during this pandemic, because John says that these words are your Easter proof. But it also releases me from a great deal of burden because your belief doesn't begin and end with my words, but with Jesus' presence in your life.

I've always wondered about the great many post-Easter signs John says Jesus did, even more spectacular than walking through a closed door and showing his wounds to Thomas. I wonder why John doesn't go on to explain them. Perhaps, it's because, in the end, the main path to belief is not by spectacular signs but by the word, “these things which are written.”

And that's the way most of us have come to believe. We didn't see, we didn't touch, we heard. We heard a story which invited us to say “yes.” We heard someone early at dawn one morning call our name. There was a someone, a sermon, a passage, a verse. We heard.

But if you need something else, something beyond words, something beyond auditory, then that's fine too, because John says, Jesus will give you what you need.

I had this friend since high school. We went to the same church for a while. Smart. Funny. Laid-back. Sometimes he thought he was too smart for church. Over the years we would have these discussions about religion. Come to find out, he was never all that religious. Actually, he was never that much of a believer to begin with. Looking back, he was probably the first genuine atheist I met, before I even knew what the word meant. I remember his cynicism and atheistic fueled opinions vividly. He always seemed to keep running away from a relationship with Christ because of his past. He told me he felt that if God existed, how could God have allowed all of these horrible heavy situations to have happened to him?

So you can imagine my surprise when I received a phone call from him while I was in seminary. After catching up, it wasn't but fifteen minutes in that he casually told me that God had found him and that he had started going to church again.

“Did you say you are going to church, and that God found you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. He told me he had also joined a bible study class and a small group through a new United Methodist church in the upstate Clemson area. I was shocked.

“I know we go through a lot of changes in college, but you a believer? And a Methodist in a bible study and a small group? Who's the girl?” I asked.

After we laughed. He told me there was no girl, but that it was all true. Fortunately, he responded to my curiosity by telling me how it happened. He had proudly carried his disbelief through college, into his career. He had just started his second year as a biochemical engineer and was loving it. I wasn't surprised. One year, his job took him to Spain. And after some meeting he had, he followed some tourists into a church there. And with the sun setting and the orange glow streaming through the windows, he touched the gothic facade and ran his hand down each aisle of the church. And he believed.

And I asked, “and then what”?

“I believed,” he said. “Somehow, whatever pieces of the puzzle I was needing just sort of came together for me there in that moment. And I believed. It's as simple as that.”

My Lord and my God.

I don't know what you may need this morning. Maybe you don't know what you need. Maybe what we all need is for Jesus to come slipping through our locked doors this morning, in which we hide in fear and in quarantine and say, “Peace.”

Maybe what we need is for him to say, “You need physical, tangible, visible, material, empirical proof? Well, maybe it’s because you were a chemistry major. Well, here, taste this bread, drink this wine, my body, my blood.”

So don’t worry that we weren’t there on Easter together. As far as faith is concerned, we didn’t miss all that much. Faith in Christ is determined, not by when we get to him, but when he comes to us. And he will. That same one who danced forth from the tomb, his confused disciples stumbling after him, who then returned to them behind their locked doors, who pulled up his shirt to doubting Thomas’ empirical fingers, comes to us, giving us what we need.

Because these things are written, bread is broken, he is risen, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life. Amen.