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Second Sunday of Easter

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of John, and it is the story of Thomas.

Jesus, our life, you are alive. In the beauty of the earth and the rhythm of the seasons and the mystery of time and space, you are alive. Jesus, our life, you are alive. In the tenderness of touch and the heartbeat of intimacy, in the images of solitude, Jesus, our life, you are alive. In the creative possibility of the dullest conversation, the dreariest task, the most threatening event, Jesus our life, you are alive. To offer recreation to every unhealed hurt, to every deadened place, to every damaged heart, you set before us great choice: Jesus risen from the dead. Therefore, we choose life. Jesus is alive. Amen.

Monday through Friday I usually stay up to, oh, about midnight doing a number of things. Sometimes I'm sad because the Red Sox have lost another game. I'm trying to come down from an exciting victory or loss. But one of the things that I do on a regular basis is I listen to and watch David Letterman's top ten list. I find them to be entertaining most of the time and they do give me a bit of a chuckle. This morning I couldn't come up with ten, but I did come up with a list of six ways that you tell it's the Sunday after Easter. Bear with me:

- (6) There's not a lily available for purchase anywhere.
- (5) Wal-Mart has rotated the Easter candy to the clearance table and brought out the Mother's Day cards and gift ideas.
- (4) The stores have removed the stuffed bunnies from the shelves and replaced them with the newest line of Harry Potter action figures.
- (3) You have no trouble finding a seat in church, even if you were late for worship.
- (2) The number of visitors in the worship service has dropped dramatically.

And the number one way you can tell it's the Sunday after Easter:

- (1) The number of people who look like visitors but are actually church members who haven't been here for a while has dropped dramatically.

I welcome you here this second Sunday after Easter which, in most churches, is known as

Low Sunday. As I noted in my sermon three weeks ago, I said that on the Sunday after Easter we normally tell the story of Doubting Thomas and his response to the resurrected Jesus. And on this day many preachers will talk about the nature of doubt and how doubt is a healthy emotion. All of us doubt at some times in our lives. However, doubt is a somewhat intellectual exercise -- very cerebral. It's possible to have some doubts about some aspects of Christian faith and still continue serving Jesus as if you have no doubt at all. We know that to a certain extent. This was true of Mother Teresa, one of the great saints who ever lived; but it's been true of many saints throughout the ages. All of us doubt from time to time -- that goes with having a brain.

But my purpose this morning is not to focus on doubt, but on an experience and an emotion that grips many saints of God much more deeply than doubt. The emotion is disillusionment. And that brings me back to Thomas.

A few weeks ago in my sermon I called him Daring Thomas. I felt it was a more appropriate name than Doubting Thomas. The reason I said that was that on one occasion Jesus was returning to Judea where his life was in danger, and the disciples urged Jesus not to go. But it was Thomas -- Daring Thomas -- who declared, "Let us also go that we may die with him." It was a heart-felt declaration of Thomas' loyalty to Jesus. He was willing to give his life for the man he believed to be the anointed one of God, the Messiah.

But today I am dealing, not with Daring Thomas; today I am dealing with Disillusioned Thomas. I believe this is a more accurate description than Doubting Thomas. After Jesus' crucifixion Thomas is thoroughly disillusioned. In his mind Jesus has let him down. You see, Thomas is a very intense young man as I have already noted. He was willing to drop everything and to die for Jesus, but like all the other disciples he thought Jesus fit the common expectation of a Messiah, someone who would restore the glory of Israel, someone who would throw off the yoke of the despised Romans. Thomas believed that right up until the time the soldiers drove nails into Jesus' hands and feet. How could the Messiah possibly be put to death? Thomas wondered with horror. The Messiah should wear a crown of gold, not a crown of thorns, and had it all been a pipedream, had he sold them a bill of goods? Now the other disciples were saying Jesus was raised from the dead. "Yeah, right!" thinks Thomas to himself. "Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me."

And so just for today, we're going to call Thomas "Disillusioned Thomas." Have you ever been disillusioned? -- with a marriage perhaps, or with a career, or a friend, or a child, maybe with a clergy person, or someone you looked up to; it happens, and it hurts. Thomas was disillusioned because I think he misunderstood why Jesus came into the world. He was not alone. Right up until he ascended into heaven, Jesus was surrounded by people who loved him but did not understand him. They expected him to redeem Israel and to throw off the yoke of Rome. And, of course, he would redeem Israel and all of humankind though not in the way that they expected.

So all of the disciples were disillusioned and disappointed and dejected, and Thomas slower to accept the resurrection than the others. It may have been because he had been more intense in his devotion to Jesus than others. He was willing to die for Jesus. Peter had denied Jesus, Judas had betrayed him, but Thomas was willing to die for him.

Thomas' expectations

had been higher, so perhaps his fall from faith had been farther. He simply did not realize that Jesus' suffering and death had been a necessary part of God's plan.

Every once in a while I run into a person who has grown disillusioned with God. Usually at the heart of that disillusionment is a misunderstanding of the way that God works in this world. They expect God to work according to their plans. But God works in God's own way and according to God's own timetable. Some people can't, they just can't deal with that. Let's face it; there is much in life that none of us understands. I dealt with this many times before, of course, but many people are deeply concerned when God works in a different way from what we expect. Well, in my estimation, God does overdo it sometimes also -- not really -- but that's how it seems to me. And some people with a weak faith can't handle it. They become bitter; they blame God, and disillusionment sets in, and disillusionment very much like that of Thomas.

Some of you have been there, at least for a while. If you haven't yet, give yourself time. Fortunately, this is not the end of the story. Thomas was dejected and disappointed and disillusioned. A friend he loved was dead. More than that, a teacher who he revered and looked up to, would give his life for, had let him down.

But Thomas didn't drop out of the fellowship. This is so important. Thomas was there with the other disciples when they met together after Jesus' resurrection. He could have made excuses, he could have stayed home and wrapped himself in gloom and despair. Who could have blamed him. Why should he have to listen to a fairytale about his dead friend being raised from the dead? "Unless I see the nails in his hands," Thomas said adamantly, "and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe." But still, Thomas went to be with the other disciples. If you will, he still went to church. I see it happen all the time in my thirty-one years of ministry. A person goes through a difficult time when they feel that God has let them down, and the first thing they do is drop out of the fellowship. They miss one Sunday, then a second, and before very long going to church takes far more effort than staying home. And friends, I think you know it, and I know it for sure; that's always a mistake. This is where people who care about you are looking. Thomas was hurt, but still went to church. He still didn't have the answers he was seeking. He still didn't understand why Jesus was dead, but at least he didn't cut himself off from the fellowship of faith. And in that fellowship of faith, the risen Jesus appeared to Thomas.

We all know the story. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came among them and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." And then he turned to Thomas and

said to him, “Put your finger here, see my hands, reach out your hand and put it in my side; stop doubting and believe.” And Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” And Thomas went out to become a great Christian missionary leader. My guess is that his time of disillusionment and doubt actually left him stronger than he was before. It happens more often than you can imagine. People go through a time of testing, and they come out better rather than bitter. In their time of need they feel the comforting presence of Jesus, and something wonderful happens in their life. In their hearts they cry out, “My Lord and my God!” And the darkness that has enveloped them becomes as bright as today.

Here’s how: Maintain your connections to the fellowship of saints. Let the people in the church love you and pray for you. Maintain an openness to the comforting and healing power of the Holy Spirit. Give Jesus a chance to come to you and show you his hands and his feet for he has been where you are. He wants to help you, like Thomas, to move from being disillusioned to being a dynamic person. It can happen. When you’re down, don’t give up! Trust in the risen Jesus and your Christian friends and you will endure.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs