

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

Thomas and the Resurrection of Faith

*Preached by the Reverend Anne F. C. Richards, Senior Assistant
2 Easter, April 11, 2010, John 20:19-31*

For ages and ages, today has been called “Low Sunday” I guess because last Sunday was Easter and we were all on a “high” because there were over 900 people in church and now there are only something like 250. Which isn’t too bad, considering attendance at many churches on Low Sunday often bottoms out at 40 or 50. But I love Low Sunday because we always have the story of Doubting Thomas on that day. I also love Low Sunday because it’s the flip side of Easter and as such has its advantages. It’s like the day after Christmas, when you have a little peace and quiet and get to enjoy the tree and the fireplace; or like the day after Thanksgiving, when you get to have turkey sandwiches with cranberry sauce and dressing and mayo.

So Thomas is the turkey of Low Sunday. And at first glance, he certainly acts like one. What’s with this guy? The risen Lord appears to his best friends and he refuses to believe it? He thinks he’s Hebrew National, with his higher standard?

Well, I don’t think Thomas is a fool at all. I think his insistence on concrete proof shows us something really important that happened at all the resurrection appearances, something that has a lot to do with what the appearances mean for us. Because Jesus appeared to people for a reason beyond showing them that he had been restored to life and had been vindicated by God. The resurrection

appearances were *for something*. They had a purpose. Let me try to explain.

First, we need to remember the context in which the appearances happened, their emotional and spiritual gestalt. Jesus didn’t appear on a blank slate; he didn’t appear to people indifferent about seeing him. He appeared to his friends when they were in deep sorrow and guilt over their loss and betrayal of him. How would *you* feel if a person in whose murder you had been complicit returned from the dead to pay you a visit? And the disciples were afraid, afraid for their lives, because the news of the resurrection was not good news to many people there at the start. Both Roman and Jewish leadership stood to lose even more ground if news of the resurrection proved credible, and so that explains why the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in today’s gospel happens in the upper room where they had had the Last Supper – because they were in hiding. These are broken people.

Another piece of context is that the first resurrection appearance was to Mary Magdalene, the only one of his close disciples not to betray him. And it happened right there in the garden where Jesus’ tomb was, and so the sense we get is that this appearance happens so soon after the resurrection itself that Jesus is still there, hanging around in the garden, perhaps even waiting for Mary to come as he must have known she would. And

you notice that when she can't find his body in the tomb, she is filled with sorrow and she says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." After a death, we have a body. But now even Jesus' body is gone. It seems that he has been completely erased. And so to Mary at this moment, Jesus is not only dead, but also "taken away," lost, stolen and she experiences the despair and emptiness of an utterly God-less universe.

And then Jesus calls her name, "Mary!" Just as Adam called Eve into existence in a garden by naming her, so Jesus calls Mary back into existence in a garden by naming her. As at the creation, something brand new is beginning. And that's why Mary Magdalene is called "the first apostle," because she is the first and primary link to the resurrection of Jesus and he commissions her to tell the other disciples about it.

All the rest of the resurrection appearances are in a sense derivative of this first one. That evening, when a few of the fearful and discouraged disciples are leaving Jerusalem, the center of their hope, Jesus appears to them and by interpreting Scripture to them and breaking bread with them, he re-starts the church (which even to this day lives through the breaking open of Scripture and the breaking open of bread) and they return to Jerusalem to spread the good news. On Easter morning, we have the physical resurrection of Jesus. And so on Easter evening, we see the resurrection of something intangible, the resurrection of hope.

A few days later, we see others of the disciples who have also left Jerusalem to return to Galilee to go back to their old jobs as fishermen. But they aren't catching anything. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, nothing is working for them. They are empty and purposeless. And Jesus appears to them, and cooks them breakfast, and he talks with Peter, who has denied him three times, and

yet he doesn't ask for an explanation; he doesn't confront Peter with what he has done. He says, "Do you love me?" And Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Those have to be some of the most beautiful words ever said. And Jesus repeats the question three times, and Peter answers it, three times, to undo the triple betrayal. He gives Peter something to do: "Feed my sheep." The word "forgiveness" is not even mentioned, and yet forgiveness has happened. And so again we see the resurrection of something intangible, the resurrection of love.

Now, finally to our friend Thomas. People have been making fun of him for centuries and calling him a bean-counter, but I think we can all see ourselves in him. His response of disbelief is only natural. That being said, Thomas might fall on the concrete end of the personality spectrum. He is the one who said when Jesus predicted his passion and death, "Let us go die with him!" That didn't pan out. And his character hasn't changed. He responds now, as before, to the surface of things. He can't see outside his own imagination. And yet Jesus responds graciously. Maybe Jesus appeared the first time when Thomas wasn't there for a reason – to let Thomas have the response he did, to let it all play out so he could graciously return on Thomas' own terms. In any case, Jesus gives Thomas what he needs. He comes back.

That's a good thing to keep in mind: that in response to what we ask for, God always gives us what we need. Remember the woman Fr. Peter told us about on Easter, the lady who has the experiences of Jesus who gives her messages to bring to people? She asked God to help her to live again, after the death of her son. And God gave her what she needed, along with something to do. God does this for all of us, but it will be different for each of us. Because God doesn't work with templates; he comes to us individually.

The story of Thomas is so wonderful because in that moment when Jesus offers his wounds to him, Thomas re-discovers not only Jesus but also himself. That's why he says not "It's the Lord!" but "*My* Lord and *my* God!" In that moment, Thomas knows not only that Jesus has been raised, but that his own identity has been raised. He sees, he knows. The gap has been breached. And so here we see the resurrection of faith.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus, Peter, and Thomas are made whole again by discovering that Jesus has reached into their broken-apartness, their falseness to re-establish them at the core where God has in fact never left them. The resurrection appearances are all about that central fact: that no matter who we are and what we do, God is already with us, waiting graciously for us to remember him, to recognize him, to read Scripture and break bread with him, to say we love him in worship and prayer, to build lives of faith that witness to hope. Fundamentalists might tell you that God has a plan for your life. My friends, there is no plan for your life. God does not have a master chart up there for everyone and He is not waiting for you to read His mind to find out what it is. This is the only plan God has for you: Faith, hope, and love. The specifics are for you to figure out. That's what makes life with God an adventure and a new creation. Faith, hope, and love are not abstract virtues functioning

somewhere out there apart from us. They need bodies to make them real, just as the resurrection needed a body.

One thing you can be assured of: that like Mary Magdalene, you will always be able to hear God calling your name. That's what the whole life of the church is designed to do – to open up the space *inside* each of us and *among* all of us where we can hear our names being called by God and where we can accept from God the things he wants us to do, just as he commissioned each of the disciples in those resurrection appearances: to spread the Good News; to feed his sheep; to form and re-form his church; and like Thomas, to reach out our hands and put them in his side in prayer and in worship, where it all begins and ends. Faith, hope, love. If we have these things, St Mark's itself can be a resurrection appearance for the world.

The resurrection of Jesus happened once and for all. God did it for Jesus, and for us. The resurrection of faith, hope, and love: that's the resurrection of humanity, and that's for us to do.

Amen.