

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Second Sunday of Easter, April 8, 2018.

The title of today's sermon is "One Week Later."

The two leading characters are the Risen Lord and the disciple Thomas. The setting is a safe-house somewhere in Jerusalem (**John 20:19-31**). "Safe-house" because the disciples were afraid. At this point, a few had seen the Risen Lord, but most had not. They had just heard that he had risen.

They gathered in the safe-house "for fear of the Jews." The religious and secular leaders had watched Jesus die on the cross, and they had it on good authority that he had been buried in a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea. As far as the authorities were concerned, the Jesus problem was solved. Life could get back to occupation normal. And anything that upset that normality would not be received well.

The disciples knew this, and they weren't sure how the authorities would react if word got out that Jesus had risen from the dead. The authorities wouldn't believe the report, but they would have to deal with those whose spirits would be lifted by the report. Well, if the authorities could hurt Jesus, they could certainly hurt any disciple who stubbornly insisted that Jesus was alive and well. The disciples had reason to be afraid.

Well, into this safe-house setting Jesus came and showed the disciples his hands and his side, and said to them, "Peace be with you." Thomas was not present at this gathering, but he quickly heard about it from the others. His reaction was "Unless I see the mark of the nails and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." He doubted their story, and thus acquired the nickname "Doubting," that sticks to this day.

One week later, the disciples gathered again, and this time Thomas is with them. And so was Jesus. Jesus came and stood among them and said, as he had one week earlier, "Peace be with you." And then Jesus spoke directly 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." Thomas did so, and answered, "My Lord and my God."

It is clear that Jesus had an agenda on this second visit. He went right to Thomas. He wanted people to believe, particularly those who had been with him for the last three years, from the time of his baptism to his death on a cross. If he could convince Thomas, his message of “Peace be with you” would gain momentum. At that point, Thomas was key. It took a week, but the week was worth it, worth it to Jesus and worth it to Thomas.

You and I are Thomas. We have our doubts. God knows this, and doesn’t give up on us, no matter how long the doubt lasts or how deep the doubt resides. Whatever it takes – one week, one year, a lifetime – the Risen Christ will tell us again and again “Peace be with you.”

When we finally respond, as Thomas did, with the words of belief, “My Lord and my God,” we are reborn. That’s the verb in this morning’s Collect: “Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ’s Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith.”

This is exactly what the author of this morning’s lesson from the First Epistle of John (**I John 1:1-2:2**) has in mind. We’re not sure if the author of this letter is the author of the Gospel of John. It doesn’t really matter for our discussion this morning. What does matter is the immense joy the author describes. “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us.”

The author is reborn. If the author had any doubts, these doubts have vanished, presumably because sins have been forgiven and hearts have been cleansed. This lesson, this declaration, is powerful. “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Deep appreciation of an undeserved gift – and that’s who Jesus is – leads to letter-writing and other forms of sharing. You and I might not be letter-writers, but we probably share our thanks in other ways. Maybe it’s in simple acts of kindness. Maybe it’s in heroic acts of sacrifice. Maybe it’s in responsible acts of

leadership. Maybe it's in private acts of prayer. There are all sorts of versions of "My Lord and my God."

One week later. That's all it took for Thomas. For you and me, the time interval might be longer or shorter. What's important to remember is that the interval between doubting and sharing joy is up to us. God is always there, offering. Christ, the undeserved gift, is always available. What you and I are in charge of is the response. And here there are two basic choices: "I'm not there yet" or "My Lord and my God."

The choice we make determines in part how we relate to the world, including how we relate to one another. We see an example of "relating" in this morning's lesson from the Acts of the Apostles (**Acts 4:32-35**). People helping one another, not through coercion, but through choice. "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common ... and distributed to each as any had need."

Now, this might not be our economic system of choice, but, like these early disciples, we do like to help. We feel good when we help. So good in fact that we like to share this feeling. And we like to give credit where credit is due. So, to whom do we give credit for the joy of giving? Well, to all sorts of people, including family and friends and strangers and authors and artists, and, yes, to God.

It took Thomas one week to figure it out. Our experience with the Risen Lord is probably different. But there is one thing we have in common with Thomas, and that is that, when we sense the presence of Jesus in our life, we want to share that feeling with someone else. The sensation is simply too powerful to keep to ourselves. That's why believers gather. That's why you and I gather, and, in our own way, share the joy.

Our opening hymn today began "He is risen, he is risen! Tell it out with joyful voice." The joyful voice of Thomas uttered these words: "My Lord and my God." The question for you and me in this Easter Season is what will our joyful voice say? Amen.