

Easter 2 A Sermon
John 20:19-31
April 16, 2023

“Where We Experience Easter”
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¹⁹When 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 leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As God has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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.”

²⁶A 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.” ²⁷Then 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.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.

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How many of you know the comic strip Hagar the Horrible? Quite a few! It's one of the world's favorites. Hagar the Horrible is a medieval Norwegian Viking. In one strip we find Hagar kneeling in prayer. "It's not easy to believe in you God," he says. "We never see you. How come you never show yourself? How do we know you even exist..." Next, we see...

- a flower springing into life beside Hagar,
- a volcano erupting in the distance,
- an eclipse of sun turning the sky black,
- a star shooting across the stratosphere;
- a tidal wave rushing over Hagar,
- lightning flashing,
- a bush beginning to burn,
- a stone rolling away from the entrance to a tomb.

Hagar pulls himself from the mud, dripping wet, surrounded by darkness. "OK, OK," he says, "I give up! Every time I bring up this subject, all we get is interruptions."¹

In our reading this morning from John's gospel, the disciples too seem to be doubting. Following her encounter with the risen Christ on Easter morn, John's gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene went straight to the disciples with the wonderful news. "And what do the disciples do in response to Mary Magdalene's proclamation of the risen Jesus, of abundant life, of a world forever changed and open with possibility? They hide in fear behind locked doors."² Our text tells us that they were afraid. Perhaps they were afraid of the religious leaders, as John's version of the story indicates. Or, maybe they were afraid of the Romans who'd executed Jesus. Or, just maybe, they were afraid of Jesus himself—that

¹ "Hagar's Search for God," [Storiesforpreaching.com](https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/doubt/): <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/doubt/>.

² Jaime Clark-Soles. "Commentary on John 20:19-31," [Workingpreaching.org](https://www.workingpreacher.org), April 23, 2017: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-2019-31-12>.

he actually had risen from the grave and may not be too pleased with them. After all, eleven out of twelve of them had deserted Jesus in his hour of greatest need and Peter had denied him three times. Either they didn't believe the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ or they didn't want to. So, in response to Mary Magdalene's proclamation of the risen Jesus, of abundant life, of a world forever changed and open with possibility, they barricaded themselves into that house, hiding in fear.

When you think about it, that's actually the way a lot of Christians and churches seem to respond to the Easter news too—keeping faith quiet and church doors tightly locked against the outside world except for an hour on Sunday morning. One author points this out in a humorous rendition of the reformation anthem, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” If you'd like to compare them, it's number 65 in the blue hymnal. Here are the reworked lyrics for verse one:

*A mighty fortress is our church,
a bulwark uninviting.
It is a shelter 'gainst our foes.
Will we reach out? Unlikely.
We'll keep them all outside!
That mongreled, vexing tide!
Our bodies they may kill,
or raid our coffers 'til
our good name has surely died.³*

Like the disciples, the church's response to the Easter good news is too often hiding in fear behind locked doors. But that didn't, and still doesn't, seem to stop Jesus from getting inside. John tells us that Jesus entered the house anyway, stood among them, spoke peace, showed them his wounds, and sent them forth with his spirit to continue his work in the world.

³ “A Mighty Fortress Is Our Church.” Factsandrends.net, April 12, 2016,
<https://factsandrends.net/2016/08/12/a-mighty-fortress-is-our-church/>.

One disciple, however, was missing—Thomas. Where he was or what he was doing, the text doesn't reveal. We only know that he wasn't in that locked house when Jesus showed up, confirmed Mary's story, and sent them forth with his very breath to continue his ministry. When the others told Thomas what had happened, John tells us that Thomas was incredulous. *"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,"* he is reported to have said. Poor Thomas. History would remember him as the great doubter. In a book I read recently called "Beyond Belief," the author makes a very compelling case that the writer of John's gospel actually had an axe to grind with Thomas and used his gospel to discredit Thomas.

Whatever the motivation behind John's words, the fact remains that Thomas will forever be remembered as "Doubting Thomas." But, as I've mentioned before, I like Thomas. In the signature line of his emails, one of my favorite professors concludes all of his electronic correspondence with the words of the deceased Unitarian minister and Harvard professor, James Luther Adams, who wrote: *"An unexamined faith is not worth having, for it can be true only by accident. A faith worth having is faith worth discussing and testing."* I resonate with this sentiment and Thomas seemed to as well. John may have told this little anecdote to discredit Thomas, but he just endeared him to me all the more.

On the other side of Easter and his encounter with the risen Christ, Thomas, like the other disciples, went forth proclaiming good news in word and in deed. In fact, legends tell us that he travelled much further than the other disciples—all the way to modern-day India where he is said to have built a magnificent palace for a king, planted churches with over 17,000 new believers, worked miracles, and boldly shared Jesus' teachings. Thomas' was no puny faith!

The truth is, Christianity is not about blind belief or unchallenged assumptions or unexamined faith. Intellectual curiosity, scientific inquiry, empirical study, doubt...these are not enemies of faith. We, like

Thomas, can boldly ask our questions—the BIG questions about life and death, about God, about suffering and injustice, about meaning, and about Jesus. In community we seek answers through discussion and deliberation, study and observation, employing all the faculties of our minds and our senses.

But, also like Thomas, we are still called out of the locked room and the fortress church to proclaim good news to the world in word and in deed. We are called out and into the places where fear presides, death lingers, and injustice rules. We are called into the places of human need and earth's need. We are called out and into those places with a message of good news—with food for hungry people, clothes for naked people and shelter for homeless people, medicine and companion-care for sick people, advocacy for victims of injustice, friendship for lonely people, and an invitation *into* community for all people. And we're called into something else too; we're called into experience.

Amidst the questing and questioning, seeking and searching; amidst the calling to go out and minister to those in need and the calling to invite others into community; amidst all that, we're also called to experience the Easter Christ for ourselves—to see the face of Jesus in those we serve and serve with; to experience resurrection in our careers and callings, our relationships and recreations, our pastimes and passions, our hopes and our dreams.

We do tremendous disservice to Easter when we make it about faith and doubt or belief and unbelief. Easter is meant to be experienced. Resurrection is meant to be experienced. The resurrected Christ, in whatever form it may take for us, is meant to be experienced.

Yes, we can experience the resurrected Christ as the disciples did in that locked room. I believe that we can experience the resurrected Christ in our fortress church. But, Easter calls us out of those safe and solitary places and into a world in sore need of resurrection. May we follow. Amen.