Second Sunday of Easter April 8, 2018

All Saints’ Church Year B

Acts 4:32-35 1 John 1:1-2:2

Psalm 133 John 20:19-31

We thank you Jesus for all the ways you Easter within us. Amen

Always, every year, the first Sunday after Easter, we read John’s story of “Doubting Thomas,” dictated to us by the lectionary. I don’t know how prevalent this story was in your upbringing; I grew up with the refrain, “don’t be a ‘doubting Thomas.’”

My first-grade teacher/nun would tell us almost on a daily basis, “don’t you be doubting, like Thomas!” If we got up to recite a prayer, and faltered, “don’t you doubt, like that Thomas did!” If we weren’t sure how to add two numbers together, “now don’t you doubt- you’re better than Thomas!” If we were late, we were a doubting Thomas, who was also late, who missed the boat, who might always miss the boat. I think our teachers and priests really thought that there was a boat to catch, and if you didn’t, you would be lost forever. They believed that we read this passage right after Easter as a warning- to doubt the Resurrection was to die to your faith.

I’m here to say, over 50 years later, the opposite is true. Our story about Thomas ***is about how much God loves us***. Jesus’ risen-ness is about our own rising, a rising that often emerges from our wounds, not in spite of them. And there’s no boat to catch, only the nave of our Creator God who keeps us afloat no matter what.

When you think about our forbearers in faith, we see wounded people. Peter as confused and as a betrayer. Paul as a persecutor, a murderer. Mary as lost and grieving. And Thomas as doubting. These failings seem to carry the full gamut of human emotions, taking in the full spectrum of our lives.

That’s one of the reasons I like to imagine all of us huddled in that upper room with our own hurts and failings… in our own woundedness…. the newly divorced, the mother anxious about her adult daughter’s prognosis, the friend who just lost his job, the woman cheating on her taxes, the man having an affair, the neighbor who is still addicted, the teenager who buys a gun to kill others, and who mocks the judge at his sentencing…. There are so many stories of fear and failings.

We’re all crammed into that upper room, like our forbearers in faith, the confused, the betrayers, the persecutors, the murderers, the lost, the grieving, and let’s not forget… the doubters. We’re all there, disciples-in-waiting, hiding….

And Jesus appears, not quite like himself, yet identifiable, somehow passing through walls, his wounds exposed, and what does he do?

He doesn’t say, “you’re forgiven,” or point to your failings, our even heal you, things he’s done all throughout his ministry. He says, “Peace be with you.”

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

Next, he shows us ***his*** wounds- his pierced hands and side, and then he breathes on us, the Originating Spirit of life rising up out of his wounds into the flesh and bones of our own wounds.

This breathing moment between Jesus and his disciples always takes me back to Jesus’ baptism. Jesus was 30 years old, and by then, well into his adulthood, even middle age, without a vocation. He still doesn’t really know what his life is about. Some would call him a loser. And yet, as Jesus comes out of the waters, God doesn’t tell Jesus what to do. ***God tells him who he is***: his beloved son, with whom he is ***already*** well-pleased. And Jesus hasn’t even done anything yet.

And we haven’t done anything yet, either; we’re just waiting in that room, afraid.

And then Jesus says to us, like a voice breaking out of the clouds, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Jesus is telling us who we are. He is giving us a new way of being human: we are the **Community of Forgiveness.** In a Community of Forgiveness, everyone- whether they are victims or oppressors- learns that no matter what they have suffered, no matter how they have sinned, a life of love and hope ***with others*** is possible. This way of being human is the genesis of Dr. Martin Luther King’s vision of the Beloved Community. We commemorate Dr. King’s ministry and the anniversary of his assassination 50 years ago and honor the power of putting communal forgiveness and reconciliation into action. What a God-inspired dream!

You see, there were plenty of individual sins to forgive in that room, plenty, but Jesus is taking us to a much deeper place. It’s not about our individual strength, or lack of.

Our faith story ***is not*** about just being a bunch of do-gooders, people who are careful about not sinning, people who mind their Ps and Qs. By the way, it was bartenders in English pubs who were in charge of minding their patrons’ pints and quarts of beer, is where we get this phrase.

Sometimes, I think we make God into the Great Bartender in the sky reminding us to mind our Ps and Qs. Our faith is not about being careful or nice or really, even, about being good. We’re good because God is good.

The gift of our faith, the gift of the Resurrection, is about being transformed into a people who know that they are carrying the Light of Christ wherever they go, and who are willing to walk into the darkness, and who know that this Light has power.

It’s about setting a fire in people’s bellies; it’s about reminding them that they are shining with the love of God; it’s about telling our sacred story that is full of danger and freedom; it’s about vulnerability, letting go, giving in, risking, and believing that just as Christ is both wounded and resurrected, so are we. We carry the Christ mystery wherever we go.

Jesus breathes onto us and into us, disciples-in-waiting, not as proof of the resurrection. It has nothing to do with proof, or Thomas’ doubting, or the weakness of our own wounds.

Jesus breathes onto us and into us to show us that his mission has not been vanquished. The Kingdom is still revealing itself, is still in progress, and he needs us to continue. To have faith, to take up the work of Jesus. To believe in the Resurrection has nothing to do with getting into heaven; it’s about our work in pulling back the curtains to the Kingdom, ***and in that work,*** we find heaven.

How do we do that work? We become the Community of Forgiveness. And believe me, and you know this well, forgiving is not easy. Forgiving Ourselves or Others, never easy. Jesus knows this as well. It sometimes costs a pound of flesh, or involves dying to something, or carrying a cross. Sacrificing. It’s about being willing to die in order to give life.

Yes, in the power of forgiving, we are believing that we, the Body of Christ, as the Letter of Acts reminds us, are of one heart and soul. Through our own breathing and touching out of our own wounds, we can set the world on fire, with a story that is filled with danger and freedom and forgiveness and life. In the ground of that being, we can become the blessings that God always has in mind for us.

AMEN