

“A Touching Beginning” – John 20:19-31 – Easter 2 – May 1, 2011

Our Gospel reading is, naturally enough on this first Sunday after Easter, the appearance of Jesus as the risen Christ in the room where the disciples had gathered. The text tells us, “and the doors of the house ... were locked for fear ...” I dare say they were! Things were going so bad so fast for the disciples. A few short days ago all was cheering and happiness. Jesus’ time had come, and it seemed that so had theirs. Riding the wave, his followers had exulted in the power, the attention, the royal welcome.

And now, all that golden adoration had turned to lead, or more exactly to a stone covering a tomb. His closest followers were devastated - Jesus was dead; arrested, tried, convicted and executed. Their whole world was in chaos, and it continued to get worse ... now his body was missing, Mary had gone off the deep end with grief, babbling about seeing him walking and talking near the tomb, and the temple police were searching for them! The fear, the anguish, the terror. And now the ultimate terror, this person who looks like Jesus standing there. Were they losing our minds? Who is this? Is it a trick? “Peace be with you” How can there be any peace when the world is disintegrating around their ears?!

“Peace be with you.” Could the disciples have even heard it? They must have, because it was remembered and written, and perhaps in the confusion and terror it was one of those curious details that sticks in the mind. One word was sufficient for Mary to recognize him, but the disciples needed more than that. Perhaps no amount of words would have been sufficient to break through their anguish and terror, and so silent actions reached and touched the frightened disciples, as Jesus showed them his hands, and his sides. It’s ironic, for it was the signs of his death that were enough to break through to them and convince them he was alive. Signs of death, turned into signs of life. Life demonstrated and confirmed with the gift of the very breath of life, the Holy Spirit.

Can you imagine the scene? Can you imagine the giddy excitement of all in that room, changed in an instant from grief and terror into glad exultation by the unbelievable appearance of Jesus, risen from the grave? Can you imagine how they must have sounded like fools, babbling to each other? I wonder if they had the character to apologize to Mary, now that they were behaving the same as she had? Can’t you just see how they appeared to Thomas, swarming around him, each one a little bit louder and more excited than the other as they try to convince him they had indeed seen Jesus? What chaos! What confusion! Who can blame Thomas for being somewhat skeptical?

And then it was Thomas’ turn. A week later, just when things were settling down, just when the trauma was turning to a memory, just when the disciples were starting to get a grip on life again, once again Jesus stands among them. Again their reaction must have been one of fear, for again he calms them, “peace be with you”. Jesus demonstrated both that he already knew what Thomas needed, and also that he was (and is) the compassionate Lord, full of understanding and caring. “Put your finger here ... reach out and touch me”, he invites Thomas, who can only respond with all the passion that is in him, “my Lord and my God!” What a powerful, spine-tingling moment it was then, and still is now.

It is easy to slip into thinking this is the end of the story – Thomas is convinced, Thomas believes in Jesus, everybody goes home happy, ta-da – the end. Even the closing two verses of the chapter fall into this same state of blissful ending ... providing a wrap-up kind of atmosphere, with what sounds a lot like a final footnote. The New Revised Standard Version of the bible even adds a title with a concluding “The Purpose of This Book”. True, there is another chapter that follows, with accounts of more appearances of Jesus to his disciples, but there is a certain finality to the verse “But 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.”

So perhaps we can view Thomas' statement of belief as being not so much that he believed in Jesus (which he certainly did), but that he believed he could have life – that he could live with that knowledge. Now what we have is not an ending, but a beginning. This is really the most pivotal moment and point of the whole Christ story. Here is the moment when the signs of death become the signs of life, and a believer inherits that life. This is the moment when the disciples – those who follow – are transformed into the apostles – those who are sent. This is that life-changing moment when they had to understand that their belief in Jesus was not just a “Hosanna” kind of joyride, but that they had committed their entire life to him. Thomas may well have been the first to see clearly the depth and the significance of what believing in the resurrection of Jesus might entail, the kind of life that would follow.

In our 21st Century, highly-independent mindset that sounds a bit like a life sentence in prison, doesn't it – committing one's whole life entirely to Jesus. But without a doubt that is what the early disciples of Jesus did; however, instead of seeing it as giving up life, they clearly understood it as having received life, new and meaningful and fulfilling life. These encounters with the risen Christ were for them, and for us, not the end of the story but a touching beginning of a life-long story. “That you may believe ... and that you may have life”. That is not so much a summary of what had happened as it is a statement of purpose of what will happen.

Sadly the church, and by that I mean most of the Western or North American church, has lost sight of what Thomas and the other disciples saw, namely that belief in Christ leads to a life dedicated to Christ. Somehow the church at large drifted into a misunderstanding that being a follower of Christ, a Christian, is about ethics and appearances. Many also came to believe Christianity is about membership, about a kind of status that could be claimed or conferred. Churches of all kinds across our land fell into what is now being described as a “membership model”; indeed, our whole denomination is still somewhat geared that way. Statistics are kept and reported on members, and great attention has been paid to Reg Bibby's observations and conclusions as to the trends of those statistics. The general belief is that “bigger is better, bigger is more successful.”

A different kind of understanding is emerging today that attempts to recapture the essence of Thomas' insight - and indeed that of the other disciples as well, and of the faithful of the early church. You've heard me mention it a number of times, and I suspect you'll hear a lot more about it over the next decade or so. That 'new' understanding is called the “missional church” movement, and the term comes from a deliberate attempt to recapture the word ‘mission’. At the heart of this approach is an understanding that each congregation has a mission, is being called by God to a particular ministry in Christ's name. As Dr. Stephen Farris, the Dean of St. Andrew's Hall puts it, “the church does not have a mission, the mission of Christ has a church.” Alan Roxburgh, the keynote speaker at the recent presbytery Mission Event, defines the missional church as one that understands that God is active in the neighbourhood around them and seeks to understand how they can help in that activity.

Perhaps the main reason why a renewed or revived understanding discipleship is crucial as a congregation moves from a membership model to a missional model is that the focus of the congregation shifts at the same time. A congregation steeped in the ‘membership’ model tends to look inward and focus on itself, believing that the church exists to serve its members. These congregations are, in their later stages, characterized by declining numbers, aging members, worsening finances, undue attention to maintaining the building, existing programs and committees, and often talk only in terms of ‘survival’. Expectations are mutually low – the members don't expect much of their church, and the church doesn't expect much from its members. I think if I asked you to name three such congregations you could do so without much trouble.

Congregations that are moving towards what is being called the 'missional' model have turned their thinking around, and see the congregation existing not to serve the members, but that the members as committed disciples of Christ offer themselves in serving others in Christ's name. The whole focus moves from inward-looking to outward-acting, and there are such congregations that are alive, vibrant, financially-healthy and growing. I believe we are one of those congregations – barely started out on the road to whatever Emmaus God is calling us to, and with much to learn, but well-started on that road already.

Is that frightening? Certainly! Frightening enough to make you wonder if you're up to it, to wonder if your faith is strong enough, whether it's worth it to believe. Starts to sound a bit like Thomas, doesn't it? The disciples were terrified, and Thomas was even skeptical. But he overcame his fear and touched the risen Christ. The offer is there for us to touch the risen Christ as well, to have our faith affirmed, and to be set out on the beginning of a new and abundant life. The assurance is clear, that all that Christ did and said was so that we could believe, and in our believing have the new, rich, rewarding, fulfilling life that he promised. Peace be with you in that new life.