

Easter 2A 2020 – Bishop Katherine Finegan

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our creator and our Lord and Savior the Risen Christ. Amen

First a “shout out” to St. James Lutheran in Rudyard as I was scheduled to be with you today. At least I can be there virtually.

Have you ever not recognized someone because they were out of context? I remember as a kid, seeing my kindergarten teacher in the grocery store, which never happened, and I was shocked because of course I always saw my teacher in school, at her desk, or in the classroom. It never occurred to me that she would ever leave the school building or that she had to buy groceries, or that she owned a pair of jeans much less wore them with sneakers. I think, it’s safe to say that as a kid, I did not have a very complete view of my teachers as people who had lives outside of my school day, as if they only existed when they were in my presence. It only mattered to me that my teacher was where I expected and needed her to be, to give me stickers for good work, to teach me my colors and letters and shapes, to tell me when it was time for snack and recess. But of course, in class, at school, I didn’t really see her I saw only a part of her, one side of her. I saw what she did, not who she was. And until I saw her in the grocery store, I didn’t realize my mistake. Seeing her, really seeing her, out and about on a Saturday, it was a surprise.

In our gospel reading for today, Thomas finally sees Jesus. And I would argue that his nickname should not be “Doubting Thomas”, but “Seeing Thomas”, because Thomas is the first disciple who sees Jesus for who Jesus really and completely is.

John’s gospel sets out this goal right from the beginning. John would have his readers know who Jesus is, completely and fully. Right from the get go, John describes Jesus as the word of God made flesh who lived among us full of grace and truth. John proclaims that Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. And then this word of God who is Jesus gives people signs as to his true and complete identity. He turns water into wine. He heals people. He casts out

demons. He feeds a multitude with only bread and fish. Jesus even raises the dead. His ministry is full of miracles, of wonders, of things no one can do unless God is with them. And many people believe in Jesus, because of the signs.

But for many the signs and wonders is as deep as their faith goes. They believe in Jesus more because of what he does and can do, and less because of who he is. The signs that are meant to point to Jesus' fuller identity, the signs that are meant to call the people's attention to his unique connection to God, the signs that are meant to create trust that Jesus is the word of God made flesh, these signs actually get in the way of faith. People start to depend upon the signs. They look to Jesus for demonstrable proof. They look to him for the signs themselves, for what Jesus can do for them in this life, and they do not look past the signs to the mission Jesus has to bring people into a new and life giving relationship with God. Like my childhood understanding of my kindergarten teacher, their view of Jesus is very small, and very incomplete. It doesn't even occur to them, that Jesus had a life with God before the life that they see, and that he will return to that life, when this life is over. All they see of Jesus is what is in front of them. They see the man and his signs. And they follow to see what Jesus will do next.

And the disciples are guilty of this as well, not because they are somehow less than worthy, but because, like the rest of us, they are human. Of course, they see the signs that Jesus performs and they are astounded as anyone would be. Of course, they don't understand the larger picture, because what they see in front of them takes their full attention. Just like us, they see things so much better in hindsight. It is only after Jesus dies, and then rises again, and Jesus breathes on them his Spirit, (John's Pentecost) that things start to make sense.

Even as they are gathered together in fear, locked behind closed doors, they still don't understand, they're still trying to make some sense of it all, and figure out what they should do. And then Jesus

comes, and says, “Peace be with you.” He shows them his hands and his side. And they believe that Jesus is risen. They believe that their teacher is once again alive.

But of course, Thomas isn’t there. And when he hears about it, he wants what they’ve all been getting all along, signs and wonders, proof that can be seen. Thomas wants the sign, the proof, the miracle that will enable him to believe that Jesus is risen.

Yet, this is exactly the kind of believing that Jesus has been lamenting and that John is contrasting with true belief throughout his Gospel. Even after seeing Jesus, the disciples still only have a narrow, incomplete, picture of Jesus. Their teacher is risen and they have seen him. But the disciples still don’t understand what this means about the fullness of who Jesus is.

Until that is, Thomas is with them, and Jesus comes again, and says “Peace be with you.” And Jesus invites Thomas to touch him, to see not only his hands and sides, to see not only the wounds in his flesh, but to see Jesus, really see him, the fullness of him, to see Jesus for all of who he is.

And I’m thinking much to the surprise of the other disciples, Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” It is a confession of faith, not only that their teacher is risen from the dead, but that the man standing before them is nothing less than the word of God made flesh, full of grace and truth, and bearing the wounds in his body to prove it. Thomas sees Jesus, again but for the first time, and he believes that Jesus is more than just a risen man, but the very presence of God.

And finally, it’s not only about what Jesus does, but about who Jesus is.

Thomas, the Seeing Disciple, leads not only the other disciples to faith, but us too. Because we are Thomas. We want to be there when Jesus comes. We want to receive the peace of Christ, but more than that, I have no doubt that there are times, and right now is one of them, as we are sequestered and feeling separate, feeling weary and afraid, and we long for signs from Jesus, or undeniable proof,

maybe even a miracle, so that our faith will be bolstered, our conviction more sure, and we imagine we will be able to put doubt behind us.

But as we learn from Thomas, doubt is not the enemy. Rather, doubt drives us to deeper questions. Doubt is the shovel that has us digging for answers, doubt is the sharpener that has us asking more pointed questions, doubt gives us the energy to wrestle with the mystery of salvation, and gives us the patience to wait in the unresolved tensions of faith. Doubt is not the enemy. Doubt drove Thomas back into the company of the disciples, where together they waited and hoped for Christ to come.

And that's where we're at. In our doubts, and in our faith, we wait and hope together even as we are apart, we wait for Christ to come to us. And our waiting is not in vain. The risen Christ comes to you, as you hear hope proclaimed in every online sermon, every moment spent in devotion and study.

Christ is with you, in every prayer that you sigh, every worry you lift up, every phone call you make to check on a neighbor, every note of encouragement you send.

And today we consider that the whole point of this gospel is that John hopes that what happens to Thomas will also happen to you and to me. His gospel is written so that we may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that through believing we may have life in his name.

We receive life, and we receive a blessing, the blessing that is upon all those who believe without the benefit of seeing miracles and signs and wonders, and yet still see all of who Jesus is. We see the fullness of God's plan of salvation, we see the incarnate deity, the presence of God dwelling among us, the light that shines in the darkness of this world, that the darkness cannot quench. We see that in Christ, we are invited into intimacy with God, we are invited into a way of being in the world, a new reality, where we see not only the fullness of Christ, but the fullness of each other as children of God, and the fullness of everyone who lives in this world for whom Jesus died and to whom we are sent to bring peace.