*Sermon 2nd Sunday Easter, April 28 2019*

*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be much more acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, our strength, and our redeemer.*
It all began very early on that Easter morning. The sun hadn’t even risen when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.  We don’t know why she was there. Perhaps she was still in shock, unable to believe the events of the last few days. Perhaps she needed to see the tomb for herself to really believe he was gone. Perhaps she just wanted to be there, to be near him as she grieved.  Nothing could have prepared her for what awaited her there. The stone had been rolled away, the tomb was empty. The linen wrappings were there but Jesus’ body was gone. Distressed, she fetched Peter and John, who then ran back to behold this new horror, insult added to injury. Even in death they could not leave Jesus alone.

And so, dejected, they returned home. Mary, alone, remained at the tomb, weeping, until a man she believed to be the gardener approached her. It is not until he calls her by her name that she recognizes that this is in fact Jesus, risen from the dead, returned to life again. He instructs her to go to the other disciples and share with them the good news. Joyfully, she runs and tells them “I have seen the Lord,” and describes her encounter with the living Christ.

And what do you think the disciples do?
Do they run out into the streets shouting “Alleluia!  Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed!  Alleluia!”?
No. They don’t!
They don’t know what to make of Mary’s story. They are still frightened of the authorities, fearful for their lives.
And so they gather together that night in a locked room, likely shaken and confused, unsure of what to make of yet one more shocking development in a week that has been full of them. When suddenly, there among them stands Jesus, their friend and teacher, who they had watched being nailed to the cross and laid in the tomb. “Peace be with you” he says. And, as if in response to the looks of incredulity that must have been on their faces, he shows them his hands and his side, the wounds of the cross not erased from his resurrected body. Finally, having seen with their own eyes that this is indeed Jesus and not a ghost or a hallucination, they believe. And, like Mary, Jesus gives them instructions. He sends them out to tell the world what they have seen and experienced.

And they do, beginning with their friend and companion, Thomas, who, for whatever reason, wasn’t there with the other disciples that night. And, just as the other disciples did when Mary told them the good news, Thomas finds this unbelievable. He says that until he can see the wounds in Jesus’ hands and side, until he can touch Jesus, it’s just too much for him to believe.
Poor doubting Thomas….well, I personally believe that the church history was pretty unfair to him when starting call him doubting Thomas…and even in Germany they’re more unfair to him calling him the “unbelieving Thomas”.
I for my own can really understand his reaction to the story the others told him. I think, considering that, I would react in a similar way. Just like: OK guys, your story is pretty nice, but do you have any evidence about that? Anything what would prove your story, did you make some selfies with the risen Lord – so I can see and believe? Did you upload any pics in your facebook news feed? Any evidence pics on your Instagram? Maybe some video of the risen One on youtube? No? Well, without all that, it’s hard for me to believe….maybe it’s more like an hallucination that was caused by your deep pain and grief!
I can understand Thomas’ reaction in a good way…it’s human and that makes him kind of sympathetic…we should not call him doubting Thomas….maybe seeking Thomas, or rational acting Thomas….because after he got the message told by his companions, he was a seeker, seeking for what is true and what he really can believe.

And so it is that, the next week, Jesus again appears to all of the disciples. He goes to Thomas and invites him to touch his wounds, to see for himself that this is all real. We don’t know if Thomas takes Jesus up on his offer, if he does, indeed, place his hands on Jesus’ side. But we do know that Thomas breaks down and confesses his faith. “My Lord and my God!” What a great confession of pure faith! Perhaps it was enough that Jesus cared for him so much that he offered it to Thomas. Perhaps it was enough that Jesus didn’t scold Thomas or showed disdain because of his doubts. Perhaps that was enough for Thomas to recognize the risen Christ, our God of love.

Three times we see Jesus appear to his followers in these early Easter stories. Three times he encounters them, shows them what they need in order that they might believe, and, in believing, might go out and share the story of their belief with others. Jesus meets each of them exactly where they are. For Mary it is merely being called by name that allows her to believe. For the disciples it is seeing Jesus in their midst. For Thomas it is being invited to touch Jesus’ wounds. They each come to know and to believe in the risen Lord in different ways. But in each case it is an encounter with Jesus that makes the remarkable, utterly confounding story of the resurrection believable. It is the encounter that convinces them that the impossible is indeed possible. It is the encounter that equips them to breathlessly share the story with the next person and the next and the next.

So it is with us. We tell the story week in and week out: recounting the remarkable stories of Jesus’ life and work, confessing our faith together, sharing in bread and wine as body and blood of Christ that both remembers him and nourishes us to go out and share the story with others.
One of the great theologians of the medieval time, Thomas Aquinas, composed in the 13th century a beautiful Eucharistic hymn to praise Christ’s true presence in the bread and wine, and in this hymn he has written in one verse:

**I do not see the Holy Wounds as Thomas did,
But I confess that You are my God.
Make me believe much more in You,
Hope in you, and love You.**

Deep abiding faith, the faith that transforms our lives, the faith that we feel in our very bones, the faith that leads us to confess and utter “My Lord and My God,” as Thomas did, comes from encountering Jesus.
It comes from experiencing God, God at work in our lives, experiencing his grace he gives to us, day by day, sharing with us in our joys and sorrow. And it is only after we have come face to face with our God that we can truly go out and share the good news with the world. Because then, I think, we believe in a way that is truly life-giving. We know the good news to be true in the depths of our souls, even when we are not seeing his wounds and his side, but we know this story of our risen Lord is true!

So where have you encountered Jesus in your life?

And with whom are you going to share that story?

Amen

Alleluja, Christ is risen!