

Easter A2

April 23, 2017

“Closer and Closer: Reach Out and Touch Someone”

Central Presbyterian Church Montclair

David Noble

1 Peter 1:3-9

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Although 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, ⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. **As the Father has sent me, so I send you.**” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the **Holy Spirit**. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “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.”

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹**But** these 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.

This is the climax of the gospel of John. Everything he has written comes together in this final story about Thomas. Even though our Bibles show several more paragraphs after this in this gospel, it is widely believed that this encounter between Jesus and Thomas is the original ending of what John wrote. As a result this story is rich and deep for us.

It’s a shame, then, that the encounter between Jesus and Thomas has been reduced to a wagging of Jesus’ finger to those who have any doubts about him. Faith is hard enough. We don’t need to be criticized or have guilt laid on us in order to say we believe. And I don’t think this story is meant to do that. Quite the opposite.

It's a story of a person who missed the party and the ones who were there try their hardest to tell him what it was like, but it was one of those "you had to be there to believe it" kind of parties. And Thomas wasn't. Where was he? No one knows. Shopping for dinner for the disciples? Taking care of business? Whatever it was he wasn't expecting Jesus to be raised from the dead any more than anyone else.

And that's not something that is appreciated about Thomas. The others in that locked room of disciples didn't believe at first that Jesus was resurrected either. Some of them had seen the empty tomb and wondered where Jesus' body could have gone, even asking around the cemetery to see if anyone knew. And when the resurrected Jesus did appear to one or more of them at or near the cemetery, and they ran back to the disciples who were hiding out in some locked room, and told them the amazing news, they didn't believe either.

Until he appeared to them all, together. They were shocked and then they rejoiced- the party of a lifetime! And when Thomas came back home and said no matter how great the party was he wouldn't believe it until he saw Jesus himself, well, he wasn't asking for anything more than what everyone else had already received. And when he saw Jesus, his wounded hands and side, and heard Jesus invite him to come close and touch the evidence himself, he blurted out, "My Lord and my God!"

And that is what all of John's gospel has been leading up to—encouraging us to say like Thomas, "Jesus is my Lord and my God!"

Some of us know that naturally. You are blessed if you have always believed Jesus is your Lord and God without much question. I know some people like this and it seems no matter what happens they go right on believing. God bless them!

But John's gospel recognizes it isn't that way for everyone. Being born a believer is not everyone's experience. In fact we come to faith in many ways, and John takes pains to tell us that that's OK.

First of all, Thomas needs some help. He isn't sure, he isn't ready to believe it all yet. And Jesus comes to him and invites him to come closer. Jesus meets Thomas where he is—in his questions and his doubts. Notice how Jesus does not scold Thomas, does not criticize him, does not guilt him. He says, "Peace" and then turns to Thomas so he can experience for himself.

I suspect many of us might wish for a personal visit from Jesus ourselves. The Old Testament reports God visiting a bunch of people, like Moses and that burning bush, and all those prophets that seemed to have a direct connection to God and spoke on God's behalf to the people.

But since Jesus' day and his appearances to his disciples and several hundred other people after the resurrection, there haven't been too many sightings. Jesus just doesn't appear that way anymore.

I have known one person, however, who claimed a personal visit. It was a teenage girl in my first congregation who was in the hospital for some treatments-- I can't exactly remember right now what they were. But she was lucid, not under the influence of any serious medications. One day she told her mother that Jesus had sat at the foot of her bed. Her mother, a devoted believer, was thrilled. The girl, though, not so much. She didn't believe in Jesus before the appearance and she still didn't after it.

But personal appearances are only one option for coming closer to Jesus. For those of us living after the party, so to speak, what we have is John's gospel along with all the other gospels and letters in the New Testament that testify to what people saw and heard and felt. John says, here are the signs I have seen or heard that reveal Jesus as my Lord and God. These signs, these miracles, these stories, tell us what happened at that resurrection party through the eyes of those who were there. "Let me tell you what Jesus did," John says, "so you can believe, too."

And, "You are blessed if you do," John adds. But Jesus isn't finished. He's not just giving us stories in a book. Jesus breathed on the disciples, he breathed his spirit into the world to represent him and to help us. Jesus may not make personal appearances, but his Spirit, a.k.a. the Holy Spirit, does move in this world and in us.

I remember attending a lakeside candlelight vespers service once and carrying my candle back to my cabin through the dark. I sat on my bunk for hours that night feeling strangely 'not alone', but somehow attended to by God's presence. Another time I had trouble in my university administration job – I told you about that this winter—and when I told my pastor about it he laughed, saying he had just been trained to handle a situation like mine, and together we did, with a rather miraculous result. And the idea for me to attend seminary was not mine, but a friend of mine who was a university chaplain who asked, "Have you ever thought about seminary?" Absolutely not! But the more I thought and prayed about it, the more I felt God's Spirit coming closer and speaking to me through my friend.

I imagine you have had similar situations when someone spoke to you, or helped you, or maybe even when you were alone but felt a mysterious presence nearby. To me the Spirit is working through people and special times and places. We have stories to tell, you and I have stories that will help each other, and they don't do anyone much good if we just keep them to ourselves. John could have kept his stories to himself. The Apostle Paul could have kept his experiences to himself, but they didn't. And we should share our stories, our experiences with each other, too, so we can believe and keep on believing.

Then Thomas's story takes off in another direction. Once again Jesus says, "Peace. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The appearances, the stories, the movement of the Spirit and the faith that comes because of all this, is all about us being more like Jesus so we can be sent out.

God sent Jesus to the world, and Jesus, in turn, sends you and me to the world. With compassion and with humility, to be closer to the world, to do it like Jesus did it.

Last week was the big party, the celebration about a shocking new world breaking into this one. Stories have been written, a Spirit is being breathed into us, we have been gathered to share our personal stories, Jesus has worked and will continue to work in all these ways to meet us where we are and to bring us closer to him and each other and the world. He says, "Blessed are you who have not seen and yet are coming to believe."