

**Easter 2c
John 20:19-31
April 11, 2010**

It was evening on that third day, which was the first day of the week, which was the day after the Jewish Sabbath. It was a Sunday evening, after a long, long week, after a horrible Friday, a numb Saturday, and then a confounding Sunday. On the morning of that day, the first day of the week, women went to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, to the new tomb in which their friend Jesus had been laid in a hurry on Friday night. They went to anoint his body, to finish the work of burial.

But he was gone. And some of the women said they saw angels, saying Jesus had been raised. Or maybe they had seen Jesus himself, walking in the garden like he owned the place. The stories were unclear. Confused. Everything was all mixed up.

And so it was evening on that third day after the horrible Friday. It was evening on the first day of the week. It was evening at the end of a long day which raised many questions and offered few answers.

And the friends of Jesus gathered in a room in Jerusalem and locked the door.

They locked themselves in, what was left of their little community. They locked the others out ... the Romans, the Temple officials, the mocking throngs crowding the Jerusalem streets. They were there, together, safe. Fearful, terrified even. But safe.

Except. Except, except, except! Just as no stone could keep the risen Christ locked inside a tomb, no door could keep the risen Christ locked out from his friends' fearful little gathering. And he was there, among them. Demonstrably himself. Marked -- hands, feet and side -- with the wounds of his crucifixion. Bringing -- not words of judgment, words of condemnation, or words of fear -- but words of peace.

Jesus came to stand among his friends, to be together with them again. But Jesus did not come to them individually. Jesus did not single out favorites. Jesus came to all of them, friends gathered together in one place. Just as he had done since the beginning, Jesus collected a community around him to hear his words, to be filled with his Spirit, to be sent into the world with his message of forgiveness.

When the resurrected Jesus appears on that first Easter evening, his resurrection is experienced communally, not personally. It is experienced in the company of others, not in solitude. It is shared, not exclusive. No one gets private time with Jesus ... what he says to one, he says to all.

The experience of resurrection is a shared encounter, not a private revelation.

To us, in our relentlessly individualistic world, this can come as a surprise. We have been formed by a Western, Cartesian kind of rationalism, to think that what is important between me and God happens here, between my ears, here, in my heart. We have been shaped by a Midwestern reserve that says never talk about God or politics. We have been influenced, whether we like or not, by a strong strain of American evangelical tradition that has convinced each of us that my faith, my individual faith, my personal belief in God or not, is the only pathway to heaven.

And so we have come to believe that the relationship between God and humanity is personal, individual, private, and distinct.

And yet, experiencing the resurrected Christ does not seem to be something that happens in isolation. It happens in community. It happens in groups of friends, small and large. And it happens to them in ways that binds them together, that strengthens and empowers them to do great things, to speak bold words, to endure hardship and persecution and still to reach out to one another and to the world to teach, to heal, to sustain.

These communities of resurrection are unified, yes, by their common experience. But they are not uniform. The people who follow Jesus continue to be as quirky and unique as ever. They don't always agree with one another. Shoot, some of them don't even believe.

Look at poor old Thomas in our lesson today. He was absent from the group that first Sunday night. He was alone, off by himself somewhere, and he missed it. He missed that experience of resurrection. But the disciples did not shut him out. They heard his complaints, his doubts, his disbelief. Not only heard them, but preserved them ... years later in this gospel lesson, so that we would know that Thomas was not on board with the program, not at first.

Then two important things happened. First, Thomas was not given a personal, private, solitary visit from the risen Christ. Jesus did not appear to him at his bedside in the middle of the night and say, "Touch me, Tom. See, it's me." Second, Thomas was not excluded from the group of disciples that had encountered the risen Christ. His emphatic disbelief did not lead the disciples to say, "Well if you don't believe us, then just stay away."

Instead, Thomas was included with them the next week, as they gathered in the same room at the same time. He was there with them to share that moment. He received his own words of acceptance from the Lord, but he heard them in front of everyone, there in public, with the whole room watching. It was incredibly personal, yes. But it was also incredibly public. Because that open sharing that Jesus offered ... here, touch me -- here, poke your finger in my side ... was not only meant for Thomas, it was meant for everyone, and for us as well.

It was meant to show us how broad is God's welcome, how inclusive is God's collection of friends. It was meant to show us that we can absolutely refuse to believe a word of it, yet we can still be welcomed into Christ's fellowship. That the community of Jesus' friends and followers is strong enough and supple enough to carry along within it those who struggle with their faith. That the best place to bring our doubt and disbelief is into the heart of the faithful community. And that the best place where our questions of doubt and disbelief might be put to rest at last is here ... in the heart of the faithful community.

Our 21st century, educated, Midwestern individualistic selves may cringe at such a thought. Doesn't it matter what I believe, we might ask? How can I have any integrity if I keep showing up even if I'm not sure I believe it? How can I say that creed when I can't believe even half of it? Today this room, right now, is full of people at every spot on that continuum of faith that stretches from atheism to true believer. Full of people with questions. Full of people who wonder.

There are people who read works by Jack Spong and Marcus Borg and feel somehow dishonest for the harmony they find with those writers. There are people who wonder if all those claims about Jesus are true, but who don't want to peek too deeply into their doubts because they love this community and they fear that if they doubt, they're going to have to leave. There are people who believed it all as children, but struggle to put it all into an adult and mature framework for themselves today.

There are people who believed yesterday and probably will go back to believing tomorrow, but today they struggle. There are people who have come out of a dark night of the soul with their faith revived, replenished, renewed. There are people who have never doubted, who have always felt God close at hand, as intimate as their breath, very present, very real. And there are people who have experienced the powerful presence of God invading their lives, turning them around, setting them on a completely new path.

All of us are here, just as Jesus' friends were there in that room that night. And what matters is not what any one of us thinks or believes as we gather here. It's that we continue to gather here, with all our faith and all our fears, all our convictions and all our doubts.

It's in our gathering that he comes to us. In our hands outstretched in acceptance as we greet each other in peace, in our hands outstretched for bread as we gather at his table. He comes to us in our praying as one body for the needs of the world. He comes to us in our laughter over coffee. He comes to us as we share our own wounds with one another, and as we reach out to bind up those wounds in his name.

He keeps on coming, slipping into our gatherings when we aren't even looking for him. Soothing our fears, filling us with hope, showing us how to hold each other up, sending us out, en masse, to change the world.

He comes wherever disciples gather, filled with fear, filled with joy, filled with faith or filled with doubts. He comes, bringing peace. He comes, breathing life. He comes. Ready or not, he comes.