

Grace Episcopal Church
Galena, Illinois
April 3, 2016 – 2nd Sunday of Easter

The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Text – John 20: 19-31

As the curtain rises on our Gospel for this 2nd Sunday of Easter, we find ourselves back to the evening of that first Easter day. In a locked room where the disciples and others who were close to Jesus huddle, it is clear that there is no celebration, no Resurrection party. There is no “Christ the Lord is risen today,” no “the strife is o’er, the battle won.” The writer of John’s Gospel tells us that these folk are gathered in fear, not rejoicing. It is not an irrational fear – the authorities who wanted Jesus out of the way might well want to make certain the whole movement is squelched.

It is also clear that Mary Magdalene’s testimony of seeing Jesus and the two disciples’ witness to the empty tomb early that morning had not entirely penetrated. No. In their grief and fear, they are gathered, not knowing what to do, what might come next. We might imagine that, in addition to being fearful, they were bewildered. Those who had expected Jesus to overcome the Roman Empire and begin a new rule were dismayed and disillusioned. Those who had dropped everything and left their jobs to follow Jesus when he called them from their fishing boats and their tax collections wondered what on earth they would do now. There was probably some guilt mixed in, too. After all, they had denied Jesus and run away when he was crucified. And, they may have felt betrayed. Suddenly, the dream seemed to be over, hopes and expectations crushed.

It was into this scene that Jesus appears. He greets them with words of peace. He shows them his wounds. And then, he commissions them to carry on his work – “as the Father has sent me, so I send you,” he says as he empowers them with the breath of the Holy Spirit. This breath of life like that breathed into the very first humans. A new creation.

This is just one of several stories in the Gospels of Jesus’ appearances following his resurrection. I am taken by how sensory and physical they are: how important it is to see and to hear and to touch; the emphasis on the flesh and blood, human form of Jesus complete with the wounds from the nails and the sword. At the same time, though, there is something quite different. There is Jesus appearing in the room with no apparent need to unlock the door. There are the instances of those who had known Jesus intimately failing to recognize him. Mary, mistaking him for the gardener outside the tomb until he called her by name. In another gospel, disciples walking and talking at length with Jesus do not know him until his gesture of breaking bread at their dinner table opens their eyes. And in this story, the lack of rejoicing until the wounds are displayed.

For Thomas, in the second act of this story, it is all about the sensory and physical. He needs to see and to touch – with his own eyes and his own hand. He is not willing to accept the

word of all of the others.

We tend to get derailed with the story of Thomas, focusing on this “doubting Thomas” that has come to be a label for all who do not believe. But all he asked for was exactly what the others had received. Each of them had evidence. Each had an experience of Jesus’ presence. Why should he not have that? If we could, wouldn’t we want that, too?

I wonder what it would be like if we looked at this second half of the story as a link—a link between those who were present with Jesus and experienced his appearances and those of us who came later when it was impossible to see with our own eyes. In that same room a week after his first appearance, Jesus gave Thomas what he needed. And Thomas responded with a profound statement of faith, “My Lord and my God.” But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He goes on with a blessing for all of those who “have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Those in John’s community, struggling with persecution for their faith, who might have still known someone who had been an eye witness. Those in our time, for whom the primary witness is the scriptural story.

This story—and the other “appearance” texts—are not a series of doctrinal statements to which we intellectually assent. They are not food for questions about historical accuracy or debates about theological points like “did Jesus die for our sins?” or “was the tomb really empty?”

These are living, breathing stories, embodied stories that show all the doubt and uncertainty of those nearest Jesus, and their movement to faith and bearing their witness into the world. They are stories with the power to draw us in and make the presence of God in Jesus available to us. Stories with the power to shape our communities so that we, too, witness and embody hope and assurance as we continue what God sent Jesus to do.

In studying this text these past weeks, I have come to believe that the mixture of physical and more mysterious elements is a signal to us that this Resurrection is a new thing. It is not a resuscitation like the raising of Lazarus who returned to this life and would ultimately have to die again. And it is not just a glorious reunion at the end of time, the life everlasting after this life is over.

The Resurrection is life now, too. Remember how Jesus said, “I am the Resurrection and the life?” It is the completion of what began with the Incarnation, God’s taking on human form in Jesus of Nazareth who showed us God and what relationship with God and one another can be. It is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to be with us always as we are sent to carry on the teachings. It is not a one-time historic event but happens over and over again wherever there is love and forgiveness, healing and reconciliation.

Sometimes we talk about the Resurrection life or of being Easter people. This is more than “believing” in the Resurrection. It is about the living and the following. It is our identity as communities of faith that, though we cannot see with our own eyes or touch with our own hands the risen Christ, we can and do tell the story over and over and re-enact it in our

liturgy. It is this identity that claims that we exist in relationship to God and proclaim the power of life over death, love over hatred, and hope over despair and carry this out to the world. So, we experience Resurrection each time we speak out for justice for those who are oppressed. Each time we serve those who are vulnerable and in need. Each time we hold out our hand to someone hiding in a locked room of doubt, despair, or confusion.

This year could be a pivotal time for Grace Church. This very week we will attend the first of several hearings that could lead to our being able to build a new Parish House. How do we think about this? How do we talk about its importance? Surely it is needed in order to provide an accessible way for all of our people to take part in our fellowship and formation. That is a key reason for moving forward. It goes beyond that. It touches on reasons for continuing to stay with a historic, in town building rather than starting over in a place with parking and more space. Why? Is it just nostalgia or a love of the beauty of the stone and mortar? Is it just another way of staying inside the doors, comfortable and self sufficient? Satisfied? Or is this place a beauty worth preserving and a venue that contributes to facilitating our mission and ministry? Does it offer possibilities to be so excited about what is happening at Grace that we can't help but share it with all who walk through these doors? And reach out to those who have not yet entered? How does this relate to—even enhance—our continuing work to define and articulate who we are, what God is calling us to be and to do in this particular time and place?

We experience Resurrection in our personal lives, too. We hide in locked rooms of pain and illness, of hurts and disappointments. We build solid walls to protect ourselves from the frightening and chaotic world around us. In both our personal journeys and our life together, we must remember that this is God's work, the work of the Spirit. If and when we become satisfied and comfortable, the doors will slam shut again. And yet, we have learned from that long ago upper room that locked doors cannot keep the risen Christ out. He breaks through the doors, sometimes when we are the most vulnerable and loves us and breathes the breath of life, of the Spirit, into us.

This is grace, my friends: Jesus comes to us, again and again, giving of himself and offering just what is needed. But it's a whole lot easier if we keep the doors open.

Friends, this is the Good News. Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed. Alleulia!). Christ is with us. Forever. Do not doubt it.

Alleluia and Amen.