

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!) Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As evening approached on the that first Easter day almost two thousand years ago, Jesus' disciples were locked away in their Jerusalem hideout, fearing for their lives. Their future was uncertain. They had pegged their hopes on Jesus of Nazareth. They thought he was the one – the one who was going to change things for the better for them. Maybe they didn't know exactly how he was going to do that, but he seemed to have a focus, a connection to God, a teaching with authority. He was great at responding to his critics and putting them in their place. He was able to restore people's health and relationships. He could even raise his dead friend Lazarus back to life. But then it all went horribly wrong. In less than twenty-four hours Jesus was betrayed, arrested, tried, and executed. The disciples' whole world came crashing down in the blink of an eye.

Has that ever happened to you? I know that it has for some of you in this room, because you have told me. But I also know that I don't know all the stories that there are to tell, to say nothing of all the stories out there beyond these walls. I think that we are living through a particularly fragile time in recent years. It's clear that there are many people who have experienced disappointment and disillusionment in our society, and many others who live in fear of still worse to come. We fear for our future and the future of our children. We fear for our planet in the face of climate change. We fear for our country, our government, our way of life. So it's not hard to get where the disciples were at on that first Easter evening behind locked doors, afraid that they might be hunted down and put to death just like Jesus.

And then all of that changed for the disciples when Jesus finally showed up among them, in spite of their locked doors. As quickly as everything fell apart it all came back together. Jesus was alive, impossibly raised to life again, and their lives were completely transformed – this time in a good way. I want to make three quick observations about this story that I think apply to us and our lives of faith as we live into the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

First, in spite of the fact that Jesus had been alive for at least 12 hours by the time he shows up in the disciples' room, the reality of his resurrection had not connected with their reality. They were still living their lives as though Jesus was dead and gone. The news of his empty tomb had not changed that. They couldn't make sense of it, and they were not inclined to believe in something as unprecedented as resurrection from the dead. Even Mary, who had her own difficulty coming to grips with the reality of Jesus' resurrection, was not able to convince the disciples of this, even though she had finally seen him with her own eyes, even though she had spoken to him and touched him. It is only when Jesus appears to them himself and shows them his wounded hands and side that their reality finally begins to change. They see, and only when they see do they then believe.

So it should come as no surprise at all that their report to Thomas – who was absent from Jesus' first appearance to them – is equally ineffective. Thomas will not believe unless he sees Jesus himself and touches his wounds – just like they didn't believe Mary when she brought them the news. So, as I never tire of saying, it's very unfair to Thomas that he gets labeled as the doubting one when he did nothing different from anyone else in the story.

That leads directly to my second observation, that seeing is believing. When Jesus does show up, when he finally makes himself known to each of them personally, their lives are changed. And not only that, but their whole experience of Jesus *before* that moment and for the rest of their natural lives takes on new meaning. This is a really simple point, and there's not much more to it

than that. But it is the central and pivotal point in Jesus' relationship to the disciples and to us. When Jesus shows up, faith happens. And only when Jesus shows up does faith happen.

Third, it's our job as the church, as Jesus' latter-day disciples, to make Jesus show up in the lives of others. That's the whole point of John's gospel, and he tells us so right here in his original ending. His gospel is a resource for bringing Jesus into the lives of those who don't have the option of seeing him the way his first disciples did. Each of us came to trust God in Jesus Christ because somebody did that for us, made Jesus come alive in our lives and in our hearts. Maybe it was a parent or a grandparent. Maybe it was a spouse, maybe even a child or a friend, but somebody made that happen for us by embodying the love, the mercy, and the forgiveness of Christ and in that way bringing the presence of Christ to us. The rest was the work of the Holy Spirit, breathed into our lives at baptism and at work in us ever since.

This gospel reading about Thomas and the other disciples is one of my very favorites because it is so real. The disciples' first attempts at evangelism, at telling the good news, are complete failures. They do not move the needle. It is only Jesus' presence that makes the difference. If they're allowed to fail, then so are we. But we know that their failure is not the end of the story. We know that Jesus did not give up on them. By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, the church was born, and then it moved out in all directions from Jerusalem and brought the presence of Christ into the lives of the generations that followed them. And that is why we are here, too. It is why we exist as the church. It is why we gather each week around word and sacrament. We gather to experience the presence of Jesus Christ for us, to bear that presence of Christ to one another, and then to take that presence of Christ out into the world around us. Because it is that presence that is able to cast out the fear that plagues us and our times, and it is that presence that can bring to us the genuine, real-deal, authentic and abundant life that God has intended for us all along. Just as the presence of Jesus changed the lives of his first followers after his resurrection, so it continues to change lives today. Let us then be faithful to that central, defining task of the church. May it cast out our fear and open our hearts to God's ongoing creative and redeeming work in us and the world. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the presence of Christ, and make us fitting witnesses of the good news that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)