

## Still Easter

In official parlance, today is the Second Sunday of Eastertide – Easter being a season, not a single day. Around the coffee pot in the church office, however, and, I suspect, in the minds of many of us, this Sunday has a different title: “Low Sunday.”

It’s not hard to figure out how this Lord’s Day got that nickname. Compared to the turnout of worshippers last week, today’s attendance is low. No need for two services to accommodate the crowds this morning. No need to lay on breakfast to make sure the choir is fortified to make it through the entire morning.

Low Sunday.

The “hero” of Low Sunday, if you can call him that, is Thomas, whose nickname is “the Twin.” Apparently, that’s what the other disciples called him. Later generations of disciples call him by a different nickname: “Doubting Thomas.” That’s a shame, really. All Thomas asks is to see for himself what the other disciples have already seen: the risen Jesus, complete with those ruined hands and that terrible gash in his side.

According to John, it was the evening of that same day when the women discovered the empty tomb that Jesus made his second appearance. The disciples had locked the doors for fear that they would be next – that they would follow Jesus to their own arrest and even worse. As profiles in courage go, the male disciples are not at the top of the list in any of the four Gospels.

Well, the disciples can lock themselves in, but they cannot lock the risen Christ out. He “**came and stood among them,**” John says, and the first words out of his mouth are “**Peace be with you.**”

Jesus had said the same thing they last time they were together. “**Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives give I to you. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid**” (John 14:27).

I repeat those words to families gathered in this sanctuary for a memorial service, or at the graveside as we commit a loved one’s body to the earth. Jesus’ presence with the disciples brought peace on the night he was betrayed, and now he brings them peace on the far side of Good Friday.

After bidding them peace, Jesus shows the disciples his hands and his side, and they begin to rejoice. *Joy* and *peace* are the essence of the Easter faith. Joy that death has lost its sting. Peace at the edge of the grave.

The Twin, however, missed this unexpected celebration. You really can't blame Thomas for wanting the same experience the other disciples had. **"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."** He's not setting the bar higher; he's just saying "Me, too! I want what you guys have already received."

And he gets it, doesn't he? A week later, they are in the same house, but this time, Thomas is present and accounted for. The doors are still shut, but that doesn't stop Jesus from standing among them again and saying again, **"Peace be with you."**

And to Thomas, Jesus makes the offer to put his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in in the place where the soldier had jabbed his side. Whether Thomas takes up the offer, John doesn't say, but he does say that Thomas answers with the strongest profession of faith in all of John's Gospel: **"My Lord and my God!"**

You could say, I suppose, that for Thomas, seeing is believing, but there's more to the story than that.

We all know that seeing isn't always enough. Thomas could have convinced himself that he was dreaming, or that the other disciples were pulling a fast one on him. Or, like modern-day climate-change deniers, he could have said, "The hell with the data, I'm sticking to my position. Never mind the melting ice caps or the floods in Miami, climate change is a Chinese hoax."

Seeing isn't always believing. Remember that story in Luke's Gospel? In Luke, the risen Jesus walks alongside a pair of disciples all the way to Emmaus, discussing the scriptures at great length. They see him just fine, but neither disciple believes. It's not until the three arrive at that house in Emmaus and Jesus is invited to play host at the table that the penny drops. He takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the two disciples. Only in the breaking of the bread are their eyes opened to recognize the risen Christ.

Seeing isn't always believing. Sometimes believing is seeing. Sometimes the gift of faith is what opens our eyes and allows us to see the truth that lies beyond the data.

Clayton J. Schmit writes, “Faith is a mystery of the heart that the mind wants to solve. To admit that we take certain things on faith is to say that we are willing, in certain circumstances, for things not to make perfect sense.”<sup>1</sup>

Or to put it another way, that broken bread in Luke’s Gospel and those nail-marked hands in John’s Gospel are not “proof” that will hold up in any court. But they are testimony to the truth of who Jesus is -- the living word of God, the word made flesh, the flesh made sacrifice, the body crucified and the body raised by a power beyond all reason – a power that is God’s pure love for the whole world.

It’s that love -- that grace -- that opens our eyes and grounds us in the Easter faith. Thomas is blessed in the seeing, but you and I are blessed in the seeing beyond sight.

A few minutes ago, Mark Hohmeister read a snippet from the Letter of First Peter. On the face of it, you and I have little in common with the original recipients of that letter.

Living somewhere in Asia Minor, these folks were at the bottom of the first-century pecking order. Some were women. Some were slaves. “Low status” we’d call them today. To add to their difficulty, their faith in the risen Christ put them at odds with everyone around them. They suffered, those early Christians -- truly suffered. Unlike some Christians today, who cry “persecution” when asked to bake a wedding cake for a couple they don’t approve of, these Christians knew genuine persecution.

In chapter 2 of his letter, the writer of I Peter provides an Easter mirror for those young believers. *Look in the mirror*, he tells them. *When your neighbors look at you, if they look at you at all, they see the dregs of the earth. But look closely in the Easter mirror. Here’s what I see: “. . . you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*<sup>2</sup>

And in today’s reading, the writer reminds those Christians -- those low-born kings and queens, those riffraff holy ones of God – that they don’t have to touch Jesus’ hands and side to know that he is alive. They can feel his love for them, and that is evidence more reliable than even Thomas could hope for: **“Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even**

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<sup>1</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, contributor to *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2*, David Barlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 399

<sup>2</sup> I Peter 2:9

**though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.”**

In his book *Blue Lake Jazz*, Donald Miller writes,

I never liked jazz music because jazz music doesn't resolve. But I was outside the Bagdad Theater in Portland one night when I saw a man playing the saxophone. I stood there for fifteen minutes and he never opened his eyes. After that I liked jazz music. Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It is as if they are showing you the way.<sup>3</sup>

**“Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.”**

Remember how we began worship last Sunday? After Michael Corzine and his pal J. S. Bach had shaken the dust off the rafters of this old meeting house, I let loose from the back of the room, *“Jesus Christ is risen!”*

Remember what you said back? You said, *“He is risen indeed. Alleluia.”*

As the choir was coming in through the narthex for the second service, fortified by egg casseroles and hot cross buns, I saw Bob Sayes standing just inside the front door. As most of you know, Bob's mother Barbara died last January. Bob took care of his mom right to the end – until her baptism was complete in death.

“Hello again, Bob. Didn't you come to the first service?” I asked him.

“Yep, I did. But I was late. I'm just hanging around for the start of the second service. I don't want to go home until I hear you holler from the balcony, *‘Jesus Christ is risen!’* I just love that part.”

“So, do I,” I told him. So, do I.”

When you've got Bach and Bob to proclaim the truth of Easter, you don't need Thomas. When you know the love of the risen Christ for you, no Sunday is low.

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Miller, *Blue Lake Jazz: Non-Religious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003, ix