

## SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 16, 2023

ACTS 2:14A, 22-32 | PSALM 16 | 1 PETER 1:3-9 | JOHN 20:19-31

There are certain disciples who come out of Holy Week looking pretty bad. The obvious two are Judas—who betrays Jesus—and Peter—who denies knowing Jesus. But there are also disciples who get included in that group who probably don't need to be. Case in point is Thomas. Unlike Judas's greed or Peter's hubris, Thomas's original sin was having to have stepped out of the room when Jesus appeared to the other disciples. Thomas's fate is not tragedy, but farce. You can imagine Thomas returning after running a quick errand and asking, "Anything happen while I was out?"

In some ways, Thomas stands in for all of us. There was a time when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples and made them witnesses of the resurrection, but that time appears to be over. And if you weren't there—maybe you stepped outside of the room like Thomas or you were born two thousand years later like us—you're out of luck. There's one set of people who are witnesses of the resurrection and have the real version of the faith. And there's another set of people who heard about the resurrection from other people and have the knockoff version of the faith.

We may be tempted to interpret Jesus's appearance to Thomas as reinforcing that idea. Unless you have a direct, personal experience with God, you're on the outs. If you heard about the resurrection from someone else or didn't have some dramatic road-to-Damascus moment, it doesn't count.

But notice what Jesus says at the end of this encounter with Thomas. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That includes all of us. Blessing, faith, and redemption are given not just to the people in that room but even to us who have not seen the risen Jesus with our own eyes or touched him with our own hands.

This is the whole reason John wrote this gospel about Jesus. At the very end of today's reading, John breaks the fourth wall and talks to us. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written," he writes, "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."

Why did John write his gospel? So that we would come to believe. So that faith wouldn't just be something that was entrusted to some small group of insiders two thousand years ago but so that the Holy Spirit might use John's words to create faith in us.

John is—to use Peter's word from today's first reading—a witness. St. John never saw Jesus rise from the dead. He never saw the risen Christ or touched his side. He never even saw the empty tomb. But he didn't need to. Because to be a witness of the resurrection simply means that you see the reconciliation, the new life, and the wholeness that the risen Christ brings into the world, and you share that with others.

The point here—if you get nothing else from the homily, this is the part you want to get—is that God works through witnesses. The Easter faith does not come down from on high like a bolt of lightning and zap people individually at random. But God brings people to faith through a community of people.

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Witnesses do two things. They experience something and they convey their experience. To paraphrase the old subway posters, they see something, and they say something. In some ways, we know this even if we don't think about it explicitly. We all have people in our lives who conveyed the good news to us. Maybe it was a parent or a pastor or a youth minister or a friend. One of our community members mentioned to me recently some particular hymns that had given them language to talk about God.

And even if you're someone who thinks my faith is a private matter between me, God, and my Bible, you're proving the point. Who wrote the books in the Bible? Who translated them? Who picked what books would go in? People. Witnesses. People who convey the grace of God to us and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, create faith in us, too. That's exactly what John says at the end of his gospel. I'm writing this book so that you may come to trust in Jesus.

And this is not a bug. This is a feature. Because this makes us witnesses too. In today's reading from Acts, Peter says, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses." We are witnesses of the resurrection. We have seen the grace of God made known to us in the witness of others. And we, in turn, are empowered to share that witness with our neighbors. Sometimes we do that with words. We proclaim the good news, offer forgiveness, offer counsel and support. But sometimes we do it with our actions. We proclaim something about Jesus through the ways we relate to others. We convey something about the body of Christ by the way we use our time and our resources and our livelihoods.

You do this. This past week, I was talking with two of our community members who shared very similar stories about how they were planning on bringing people from their social circles to services during Holy Week. And they were nervous about it because—for reasons that we don't need to get into—these individuals often go places where people treat them as if they wish they'd stayed at home. And one of these people remarked to me that their family was getting nervous about it, and so they told them, I'm lightly paraphrasing here, "Your presence isn't a problem."

That's witness. That's being a witness of the resurrection. It isn't telling people about how Jesus was raised from the dead two thousand years ago. It's showing people how the resurrection of Jesus changes how we can relate to each other. In the risen body of Christ, everyone is raised to new life. And so in the body of Christ in this place, there are no wrong kinds of people.

So often, we think of ourselves the way Thomas thought of himself when he met up with the disciples. As having missed his big opportunity. Of being someone who could only do stuff around the edges but not do anything of any real import. St. John reminds us that that's not even close to the truth. John wrote his gospel as a witness so that we might come to believe. And God gives the Holy Spirit to each of us so that, through our witness, all God's creation might have life in Jesus's name.

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