

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
April 27, 2025 – 2 Easter
John 20:19-31 – Faith and Hope
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

In today's lesson from the Gospel of John we hear about two appearances of Jesus to the disciples, one when Thomas was not present and one, a week later, when he was. The first event took place on the evening of the day on which Christ rose from the dead. We are told that the disciples were gathered together in a house. They had locked the doors because they were afraid. When speaking to them of his own approaching death, Jesus had told his disciples to expect persecution. They had seen Jesus crucified. They could be recognized as followers of Jesus, and perhaps they, too, would be harmed or killed, just as their Lord had predicted. So, they stayed together, locked in the house, afraid.

In the midst of their fear and grief, Jesus suddenly appeared in the room. After greeting them with the traditional Jewish greeting, "Peace be with you," he immediately showed them his hands and his side, thus stating in no uncertain terms, "Look, I am Jesus, the one who was crucified." The disciples then rejoice, and they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We then hear about "Doubting Thomas." Thomas had not been with the other disciples on the first Easter evening. We are not told why he was absent. We only know that he had not seen the risen Lord when the others had. They told Thomas about their amazing experience, but he was not convinced. "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." Thomas wanted concrete proof that the man he had seen crucified was in fact alive. Nothing less would make him a believer.

What happened? A week passed. The disciples were again gathered in the house, and this time Thomas was with them. Jesus appeared just as he had before. He turned to Thomas and said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus immediately offered Thomas exactly what he needed in order to believe. This is the same Lord after the resurrection as before, the one who time and again freely gave others what they needed.

What do we think of Thomas? His "reputation" is tarnished, isn't it? When we call someone a "doubting Thomas," we mean something negative, that the person is overly skeptical. I think we unfairly judge Thomas. His friends had told him a rather unbelievable story, hadn't they? Why would he take their word that the man he had seen crucified was now alive? Jesus did not reject Thomas because of his doubts or withhold from Thomas the proof he needed in order to have faith. What is more significant than Thomas' doubt is his faith. For as soon as Jesus offered Thomas the proof he needed, Thomas responded immediately, "My Lord and my God!" This is much more than an acknowledgment that Jesus is in fact alive after death. This is Thomas' assertion that the risen Christ is his Lord and that he is God. There is no

longer any doubt about who Jesus was and is. Our faith, like Thomas', is in the living and eternal Christ.

Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That includes nearly everyone who has believed in Christ since the time of his resurrection appearances. Some Christians are given the gift of a simple faith, a faith without doubts. But most Christians have not been given that gift. Most of us experience doubt. And it can be a truly frightening and horrible experience to question our faith.

Our Gospel lesson teaches us that Christ will not reject us for having doubts. His encounter with Thomas can fill us with hope that at some point Jesus will make himself known to each of us so that we can believe in him wholeheartedly, with no more doubts, with only joy in knowing him. We can be sustained now by the hope of meeting our Lord face to face, friend to friend, in the future.

I want to speak further about Christian hope. First of all, Christian hope is entirely different from optimism. It is not about seeing the glass of life as "half full" rather than "half empty." It is not about predicting a bright and cheery future in this life for ourselves or for others. It is not about having confidence in the success of our endeavors. Christian hope is about God. Christian hope is a faith issue because it is based on faith in the nature of God. Christian hope requires from human beings a leap of faith, a trust that amounts to "betting one's life" on a vision of God revealed in the Bible and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This vision is sometimes in stark contrast to apparent reality.

The essence of Christian hope rests on faith that God is all good, all powerful, and all knowing; that God is just and merciful; and that Jesus Christ is with human beings whatever their life circumstances. In fact, the Gospels suggest that, if anything, God is especially present to human beings when their circumstances are bleak, not only because of God's compassion and love, but also because human beings are often more open to God when they have nothing else to rely on. In the broad story of faith, openness to God is more important than any transitory suffering we experience.

There is a moral component, or sequel, to Christian hope. Christians are called to act as the body of Christ. This means being a body (the church) and bodies (individual Christians) who are the body of Christ in the world. We cannot sit back, enjoy ourselves, and recite inwardly "all things work together for good for those who love God," in the words of St. Paul's Letter to the church in Rome (Romans 8:28). That is God's business. Our business is to be Christ's hands in this world, to serve as Christ served. Our "orders" and our blessed opportunity are to embody Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel(25:35-36, 40): "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me....Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Again, this is a matter of faith, not a matter of optimism about the consequences of our behavior. Jesus calls us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, though the food and clothing we provide may be inadequate to sustain life. We are called to take care of the sick, regardless of whether the sick person will recover or die. We are called simply to enter the prison of those who are imprisoned, with no expectation of releasing the prisoners. We are called to be Christ in the world and in doing so, we are given the opportunity to serve Christ.

Christian hope is centered in Jesus Christ, and the cross of Christ is central to our understanding of the life and nature of Christ. To those who suffer, the cross of Christ is hope, for the cross means both that there is no limit to God's willingness to join us in the human condition and no limit to God's understanding of our suffering. More than in the manger, on the cross Christ is Emmanuel, God with us, especially perhaps in his cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Finally, Christian hope is based on faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and in God's eternal kingdom. There is no death that is ultimate when God gives life. Jesus has won the victory over all that is less than God, and God's kingdom of love and justice will ultimately be established forever. Christians are called to live in this hope, which is articulated at the beginning of the Burial service in the Book of Common Prayer (page 491). These words also remind us that in the Episcopal Church we understand the burial service to be an Easter celebration, a celebration of redemption and of the promise of eternal life in Christ.

"I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord. Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he (or she) die. And everyone who has life, and has committed himself (or herself) to me in faith, shall not die for ever.

As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth. After my awaking, he will raise me up; and in my body I shall see God. I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him who is my friend and not a stranger."

In this Easter season may each of us nurture our faith in the risen Lord and may we be filled with Christian hope, for Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!