

## **A Witness that Costs Something**

In Acts 5, the apostles are hauled in front of the Sanhedrin, accused of teaching in the name of Jesus when they were told not to. Their response – courageous, clear, and unwavering – was this: “We must obey God rather than people,” (Acts 5:29). They proclaim the resurrection of Jesus as witnesses to the truth they could no longer deny. And they stand as reminders that resurrection belief isn’t abstract. It’s embodied. It costs something.

This past Monday, the world learned of the death of Pope Francis – a man who, in many ways, modeled this kind of embodied belief. He wasn’t just a religious figurehead. He wove his faith into the fabric of his life. He chose simplicity over splendor, consistently spoke for the poor and the marginalized, visited war zones, and washed the feet of prisoners. Many people – all over the world – have recognized in him a man who sought to embody the risen Christ in word and deed. Just like the apostles in Acts did.

As we gather today in a time when trust in institutions is fragile, when political divisions seem bigger than ever, and when many ask what Christianity looks like in action – not just in belief – the story of Jesus appearing to the disciples, and to Thomas in particular, speaks volumes. We’re reminded that faith isn’t just something we think. It’s something we live. If you have your Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to John 20:19-31. **Read John 20:19-31.**

## **Locked Doors and Open Wounds**

Our Gospel lesson this morning occurs on that first Easter night. The disciples are terrified. Jesus has died a horrific death. Though Mary Magdalene has claimed to have seen Him alive, the news hasn’t moved them from fear to faith just yet. They are huddled, afraid, and uncertain. They are locked behind closed doors, in what they hope is a secure, undisclosed location.

Isn’t this an honest picture of us, in times like these? Whether it’s the mass shootings we grieve, the heated rhetoric surrounding elections and politics, or economic fears, there are a lot of people who are spiritually locked behind doors of anxiety, doubt, and disillusionment. They’re discouraged. Uncertain about their future. “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’” (John 20:19).

Into the uncertainty and fear, Jesus comes. He doesn’t wait for the apostles to unlock the door. He enters, wounds and all, and says, “Peace be with you!” Pay close

attention to what happens next. “After He said this, He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord,” (verse 20).

Jesus shows them His hands and His side. He meets them with proof not of unlimited power, but of pain. A few years ago a popular Christian band came out with a song, *Scars in Heaven*, Jesus still bears the scars of the crucifixion. The risen Christ is still the wounded Christ. His resurrection is not a denial of suffering – it is the transformation of it.

### **He Redeems Our Wounds**

And here’s some good news – the peace of Christ doesn’t erase our wounds – it redeems them. The same Jesus who was crucified is now alive. He brings peace not by erasing the trauma, but by entering it with us. “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.’ And with that He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit,’” (verses 21-22).

In breathing on them, and telling them to receive the Holy Spirit – which they will at Pentecost – Jesus is commissioning them. He’s commissioning these apostles, who are hiding behind locked doors, to become His presence in the world. It doesn’t seem to make sense, does it? But friends, that’s embodied believing. Not just receiving peace for ourselves, but sharing it with others who also need it. Jesus even makes a bold statement, “If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven,” (verse 23).

Christ commissions the Church to be his presence in the world. Christ forgives the sins of the whole world through His sacrificial death on the cross. So can the Church forgive sins? Well, we have a lot of siblings running around out there who don’t think Jesus’ blood is strong enough to cover their problem. The Church needs to step up to the plate, and tell the whole world that all their sin has been washed away by the blood of the Lamb. The Church is supposed to be the North Star in the darkness, guiding weary travelers ever onward towards the final destination – of seeing Jesus face-to-face. Sometimes we don’t do a very good job of that.

We nit-pick and bully people who aren’t like us, and sometimes try to stick square pegs in round holes. It doesn’t work so well. The Church – every church, wherever they are – should be the most grace-filled and grace-giving places on the planet. I have more to say about this, but I want to move on because I really want to talk about Thomas, and we haven’t got all day.

### **Honest Thomas**

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my

finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe,” (verses 24-25).

Didymus is a word that means “Twin,” so apparently Thomas was a twin, or they called him “Twin,” but we often label him “Doubting Thomas.” We’ve all heard that before. I’d argue that he’s more “Honest Thomas.” He doesn’t want second-hand belief. He wants to see for himself. He wants to touch, to feel, and to know.

This, too, is an embodied request. He’s not rejecting faith – he’s seeking something he can stake his life on. And ultimately, according to Church tradition, he would. Thomas died for his faith as a missionary to India.

A week later His disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then He said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe.” (verses 26-27).

### **Disagreeing Agreeably**

Friends, pay close attention to this interaction between Jesus and Thomas. When Jesus shows up and Thomas is there a week later, Jesus doesn’t rebuke Thomas. He gives him an invitation, “Put your finger here,... Reach out your hand,... Stop doubting and believe.” It’s apparent that Jesus is tender and understanding towards Thomas. He meets Thomas in his demand for something real.

Another thing to point out here is that even before he believes, Thomas is included by the other apostles. He’s skeptical of what the other apostles are telling him. And the whole lot of them, appear to disagree agreeably with each other. They don’t tell him – like we so often tell people – that since he doesn’t see eye-to-eye with them, he has no place with them. We hear and do that a lot. We tend to “write off” people who don’t think like us, don’t look like us, or don’t believe the same way as we do. But Thomas is still included – he’s still involved – in the beloved community.

In response, Thomas provides the highest Christological statement on the nature of Christ contained in the Gospel, “My Lord and my God!” (verse 28). Thomas recognizes that Jesus is fully human, with a body just like ours, but also fully God, with abilities beyond the capabilities of these bodies. In today’s world, where skepticism runs rampant, especially among younger generations who ask, “Why should I believe?” we need this moment. A faith that acknowledges doubt is a faith that can endure.

Jesus doesn’t scold Thomas for needing something tangible – something Thomas can touch. Instead, Jesus says, ‘Because you have seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed,’ (verse 29).

Jesus blesses “those who have not seen and have believed,” not because blind belief is somehow greater, but because embodied belief often grows in the soil of community and testimony.

### **Embodied Believing in Our Time**

Belief isn't abstract. It shows up in flesh and blood. That's why Jesus didn't rise as a ghost or a symbol – He rose up in His own body. The Christian response to the wounds of the world must be similarly embodied. This week, we grieve another wave of senseless violence – from another school shooting in a place that once felt safe to many people. While news coverage comes and goes, the Church is called to stay. To be present. To lament. To serve. To offer a resurrected, wounded, and risen kind of peace.

Likewise, as migrant communities continue to seek shelter and dignity in the midst of legal battles and shifting policies, as natural disasters displace families from Florida to Hawai'i, we're reminded that believing in Jesus means becoming His hands and feet to a world that yearns for healing. He's the only One who can give it. And the Church is His vehicle to use to get it done. Believing isn't saying, “I agree with this idea,” rather, it's stepping into the pain and the promise of resurrection.

Friends, please don't think the United States is the only country with migrant problems. Europe has them, too. Pope Francis, in one of his first acts after being elected, reminded the world that Christianity must touch the world's wounds. One of them was by visiting Lampedusa, an Italian island off the coast of Tunisia. Lampedusa is known as “the gateway of Europe” to poor Africans trying to leave behind homelands embroiled in poverty and war, to seek better lives in the more peaceful lands of Europe.

Francis went there after a boat filled with African migrants capsized in October, 2013, and nearly 400 people – mostly women and children – died. Francis didn't hide behind the walls of Vatican City. He went. He showed up. That's what resurrection belief looks like – not withdrawal, but witness.

### **What It Means to Believe Today**

So what does all this mean for us today? To believe in Jesus today means we trust that the same Spirit Jesus breathed on the apostles is still at work within us. It means we show up in our neighborhoods with casseroles and compassion after tragedies. It means we speak out when injustice becomes the norm. It means we offer forgiveness in a culture quick to cancel – and condemn. It means we pray with hope when others are filled with despair. And it also means we teach our children that faith isn't just going to church – it's following a risen Lord into the world's broken places.

Thomas needed to see Jesus' wounds. The world today needs to see our wounds, too. Not that we have it all together, but that we believe in a God who meets

us even in our biggest messes. As the late theologian and priest Henri Nouwen would say it, we are called to be “wounded healers.”

All of this is reiterated in the last two verses of the Gospel lesson: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written down that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name,” (verses 30-31). John ends by telling us that “you may have life.” Life. Not just information. Not just correct theology, or an accurate view of Christ. He gives us life.

## **Resurrection People**

The Church has been referred to as an Easter People, or as Resurrection People. To be people of the Resurrection, means we believe in the risen Christ and we live like He lives. To be scarred, but healed. To be real – not an ideal. To be present – He’s always present – not distant. And to be peace-giving, as opposed to fear-driven.

Today the Church struggles with relevance. Many people – especially my Gen X’er peers and younger – see faith as disconnected from life. Our call isn’t to defend dogma and doctrines, but to live the resurrection. The world is looking to us to show what embodied believing looks like.

They need to see not just a cross on a necklace, but the cross in our choices. They need to see not only the empty tomb on Easter, but a new way of being every day. They need to see not only words, but more importantly witness. And not just our Sunday faces – but seeing that our Sunday face carries into the other six days of the week.

This week, the world lost a pope – a symbol of faith for over a billion people. But more importantly, the world loses hope every time believers hide behind locked doors instead of living out their faith in the open. Like Thomas, we need to cry out in faith, “My Lord and my God!” and then, like the apostles in Acts, go into the world as witness-bearers of the greatest thing that’s ever happened since the Creation. That through the wounds of Jesus, the world receives peace, life, and resurrection.

**Prayer:** Risen Christ, breathe Your peace into us; make us bold in witness, gentle in love, and faithful in body, mind, and heart. May our lives proclaim: You are risen, and we are not the same. Amen.