

Second Sunday of Easter, Year C

April 11, 2010

Acts 5: 27-32, Psalm 118: 14-29, Revelation 1: 4-8, John 20: 19-31

Acts 5:27-32

{27} When they had brought [the apostles], they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, {28} saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." {29} But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. {30} The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. {31} God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. {32} And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Psalm 118:14-29

{14} The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. {15} There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly; {16} the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly." {17} I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD. {18} The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death. {19} Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. {20} This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. {21} I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. {22} The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. {23} This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. {24} This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. {25} Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! {26} Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. {27} The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. {28} You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. {29} O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Revelation 1:4-8

{4} John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, {5} and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, {6} and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. {7} Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. {8} "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 20:19-31

{19} When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews [or "Judean authorities"], Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." {20} After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. {21} Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." {22} When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. {23} If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." {24} But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. {25} So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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." {26} A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." {27} Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." {28} Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" {29} 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." {30} Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. {31} 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.

There are a few things worthy of note in today's Gospel story.

First, Thomas traditionally comes off badly and is even still referred to as "doubting Thomas", not intended in a complimentary way.

Perhaps there is more here than meets the eye and perhaps Thomas, it turns out, may actually serve as a good role model for twenty-first century disciples.

You know by now that I tend to look for unusual things or unconventional twists in Bible stories and, when it comes to the familiar story of Thomas, even after only six years of preaching, it seems like everything has been said. It turns out, though, there is an interesting detail I missed. In verse 19, the disciples are described as being locked away out of fear of the religious and civil authorities. They were "laying low", as it were. Although it doesn't say why he was out, Thomas was *not* there and was, at least at that moment, *not* hiding. Thomas does not necessarily give in to the crowd or get swept away by prevailing sentiment. He definitely "dances to the tune of his own drummer." That speaks volumes and is in keeping with what we know of him from St. John's Gospel. Even though he received only three brief mentions in three chapters (including what we heard today), I think it still gives us a good sense of who he was.

In chapter eleven, Jesus decides to head to Bethany, a town close to Jerusalem and so also close to the hostile authorities there, in order to mourn his friend Lazarus. By that point in the story it is pretty clear what will await Jesus in Jerusalem, but it does not deter Him. So, "snarky" and honest Thomas replied, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." It's sort of like the first century equivalent of, "Fine! Go ahead. But don't say I didn't tell you so!" I'd call that a healthy sense of realism and skepticism. Yet, he still went. Not blindly and not necessarily happily, but he still went. A little complaining never hurts either.

We next hear about Thomas in the fourteenth chapter of St. John's Gospel, as Jesus engages in the long, sometimes tedious, sometimes strange, Last Supper monologue (it goes from chapter 12 until the end of chapter 17). Jesus said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." (John 14: 3-4). Thomas answered, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14: 5). Again, the first century equivalent of, "Huh?" or "Say what?" If you've spent any time with St. John's Gospel,

then you know that Thomas definitely speaks for most of us on that one. Can you imagine the potential nicknames: “Cut to the chase” Thomas, “Just keep it simple” Thomas, “Uh, hello!” Thomas. Thomas- not even afraid to ask the Lord for clarification and to call the Lord to task when he didn’t quite understand what the Lord was saying.

Finally, the word ‘doubt’ actually never appears in this story. That translation is definitely an interpretation and seems a bit of a stretch even to an amateur like myself. Instead, the word (*apistos*) translated as ‘doubt’ in verse 27 is actually more accurately “without faith”, “disbelieving”, or even “faithless”. Probably even more correct, however, is to render it as “not trusting”. So, Jesus would be inviting Thomas to stop not trusting and start trusting. Although “faith” is not a terrible translation of the Greek (*pistos*), we tend to think of faith as an intellectual exercise and something or some things we believe, whereas “trust” is much more a matter of the heart. So, as much as Thomas is to be admired for wanting to figure it all out, there is simply a point (as there is for all of us) at which we simply have to “let go” and to trust, even without all the answers. We need to be comfortable with mystery. Trust is probably a very difficult thing for any of us.

One more thing before moving on. I’ve said this before, probably on this very Sunday, but when it comes to religion I would rather deal with a healthy sense of doubt than absolute certainty. It always seems that those who are the most absolutely certain in any religion are the ones who can be moved to do the most harm to those with whom they disagree.

I know I would have written this story in a very different way. If the author of this gospel was trying to “wow” or convince the “crowds”, then he (or she) picked a heck of a way to do it. In my version, Jesus would come back as some sort of triumphant super hero, even better than before: able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, faster than a speeding locomotive...(anyone 40 and under will need to ask a parent about that line). But no, the scars, the wounds remain even after the resurrection.

That says quite a bit, but I’ll focus on only this one point. The story, rightly, doesn’t focus on the wounds, but I think it’s fair to say that, somehow, they were *transformed* by the love and power of God. It’s good to be reminded that although some wounds (perhaps all wounds) never really go away, they too can be transformed into

something that works for life and healing. We sometimes try so hard to be perfect or to “move on”, but yet continue to struggle and wonder why things don’t seem to change. This image offers hope.

This also tells us that the world pretty much continues on it’s way in spite of the resurrection. The world remains a wounded place. Yet, the risen Jesus works in and through those places of pain and failure bringing God’s love and forgiveness. *We* become transformed even if the world around us (or within us) doesn’t.

Jesus was recognized by those wounds. Perhaps that’s *exactly* the sign the disciples needed. If any people qualified as the “walking wounded” they most certainly did. Not only had they been through the traumatic events of Jesus’ arrest and execution, but they had failed miserably. They deserted and some had even denied Him. Wounds do not have the final word.

Finally, all of us can think of many reasons why we shouldn’t be doing any particular sort of ministry. I certainly have a long list for myself. Yet, after that first greeting of peace spoken by Jesus, He commissioned them and sent them out for ministry and mission. That is truly good news.

Thanks be to God!

O wounded hands of Jesus, build in us your new creation. O Love that triumphs over loss, we bring our hearts before your cross; come, finish your salvation. (ELW 727, v. 4)

AMEN.