
Today’s Gospel reading, with the disciples hiding out in a locked house… and with Thomas famously doubting that Jesus had returned from the dead – (which – let’s be fair – is the same way the rest of them had reacted a few hours ago, that morning, when Mary Magdalene came and told them what she had seen at the tomb)… it kind of makes you look at the disciples in a new way. They’ve pretty much always been with Jesus up until now – we haven’t really had a chance to see what they’ll do when they are on their own… An that’s an important question now that – well – now that they are on their own. +++ +++ So, let’s think about what makes the disciples tick. +++ +++ Before they met Jesus, the 12 had made their way in the world the best they knew how – just like everybody else… Fishermen, a tax collector, tradesmen – we don’t know exactly what they all. But they each had found a way to earn a living. I’m sure they had their routines – their NORMAL patterns every day. +++ In some ways, maybe their “normal” was similar to your “normal” – take the morning, for instance. Does everyday start pretty much the same way for you? They do for me:: I get up around 6 with no alarm. I go downstairs with one of the dogs and let him out, I put the news on my ipad in the kitchen, I make coffee. At some point in there the dog comes in… Then I clean the kitchen if there’s anything left to do from the night before – maybe start the dishwasher – scrub the sink… When the coffee’s done, I take a cup to Linda. Then I go to my desk and start working. +++ We never really think about it, but the disciples must have had their own 1st century version of a “normal” morning – a “normal” day. +++ Like everyone else, they learned at an early age to trust their own eyes and ears – they kept their promises – they stayed away from trouble – they locked the door when they were afraid. +++ They had their own “normal.” +++ Then they met Jesus – and “normal” kind of got thrown out the window. +++ They followed him – they listened to his words. Every day, Jesus demonstrated generosity and love, he taught them to stand up for the weak and to forgive generously. He showed them how to be brave. +++ But, how much of it were they absorbing? It would be interesting to have had a chance to talk to a few of the disciples a month before they followed Jesus into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday – to ask them how they’ve changed these past few years… If their old “normal” had evolved at all… into something NEW – if Jesus had fundamentally changed them. +++ I’l bet they would have said “Yes – I’m not at all the same person I used to be.” And, they would’ve thought it was true…

Just three days ago, Peter, Thomas, Andrew, and the rest of the 12 had sat at a table with Jesus. He had washed their feet, prayed with them and for them… he had given them a New Commandment – a new way to live their lives in his name:: “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” They promised him they would do so. They promised to spread the word of his love everywhere. +++ Jesus warned that it wouldn’t be easy – they world will hate them – they will face persecution – they themselves will deny him. But they promised to be brave – promised to be true to him – promised to never give up. +++ ((Mary Poppins would call these “Pie Crust Promises – easily made and easily broken.”)) +++ In fact, later that same night, when Jesus was arrested – it all began to unravel – all their commitment – all their avowed courage – all their professed faith – all their plans to testify to the world on his behalf. +++ Right after the meal – Judas betrayed him. By morning – Peter had denied him three times. And, by the afternoon – only one disciple was left anywhere to be seen as Jesus hung on the cross and died. +++ Now, two days later, despite their promises to be bold and continue his work – they are huddled in a room with the door locked – afraid to go out and face the people who had crucified Jesus… Afraid they might be next. +++ So what happens in today’s reading? Well, Jesus hasn’t given up on them yet. If they aren’t coming out of the house – he’ll come in. … So – suddenly – there he is – standing among them. +++ In their weakness, they had failed to really change – failed to establish a NEW NORMAL – a “normal” where they are ready to take the initiative… a “normal” where they are ready to stand on their own two feet… a “normal” where they are ready to move the story forward on their own. +++ And it makes me wonder – “If the 12 didn’t change much in their time with Jesus – what about us? Are we out there working for justice and turning the world upside down like Jesus – or are we hiding behind locked doors?
And then there’s “Doubting Thomas.” I think Thomas has more to teach us than any of the others. In his article “Thomas: Apostle for a Secular Age,” Ross Wagner argues that “we are all ‘doubting Thomases’ now.” Reading today’s passage, we judge Thomas, don’t we?... when he doubts the other disciples’ report that Jesus had risen from the dead. And we know he deserves it when Jesus says, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”+++ But underneath, I think it’s hard for us to be too harsh on Thomas. We come from a time and place where seeing is believing, too. And not just seeing –+++ but experiencing –+++ feeling –+++ holding+++ proving.+++ Thomas is probably thinking:: “If Jesus did come like they say, why did he have to do it when I wasn’t here? He brought the “evidence” but took it away before I got to see it – of course I’m going to be skeptical!”+++ Wagner writes, “Like Thomas, we too fantasize about holding the truth firmly in our hands.” We don’t have much room for mystery anymore – we want to own information – so we “speak casually of ‘grasping’ a concept or ‘mastering’ a subject.”… [But] Jesus… will neither be grasped nor mastered. He will not be [bounded] by Thomas’s hunger for certainty – or by ours. Jesus is no mere Object for our detached analysis or dispassionate evaluation… On the contrary, John’s Gospel insists that Jesus is the Subject. HE IS the Word [the logos] who was with God in the beginning, … the one through whom all things have come into being and by whom all things are sustained.+++ Jesus IS the way,… the truth,… and the life.+++ Truth, John insists, is not information we can hold within our grasp. Truth is a person: the Word made flesh, God with a human face, the Teacher who washes his disciples’ feet, the Lord who lays down his life for his friends.”++++++ And THAT’S why Thomas’s reaction is so disappointing – a reaction we’d probably have in the same situation… It’s disappointing because at this point in the Gospel – Jesus Christ has completed his work here –::: he has saved so many people – he has turned power structures upside down – he has given a voice and a language to social justice – he has given his life on the cross – and he has single-handedly united the heavenly (the divine) – with things of this world – with you – and with me.++++++ But Thomas has failed to change – in the absence of having Jesus right before his eyes, Thomas has gone back to the way he used to be – believing his eyes, his ears, and his hands – instead of believing in the mysterious Truth of God. Thomas has failed to find A New Normal… and we are appalled because we can see our own weakness in his.++++++ BUT – just as he had with the other disciples as they hid behind locked doors – Jesus takes the initiative with Thomas – and turns his “rigorous and methodical [empirical] examination… into a relationship of trusting love and faithful discipleship.”+++ Instead of chastising him for his doubt –… or kicking him out of the group … – Jesus invites Thomas to look at the marks of nails in his hands, Jesus takes Thomas’s hand and puts it into his side to feel the wound.+++ Then, as Wagner points out, “Thomas’s response is immediate and [clear]:” He doesn’t just say – “OK – now I believe you.” No – he exclaims, “My Lord and my God!”+++ Finally – Thomas has stepped beyond his old way of thinking:: – where he had looked for evidence – for cold/hard facts… – now, he finds himself testifying to Divine Truth and embracing a relationship with God… through Jesus Christ.++++++ Thomas will never be the same again – finally – after Christ’s crucifixion, and resurrection, and after physical proof – Thomas finally has a NEW NORMAL – and he will go on to testify to the world about the Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

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This encounter in a locked house is a pivotal moment. Christ doesn’t just return to us from the grave – he also breathes the Holy Spirit on us as well. Never again will believers find themselves isolated from the presence of God… never will his church be without the leadership of the Holy Spirit.++++++ And the life-altering change that takes place in the Apostles couldn’t be more obvious than in our reading from Acts, when Peter powerfully stands up to the High Priest and to the Council just a few months later. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” they accuse. Peter responds with a clarity and confidence that reminds us of Jesus himself, “We must obey God rather than any human authority… We are witnesses to these things, and so IS the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”+++ Finally – with the guidance of Christ and the help of the Holy Spirit – the Apostles have found their NEW NORMAL.

And today, Revelation assures us that it’s not just the Apostles who will find a new normal. It’s not just those who join the new Christian Church.+++ “Look! He is coming with the clouds; EVERY eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account ALL the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.”+++ “Even those who pierced him”… as we remember in Mark it is the Roman Centurian::: the one who pierced
Jesus with the spear, then watched him die on the cross, who declares “Truly this man was God’s Son!” +++
+++ +++ Whatever we might believe – whatever evidence we might insist on – whether we lock ourselves in a
room or proclaim his truth on the streets… +++ … the GOOD NEWS is:: Christ is the reality for us all – even
those who don’t believe in him. Christ is the way, and the truth, and the life – even for those who choose
darkness. +++ +++

So… once again, Lent has come and gone – giving us a language to think and talk about how much our life
reflects Jesus. – What does it mean in YOUR life to be a Christ-follower? +++ Easter has come and gone, so, if
you haven’t already – it’s time to ask: “How does Jesus’ extravagant gift of crucifixion and resurrection change
YOUR life?” +++ Has Easter compelled you to change +++ – to respond … to grace… instead of just
accepting it as the gift that it is?… +++ Has the presence of Christ in your life led you … to a New Normal?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.