

Easter 2
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Christ is risen indeed!

But how do we know?

This is the question today's Gospel asks. How do we know?

This side of Easter Sunday it's rather easy, I suspect, to roll up all the events associated with Easter into one, pretty compact narrative. The women go to the tomb and find it empty; they tell Peter and the other disciples, who go to the tomb and find it empty; and then the resurrected Christ appears to them, walks among them, eats with them. Christ is risen! Alleluia! And then they go out and tell everybody.

But it's more complicated, and more confusing than that. It's more wonderful and much more strange than that. Christ's resurrection turns everything upside down and sideways. Everything—EVERYthing has to be looked at, experienced, told in an entirely new and unprecedented way. And at first it's not entirely clear that Jesus's followers are up to that.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, the disciples have returned to the Upper Room. Here they celebrated the Passover with Jesus, and he talked extensively about his relationship with them, and with God, and how he himself was the profound and intimate connection between them and God. This was the last time things were familiar, and things were pleasant.

After that—horror, disaster, horrendous danger and great sorrow and grief with all the sense of loss, loss not only of a friend, and a beloved teacher, but also, apparently of everything that teacher had taught and the promise, the hope he had offered them and they had received. All gone. And instead, great, even disabling, horror, and fear, and grief.

So here they are in the Upper Room. The doors are locked. It's what they can do to protect themselves from what they fear: that what was done to Jesus will be done to them. And they're not wrong or overly reactive to fear it. They are known to be his followers. People have been asking about them. So, the Upper Room, with the doors locked.

And suddenly Jesus is there! Jesus himself—not dead, bearing the wounds from the nails, and the spear, and the crown of thorns. The one who was dead and buried is alive! There. With them. How utterly baffling, how incomprehensible! Such a thing cannot be. And yet here Jesus is.

Jesus, alive. But alive in a different way. Radically changed, while also still Jesus. In this and in the other stories of Jesus's resurrection appearances, Jesus is changed so significantly that they're not really sure it's him. It's only when Jesus does Jesus-like things that they recognize him. He speaks, and in familiar ways. And he eats with them. This, then, is not a trickster imposter, or a ghost. This is actually Jesus, their teacher and friend, actually alive but also actually changed. Finally, those gathered recognize him, and they rejoice.

But not all of them are there. Thomas isn't. The Gospel doesn't tell us why—just that he isn't. So when Thomas arrives, those gathered tell him that they've seen the risen Jesus. And he doesn't believe them. It's too much, too incredible, too baffling. Thomas needs to see for himself.

And so Jesus appears again. He gives Thomas the same evidence he gave the others: he speaks, he shows Thomas his wounds and has him touch them. Indeed, here is Jesus, in the flesh. And Thomas believes. But then, seemingly, Jesus chides Thomas for not believing until he sees. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

So we think of this disciple as Doubting Thomas. And not in a good way. And in some ways that's exactly what the Gospel wants us to think—something along the lines of “Thomas doesn't believe what Jesus has been teaching, so he has to see some evidence.” Thomas the doubter is also Thomas the empiricist: what's real is what can be seen, heard, and touched. Period.

But, then, the same is true for the others: they clearly doubt that Jesus, being dead, will be among them again. It's only when he shows up, in the flesh, with the wounds, and when he speaks, that they recognize the Lord. Just like Thomas.

So, yes, Thomas doubts. And so do all the others. After all, what is going on here is something inexplicable, baffling, exceedingly strange. It shatters their world, and they do not yet know what the new world is. Are they uncertain? Do they doubt? Of course!

But there is another reason Thomas doubts, I think, and that is he does not find the disciples trustworthy witnesses. Up to this point, they've not after all consistently acted as if they believe all that Jesus says and does. Peter's always a good example here, and I don't think this is by accident. Peter, whom Jesus designates as the chief disciple, Peter is always bumbling around, boomeranging between disbelief and over-enthusiasm, clearly not understanding, relying on his own take on things rather than seeing and trusting in what Jesus is up to. And on this rock Jesus will build his church.

Remember? Peter and the other disciples are in a storm at sea and in danger of drowning, when Jesus comes to them, walking across the waters and calming the storm. At Jesus's bidding, Peter walks across the water toward Jesus (first having taken *off* all his clothes!), but because he doubts, he starts to sink and Jesus has to save him from the drowning that Peter's doubt brings near.

And: When Jesus says he will wash the disciples' feet as a sign of how they are to live with each other, Peter vehemently refuses. Vehemently. But when Jesus explains this is necessary, Peter goes to the other extreme. Wash not only my feet! Wash all of me! Again, he's sort of missed the point by going too far in either direction.

And when Jesus is arrested, first Peter attacks one of the guards in order to defend Jesus. And then, with the others, he follows Jesus through the drama of his arrest and interrogation. At a distance, perhaps. But he's there. But any time someone says, “Aren't you one of his followers?” Peter denies it. Three times, apparently without noticing until the third time. Ultimately, he and the other disciples run away. They abandon Jesus at his death. They're not

there. They're not there when Jesus dies, and when his body is taken down, and when he is anointed for burial, and when he's laid in the tomb. And when the women (who were there through it all) find the tomb empty and tell the disciples, Peter doesn't believe them. He races off himself, making sure to get there first, to see for himself.

Not particularly reliable witnesses, are these guys? The disciples, chief among them Peter, manifestly have not believed Jesus, not trusted what he's said. Until he shows up. In the flesh. With the wounds. With his voice. Until he eats with them.

Not surprising, then, that Thomas isn't convinced by what they tell him. They're not, in their persons, particularly convincing.

But it is Thomas to whom Jesus says, "Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe." And that brings the whole thing home to *us*. We, all followers of Jesus after his Ascension, we have not seen and yet believe. Christ has risen—and we know it, we are confident in knowing it, we trust it, we live our lives (to some extent) in light of it. We do not see as the disciples saw, and yet we believe.

Why? Because we find all of this believable. Decidedly strange and unsettling, but nevertheless believable. We have decided, knowingly or not, to trust Jesus's disciples. The original ones. The ones who, over time, told and retold the stories, and in ways that we have some chance of understanding. The teachers. The preachers.

And we have seen, again and again, the difference it makes to who people are when they believe that Christ is risen. At least some of the time, they are different. This confidence, this trust that Jesus is risen and has gone to sit at God's right hand changes people, in little and in big ways.

And it makes them—us—witnesses ourselves. In our words, and what we do *not* say. Whether we're talking about God, and Jesus, and our faith—but also when we're not. In our deeds, our activities—what we do and what we do not do—believing Christ is raised changes us. In our daily lives and relationships—in who we are with our families, our friends and colleagues, and who we are—and who we are not—with our neighbors, with strangers, with enemies—believing changes us. In all these ways, in so many ways, we too are witnesses to Jesus's resurrection and what it means. We, too, like Jesus's first followers, are receiving and living life anew, with confidence that God is in our midst and that by God's grace we are made new.

But also, like the disciples, we are not consistently reliable witnesses. We're not the first inconsistent ones. We are believers, and followers of Christ, but that's not all we are. We falter, we founder, we doubt and even disbelieve. At times we're overly enthusiastic in a way that doesn't last. Sometimes, perhaps, we even betray and abandon each other, Jesus, God.

It's a hard thing—it's a challenging thing—to put on new life. It's always been a challenge to tell the difference between real news and fake news. Now is not the first time. It's hard to change the patterns of our lives, especially since we cannot be sure what the new pattern would be or what it will mean. It's always a challenge to believe what we're told, however convincingly, when it seems incredible. Impossible. Unbelievable.

And yet we persevere. Because with it and under it all, we have seen and known the risen Christ. In our daily lives. In our worship. In the Eucharist. In other people, perhaps especially in and through those who are strange to us, as well as in those who are near.

We who have not seen, believe. And believing, we bring others to faith as well.

The Epistle of Peter: “[T]he genuineness of your faith—[which,] being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen* him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!