

## A God of Second Chances

John 20:19-31

April 11, 2021

2nd Sunday of Easter

It was Easter evening and Jesus, newly raised from the dead, appears to the disciples who are hiding out with fear and trembling. Without unlocking the door, Jesus appeared in their midst saying, "Peace be with you." Jesus invited the disciples to look at his scarred hands and side.

It would be enough. Only problem was, Thomas was not there when Jesus appeared. When the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, Thomas said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hand and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

If the Protestant Church had a patron saint in the 21st century, Thomas would probably be our role model, for many people today are skeptical, and demand more evidence. Perhaps it has something to do with the scientific and technological age in which we live.

What about you? Do you need to see in order to believe, or will you in this season of Easter believe the disciples, along with Mary, Martha and the company of women who encountered the risen Lord? What will it take for you?

Martin Marty, well-known church historian and professor at the University of Chicago, recalls a summer day of his boyhood when one of those grand miracles of childhood occurred. A watermelon truck overturned right in front of Marty's house. No one was injured, but the driver of the truck could only watch helplessly as scores of neighborhood children raced to the scene of that blessed event. The bad news about the watermelon truck, Marty reports, is that he personally was out of town visiting his grandmother the day the truck lost its juicy cargo!

Sometimes life is like that. While all the other kids are there catching the bouncing watermelons, you are miles away. So Thomas missed the party. Jesus appeared, and he was not there. Maybe we would have been in his shoes.

So what did Jesus do? Do you believe history repeats itself? Can lightning strike twice in the same place? Could you use a second chance in some area of your life? A second chance to get things right, or a chance to overcome some deep regret?

Jesus gave Thomas a second chance to see for himself. Well, a week later, the disciples were in the same house, and this time, Thomas was with them. "Peace be with you!" Jesus said as he stood among the disciples for a second time. And then he said, specifically to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your

hand, and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe." (Jn 20.27) Then Thomas gasped, and exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!"

In the spiritual life – the life of faith – one is asked time and again to affirm what he or she cannot see, and believe in what they cannot touch. Many people are not big on the Christian creeds anymore, but the opening lines of the Nicene Creed say -- "We believe in one God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen."

Perhaps that should have been around in Thomas' time. Jesus comes again and again to breathe his spirit and power upon us, just as he did that first Easter evening when the disciples had locked themselves in the upper room out of fear.

What about you? Will you allow the spiritual presence of Jesus to enter through the locked doors and barricaded places in your life? Would you like a second chance in life? We worship a God of second chances. We have celebrated the resurrection of Jesus at Easter. We continue to celebrate the weeks of Easter on the church calendar, right up until Pentecost.

But have we fully comprehended what God has done for us through the risen Christ? Maybe we're still living into what it means to be an Easter people. But it's not enough for me or anyone else to tell you about Easter and what you ought to believe. God wants each one of us to experience Easter for yourself -- to encounter the risen Christ for yourself. Luckily, Thomas did and you can too.

Let's take a look at those who did see the Lord. Jesus appeared twice to the disciples – almost a week apart. The first appearance took place on that first Easter evening. The second occurred a week later. 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" (vv. 27).

For most, belief did not come at the tomb on that first Easter, but later in the day . . . in a locked room, or even a week later when Jesus appeared a second time. It happened as the disciples returned to Galilee—back to their routines in every day life. They found him at work . . . around the table . . . with their families . . . in the breaking of bread and in the commerce of daily life. They discovered what the angel said at the empty tomb was true: "He is going on ahead of you."

You will find him there in the future . . . not in the past. It is no longer just history. The resurrection is not just about one day or one story, but about a lifetime lived in the light of the Easter story and the power of the Holy Spirit. It's okay if it takes a while for everything to sink in.

You're in good company ... the company of the disciples ... Peter, James, John, Mary and others, and above all, for Thomas. The skeptical disciple got a second chance to believe. Thomas and the rest of the disciples, deciding to trust this new reality are changed. They stop hiding and start seeking. They stop making excuses and start moving mountains. . . . They lay their hands on the sick. They defy the authorities. They are bold, and no longer timid. They never tire of telling people who gave them the courage to do such things, and they become known for their glad and generous hearts.

I hope you get a second chance at what matters most in your life. I hope you will get a second chance to encounter the divine if you are a sceptic. The days and weeks following Easter made all the difference for the disciples. It was a reality so large it took a while to live into it. A new reality replaced the old way of seeing things. Jesus said, "You cannot put new wine in old wine skins." (Lk. 5:37) The old wineskins will break, because they no longer can contain the new wine.

Easter announces the resurrection of Jesus and promises other resurrections – including our own. Something old inside has died. Something new is being born today. You cannot go back and be the same person you were before Easter, any more than you can turn back time.

God wants to give us a new future -- a future paved with the power of the resurrection and the bold promises of the Holy Spirit. And if you don't get it the first time, he's giving you a second chance, just like he gave Thomas. Maybe Thomas gets a bad rap. Who knows? Maybe we would have been in the same boat with him had we been there on that first Easter.

Now I know many people are not big on Christology, especially here in Marin. So I would say this in terms that are universal and inclusive of seekers everywhere: Reality is imbued with a spiritual essence. Even if you do not consider yourself a Christian, the divine essence that is at the heart of reality wants you to have a second chance at a spiritually fulfilling life, and countless opportunities after that.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen." Emerson did not consider himself a Christian, but rather believed in Transcendentalism, a movement that embraced the austere New England Unitarian tradition with elements of mysticism.

Christians follow the risen Christ as guide and spiritual leader. But Christ is also a cosmic Christ. He points beyond himself to the nature of God, and the sanctity of the universe.

I like the way the writer Richard Rohr puts it in his book, The Universal Christ,

which I believe is one of the most significant books of our time. He points out that Christ is not Jesus' last name, but rather is another name for the Messiah. He embodies the essence of truth that is at the heart of most other religions. He takes on flesh at a particular point in time, but also symbolizes the truth that others intuited throughout history long before him. Rohr's book is an interesting read, and one to ponder slowly.

Regardless of what your life has been like up to this point, the resurrected Christ invites you to experience new life, and a spirit-filled life, even if you remain a bit skeptical. I like the way Peter puts it in the epistle attributed to him in The Message translation:

“Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we’ve been given a brand new life and everything to live for... so be ready to receive the gift that has come through Jesus Christ.” (I Peter 1:3,13)

What would you do if you had a second chance at life? A second chance to be all that God wants you to be? A second chance to be fulfilled? Can you relate to Thomas, who was late to the party, but the risen Jesus came to him anyway? He gave Thomas a second chance, and today, he is giving you one, too. Amen

## John 20:19-31

20:19 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, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

20:20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

20:21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

20:22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

20:23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

20:24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

20:25 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."

20:26 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."

20:27 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."

20:28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

20:29 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."

20:30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

20:31 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.