

2 Easter – A – SJ – Blessed are those who have not seen

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I don't mean in any way to disparage all those folks who were here last week but not this morning, particularly those we seem to see *only* on occasions like Easter and Christmas. I actually have a good deal of sympathy for them. I wasn't always a regular churchgoer and, in any event, the festivity associated with the way we celebrate these two biggest feast days of our calendar may well, all by itself, satisfy our inevitable needs for reassurance that what the Bible tells us about incarnation and resurrection is true. But practice makes perfect, I've been taught. So coming to church as a regular practice, even on those days when staying in bed, or working on the crossword, or watching TV sports just seems like a lot more fun is good for the soul. Even today – traditionally known as Low Sunday....

I don't really know where or why that term arose. Perhaps it refers to the emotional letdown after the high of Easter; perhaps it refers to the inevitable drop in attendance. Whatever the reason it's called that, though, and whatever the reason attendance does drop, it's a shame, since today's gospel, read not once every three years but every year, is for us in the pews, and on the altar, too, an especially important one, one that says a whole lot about what it really means to be a Christian.

Let's look at it, then, to see what it is about it that makes it so important that it should reappear in our lectionary every year. The scene has the disciples in the house where they had had their last meal together with Jesus before his crucifixion, and they are locked in for fear that the same end may come to them as has come to the one who had brought them together in the first place. They are the same fearful followers that Jesus, as they walked towards the Kidron Valley after their last meal together, had called no longer his servants but his friends, as he told them to "love one another as I have loved you," adding that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" – as, of course, he was soon to do. They, however, showed a far more human lack of courage, with even their leader, Peter, denying three times that he had anything to do with Jesus after his rabbi's arrest. Indeed, at Jesus' crucifixion, of his followers, only his mother and aunt, Mary Magdalene, and the mysterious, unnamed "disciple whom he loved" stood at the foot of the cross.

However, that the disciples should lock themselves in the room is, if not admirable, certainly understandable. After all, Jesus' crucifixion was pretty clearly a political matter, rather than a criminal one in the classic sense of that word. The Romans were afraid of the unrest he could stir up; the Jewish authorities were afraid of the potential fallout on their people – in the famous (or infamous) words of Caiaphas, the high priest: You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." So, yes, perhaps they also had good reason to be afraid.

In any case, there they are – all but Thomas – who may be out for any number of reasons; I'm not going to speculate. Heck, he might only have been out shopping! It's Sunday evening, and suddenly, locked door or not, there is Jesus. "Shalom," he says. "Peace be with you." And then something happens that is frequently not noticed, or that is at least ignored by people talking about this gospel passage. Jesus shows the disciples his hands and side. Then, as he breathes the Holy Spirit on them, he commissions them to go out to forgive sins.

A week later, also on Sunday, Jesus appears once again (I think it is fair to say that it is no coincidence that Jesus appears on two Sundays in succession – just as, sacramentally, he is present *every* Sunday, as the Church celebrates the Eucharist). This time Thomas *is* present. He has already been told by the others that they had seen the Resurrected Lord, but he says, basically, "I've got to see it to believe it." "Unless," he actually says, "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."

And so, Thomas has over the centuries since been known as "Doubting Thomas." The implication is, of course, that there is something about what *he* has said that is shameful. But, remember what is often passed over: The other disciples also had to be shown the stigmata (that is, the marks of the crucifixion) before they could believe it really was the risen Lord. Jesus showed them, too, not just Thomas, hard evidence. The only difference is that Thomas first heard about the encounter from the other disciples but wasn't ready to accept the witness of his friends as sufficient.

But isn't that the way most of us deal with reality? We aren't – most of us at least – ready to believe something to be true merely on the word of someone else. After all, they may not be telling us the truth because of some motive that we don't know. Here, for example, perhaps to convince Thomas that *they* have received a privilege that poor Thomas, because he chose to leave the rest of them, didn't get. They may have misperceived what they are reporting. In that regard, those of us who have been in the field of criminal law are well aware of the limitations of eyewitness evidence. Whatever his reason, though, Thomas wants to see for himself, just as his friends say they have seen. And the risen Lord complies.

I think it is significant, however, that, although Thomas says he won't believe until he puts his hand into the wounds, the passage doesn't say that he actually does that. What it does say is that when Jesus offers to allow him to do that – so that he may not doubt but believe – Thomas' response is an immediate "My Lord and my God!" It's a somewhat subtle point, perhaps, but I think that what John is implying here is that there is something short of the kind of evidence one would call for in a court of law – these days the DNA test results, for example – that can satisfy our human need for proof that Jesus is Lord. And Thomas's assertion leads directly to the next, crucial sentence: "Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'"

That sentiment is crucial. Why? Because it clearly applies to us. We don't have the benefit of having Jesus stand before us – with or without those terrible marks of

nails and sword. So, when it comes to believing, we are left with, it would seem, only the words of the gospels. Indeed, John is explicit, isn't he, at the end of today's gospel? "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." That is, the words that John has written reveal the Word that in the beginning was with God – and that was God. Also, back there at the start of this gospel, when it says that there was a man whose name was John who was sent from God to testify to the light so that all might believe through him, the John being described is John the Baptist. It might just as well, though, apply to the author of John's gospel as well. He has certainly testified through it so that we might believe in Jesus, the Word that was with God, and that was God.

We are not, however, left with only the words of this gospel – or, indeed, the words of the other gospels either. We also have the "Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name." Through the intercession of that Advocate, we encounter the Lord for ourselves – just as Thomas did – every time we come to the table for communion because he is there. And that, more than anything else, is a reason for us to come to church every week – not just for those special feasts like Easter.

AMEN