

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 2nd Sunday of Easter, April 28, 2019.

If I was to ask you to label today, my guess is that most of you would say the First Sunday after Easter. Our insert, however, calls today the Second Sunday of Easter. Both labels are valid. If we think of Easter as an event, which it was, then today would be the First Sunday after the event. Makes perfect sense. If, however, we think of Easter as a Season, then today would be the Second Sunday of the Easter Season. Also makes perfect sense. Take your pick.

What we call this particular Sunday is much less important than what we do with it. Indeed the whole Easter Season is about what we do in response to the Risen Christ. God raised Jesus from the dead for a reason, and that reason involves you and me. Having witnessed the resurrection – the passive side, if you will – we are now expected to be a witness – the active side.

Think of opening a present that which includes a set of directions. If we have been hoping for this particular present, we can't wait to follow the directions. If it is not something we have been hoping for, we might well set the present and the instructions aside and focus on the other gifts. Who knows when or if we'll get back to the Risen Christ and his directions. The gift box might be destined for a closet or basement or perhaps returned for a credit.

Imagine returning Easter for a credit of some sort, as if there could be a better present. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But it happens. Many of us have been there at one time or another. But that's a topic for another day.

Back to witnessing for Jesus as the expected response to Jesus rising from the dead. Was this the experience of everybody? No. But it was the experience of those featured in our gospel today (**John 20:19-31**).

Some of the disciples, who had witnessed the crucifixion, but only heard about the resurrection, were gathered in a safe-house for fear of the authorities. The authorities wanted to squelch the growing empty-tomb rumor. The crucifixion was meant to get rid of the Jesus problem. The empty tomb report simply prolonged the problem.

Well, the Risen Christ did not cooperate with the authorities. Instead he appeared to the disciples and said, "Peace be with you." Then he showed them his wounds. At which point the disciples rejoiced. Another of the disciples, Thomas, was not present at this gathering and, when told about it, simply didn't believe it. A week later, Jesus appeared to Thomas and invited him to confirm the Lord's alive-ness by touching him. This physical experience made a believer out of doubting Thomas. "My Lord and my God."

This passage hits home, because we identify with Thomas more readily than with the other disciples. All of them had initial doubts about the resurrection, but it was only Thomas, as far we know, who openly questioned the reality of new life. Thomas speaks for us: "Prove it. Unless I see the marks of the nails in your hands, I will not believe." Jesus responds, "Go ahead, Thomas, please touch my wounds." Thomas accepts the invitation, recognizes his Lord, and believes.

This is an experience that would help us, isn't it? We want to be sure. We wish we could confirm our faith the way Thomas did. We wish there was a set of directions that we could follow. Maybe a You-Tube video.

Well, Thomas believed without the Internet. He did it by being in the right place at the right time. He missed the first gathering when Jesus appeared to the disciples, but he didn't miss the second one. Let's take a look at the participants in the second gathering.

- There were believers, who weren't always believers. When they heard Jesus from the cross utter "It is finished," they thought it was finished.
- There were close family and friends who agreed to care for the body. Not dozens, certainly not thousands. Only a few. No camera, no mics. Only hearts full of love. In the midst of their sadness, the Risen Christ spoke to them, making them eye-witnesses.
- There were also some others identified in our gospel today. Those who had learned from Jesus and risked their own lives. And now he had overcome even death to reinforce his love for them.

- Then there was Thomas himself. He wanted to believe. He wanted to have his faith restored. He wanted his teacher to be alive and well.
- And the most important ingredient of all was Jesus himself. He made himself available to those who had walked with him to the Cross, and even to those who had not.

Well, where are we in this mix? Can we be an ingredient too? Surely we qualify. We have our doubts. We are Thomas. But we also want desperately to have the resurrection validated. How we wish we could have this experience.

Well, guess what. We are having this experience. For some, the Easter experience is engrained. For others, the experience is brand new. For some of us, doubts surface, but we keep coming back. We keep hoping. We stay open for some kind of experience comparable to the one Thomas had. “Let me touch you, Lord. I want to believe. I want to be part of this amazing Story of God’s love, covering thousands of years since the Resurrection and billions of years before your birth, life and death.”

And guess what else. The more we open ourselves to this experience of faith, we realize that there is a leading role for us. We can be witnesses. We are witnesses. In this great Cosmic drama, there are things for us to do and lines for us to say. We weren’t there then. But we are here now. And there are lots of people out there, who, like us, long to be involved in some kind of life-saving Story. This morning’s Psalm (**Psalm 118:14-29**) refers to the object of this longing as “the gates of righteousness.”

Remember the Flowering Cross from last week. What a powerful symbol. We brought our best, and we added it to the mix, and we created something really beautiful and really inviting, and then we went inside and shared the same meal that Jesus had with the disciples, where Thomas was present.

Well, we are present too. Hungry for confirmation, yes, but also deeply grateful for the signs of that confirmation that we see in one another. We are not Alpha and Omega, but we are somewhere in between, embraced by the Creator of the Universe in and through the person of Jesus Christ. A figure of history, yes, but also alive and well in our own day, thanks to generations of witnesses, including

people like us. Some would call this the power of belief. Thomas called it the power of touch. We can touch too.

During this Easter Season, we will be reading regularly from the Acts of the Apostles (**Acts 5:27-32**). These lessons are about people who witnessed in the first century following the Resurrection. But the witnessing didn't stop after one century. It continues through the likes of you and me. We are writing our own chapter in the Book of Acts. Let that sink in. We are readers certainly, but we are also authors.

Is there purpose behind our involvement, including our presence here today? Oh yes. Here's how today's passage from Revelation (**Revelation 1:4-8**) describes this on-going effort: "So it is to be. Amen."