

Rejoice? Rejoice!
Second Sunday of Easter
April 8, 2018
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Text: John 20:19-31

For thousands of years, the disciple Thomas has been given a nickname “Doubting Thomas.” When the other disciples joyfully tell him that they have seen the risen Lord, Thomas says, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”¹ Because of this narrative, Thomas is primarily portrayed as a person filled with doubt and even fear. But this is unfair to Thomas. Throughout the Gospels, at least he is no worse than the other disciples. In Matthew 14, when Peter tries to walk on water with fear, Jesus reaches out his hand and says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”² So I don’t think the nickname “Doubting Thomas” is given by the other disciples who have seen the risen Lord before Thomas, nor is the intention of the author of the Gospel of John.

As we look through the larger context in John 20, Thomas’ answer might have reminded the other disciples of their own responses to the first witness Mary Magdalene’s report that she has seen the risen Lord.³ Did the disciples doubt about what Mary said? Are they amazed or joyful? We don’t know that many details, but from the following text we do know that they are still in fear.

On the evening of the first day of the week, the disciples except Thomas gather together in a house and all the doors are locked. Rejoice? The fear is alive in them. And the fear is even

¹ NRSV, John 20:25.

² NRSV, Matthew 14:31.

³ NRSV, John 20:18.

stronger than the joy of Mary's good news. They might long for the presence of the Risen Lord. They need peace and comfort. Surprisingly, the Lord comes through the locked house! The Risen Lord is standing among his disciples! What a surprise! The feeling at this moment reminds me of my little brother's favorite children's movie Superman. When it's so depressing that the evil is conquering the world, Superman shows up at the right moment in a powerful way. Jesus, as the Risen Lord, a victor over death, comes through the house and stands among the disciples. He brings peace to them. He sends the Holy Spirit to them! He shows to the disciples his hands and his side with the marks of nails. This is the same Lord who they are missing. And this is the Risen Lord who has overcome death! Rejoice!

For some reason there is one disciple who has missed the moment of rejoicing. That's Thomas! Then the following event in John 20 seems to happen in a similar pattern. When the other disciples joyfully shared the good news with Thomas, "We have seen the Lord! He is alive, raised from the dead! Rejoice!" Thomas answered, "Rejoice? Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." What's happening to Thomas? He loves the Lord. Earlier in John 11, when Jesus determines to return to Judea in danger of persecution and the other disciples try to dissuade him, it is Thomas who says to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."⁴ Thomas loves the Lord and even determines to die with him. He is not apathetic about the news of Jesus' resurrection, but perhaps his cognition is inconsistent with what he needs to believe. Or perhaps the little faith in him is overwhelmed by fear and loneliness. All have said they have seen the Lord except Thomas. Have you noticed that what Thomas longs for is

⁴ NRSV, John 11:16.

exactly what the other disciples have experienced? Thomas longs for peace and comfort as well. He eagerly longs for the presence of the Lord.

Like Thomas, I find that sometimes there is a similar dichotomy in me that intellectually I know God is present but actually I feel his absence, especially in pain and suffering. Rejoice? But do you know there are people suffering? Rejoice? But do you know we have losses and brokenness? Rejoice? But do you know she is misunderstood and mistreated in her community! Rejoice? But do you know he is suffering from injustice! God, I know you are everywhere, but where are you when injustice is happening? Where are you when fear is alive?

In John 20, on the following Sunday, Thomas is with the other disciples. Maybe he does not want to miss anything if the Lord is present. Yes, the Lord comes again. The risen Lord comes and stands among the disciples. But this time Jesus is focusing his attention on Thomas. He goes towards Thomas, saying, “Here are my hands. Put your finger here and see. Here is my side. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.”⁵ Jesus is revealing himself to the last disciple who has not seen his resurrected body yet! Thomas says, “My Lord and my God!”

Certainly, the author of the Gospel of John does not mean to embarrass Thomas, but to witness that the Risen Lord cares for each of his followers and comes to strengthen the faith. As it’s mentioned in v. 31, these witnesses 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.⁶

Thanks be to God. I’m thinking that our faith, even though mixed with doubt and fear, is sustained again and again through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit! When the

⁶ NRSV, John 20:31.

Word is proclaimed, we experience the presence of Jesus Christ! And when we gather around the communion table, we eat the bread and drink the cup in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The bread that we eat is the body of Christ. And the wine that we drink is the blood of Christ. Like the disciples, we tangibly see the body of Christ through the communion. He died and is raised for you and for me. He cares for every sheep who follows him! He enters the life of every child and transforms it into deeper faith! Rejoice!

Now I invite you to recollect the images of the Christian story that Pastor Gordon described a couple weeks ago. As he mentioned, the feelings of harm, suffering and loneliness are so strong, and these feelings seem like a wall that separates us from others. But the Risen Lord breaks the wall of suffering and loneliness! He brings freedom, hope and joy!

About seven years ago, I just learned to understand what it means to be a Christian. I was attracted by the unique feeling of peace among the Christians in a little house church near my college. As a science student, I often attempted to make sense of everything in a scientific way, but I was reminded that Christianity is not just something in your mind, but also your heart, your soul and your strength.

I couldn't make sense of it until I experienced it myself. One day I was travelling to visit some of my non-Christian friends. We shared with each other our college lives and our dreams about the future. On one hand, I was glad that all my friends were doing well and had a bright future. On the other, I felt that I was supposed to share the good news with them. I wanted them to also know me as a Christian, my new identity. I wanted to share the feeling of peace which was beyond my explanation but so real. In a low voice, I said to them, "I became a Christian." I was expecting some questions out of curiosity. But some of them asked me with

concerns, “Are you sure you want to be a Christian? This might negatively influence your future.” I wasn’t able to persuade them, because I did realize that to be a Christian seemed to be hard for all kinds of reasons. I was wavering. I felt lonely.

A few days later, when back to school, I went to the little church where I knew there was peace that I longed for. And surprisingly, a friend in the church was reading a letter written by a British missionary, a young woman who came to China in the early twentieth century. In persecution, she wrote to her parents, “If one soul is saved through me, my life is worthy.” When hearing this, I felt my heart was struck and I knelt down crying, “Lord, forgive me.” I was worried about my own future, but this young lady, who had nothing to do with this country, came to serve the Lord and save the souls. (pause)

Last Sunday I was reminded of the Easter Sunday eight years ago when I was baptized. I was wondering what it would be like if there was no Christ in my life. Because of Christ, my life is not just different but also meaningful. I’m grateful that Christ is the beautiful “curveball” in my life. And I would also like to say “thank you” to you all. In this two-year internship, you have shared with me love, compassion, hospitality and encouragement.

Thanks be to God. The Risen Lord breaks the wall of suffering and loneliness not just for Thomas also for us! He enters each of our lives. And peace is stronger than fear. Joy is stronger than loneliness.

Rejoice? Yes, Rejoice in the Risen Lord!

Amen.