

**SECOND READING:** John 20:19-31      <sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” <sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin<sup>[a]</sup>), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So 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.” <sup>26</sup> A 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.” <sup>27</sup> Then 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.” <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may continue<sup>[b]</sup> to believe that Jesus is the Messiah,<sup>[c]</sup> the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

**FIRST READING:** Acts 2:14a, 22-32

14But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 22“*You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—* 23*this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.* 24*But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.* 25*For David says concerning him, ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;* 26*therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope.* 27*For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption.* 28*You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’* 29“*Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.* 30*Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne.* 31*Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, ‘He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.’* 32*This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.*

This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD

### ***“Believing”***

Over the years there have been many theories regarding what happened Thomas after this famous encounter with Jesus, stories about his later life, where did he go, what did he do? When I was in India, I heard the story that Thomas sailed there in AD 52. In Kerala, where I was, he is credited with evangelizing the area and establishing 7 churches before he was martyred. There are still Christians who are called Martoma Christians, followers of the St. Thomas tradition. One very charismatic woman in the extended family I stayed with was, in fact, Martoman. Let's, this morning, do something a little different. Let's stretch our imaginations, in order to learn something about faith and, like Rev. Dr. Laura Mendenhall and others have done, consider a conversation Thomas may have had with another.<sup>1</sup> In our time together, let's consider Thomas as an old man sharing his wisdom with young follower named Alexander.

The scene is Thomas' home in Palayoor, India, and Alexander has come as he came most days to help Thomas get from his bed to the chair by the open window. The air was warm, and the sun shone in. Thomas smiled as he heard the sounds of the morning...dogs barking, the occasional rooster crowing, people moving about, doing their business. Alexander brought him a lap blanket, some bread and a cup of black tea and sat down on a pillow on the floor beside his chair. They chatted for a few minutes about nothing really, and then Alexander asked Thomas to do as he'd done before, that is, tell him about that evening in the upper room, a week after Jesus rose from the dead, the evening when Jesus came to him and told him to put his hands in his wounds.

Thomas did not hesitate. He never tired of telling people. He began, telling Alexander that at that time, the followers of Jesus were at their best, and also at their worst. *“They were at their best because Mary had run from the tomb in the morning, exclaiming, ‘I have seen the Lord!’ She knew and believed, you see,”* Thomas said. *“But they were at their worst because the rest of them were still paralyzed with fear and doubt. They required an encounter with the risen Lord to believe.”* Thomas went on to explain that this happened that evening despite the

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Mendenhall. *“Dealing with Mystery”* [https://day.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b82ef71918cdf2002722/dealing\\_with\\_mystery](https://day.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b82ef71918cdf2002722/dealing_with_mystery) (accessed 4-5-2024).

doors being locked. *“Even though I was not there to witness it, Jesus appeared, and he breathed on them. The breath of God, the source of life, that which was blown over the face of the deep when there was nothing but chaos. That was what he breathed on them, the breath which was breathed into the lungs of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.”*

*“Jesus breathed his Holy Spirit on them,”* Alexander eagerly affirmed.

*“Yes,”* Thomas said. *“And then Jesus said something very important. He said what I think, what I have now come to know, is the whole point of Easter. ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you,’”* he said. *“He was saying that we followers are now equipped, with enough of Jesus’ life and breath, that we can get up from our places of fear and doubt and get moving, moving toward our homes, families, our communities, toward the whole world, (THOMAS’ ARMS WAVED ABOUT), toward the world which is beautifully, and profoundly different now.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“How, Thomas? Tell me again, how the world is different?”*

*“Well, Jesus’ rising from the grave shows us that love has prevailed over hate, and the worst of all things, death, has been conquered. And once we know this, we know that all the other promises that Jesus made are also true....*

*“Like...like we will be raised too?”*

*“Yes, like we will, in the end, live again, too. And because of all of this, we can, without fear, get up, go out and change the world to be a better place.” ‘The Resurrection is the beginning of the future of the world.’<sup>3</sup> ‘The Resurrection is the beginning of the future of the world.’ ‘The Resurrection is the beginning of the future of the world.’ Thomas said this several times, loving the sound of it, loving its poetry, loving its truth.*

After a long pause, Alexander asked, *“Were you afraid, Thomas?” “Were you afraid?”*

Thomas looked at the bright, young man, eager, open, vulnerable, questioning, and said, *“Well, yes, my son. I believe we all are held captive by our fears. The world is a hard place, and, and you remember also that I had missed out. I had seen him die. I had SEEN him DIE. And I had not YET, like them, encountered the living Lord for myself. I said to one of the other*

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<sup>2</sup> John Buchanan. Sermon. “Sent” <http://222fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/041507.html>. (accessed 4-5-18).

<sup>3</sup> Jurgen Moltmann. “Passion for God: A Theology in Two Voices.” (Louisville: WJKP;2003),84.

*disciples, "Unless I see it too...unless I see the nail holes in his hands and put my hands in the wounds in his side, I'm not believing it. No way!"*

Alexander interrupted, *"I would have done the same thing. I think I would do the same thing now. I need to see and touch for myself so that I can know and understand."*

*"Well, that IS where I was," Thomas acknowledged. "However," then he looked Alexander in the eyes and said slowly and deliberately, "when Jesus greeted me and offered me whatever I needed in order to experience for myself the power of the Resurrection, the truth is, I did not need it. I did not need to put my hands into his side anymore. I did not need to touch his wounded hands, Alexander. What I knew at that moment is that what is eternal is invisible."<sup>4</sup> I knew that I was in the presence of the Risen Lord. I was standing right there and then in the embrace of the Son of the Living God, the God who loves me, who died for me, and all by his forgiving grace, a grace I never deserved nor earned. He was alive and his spirit revealed this truth to my mind and sealed it upon my heart, his Spirit who is even now loose, loose on the earth. Touching him that evening was not going to make THAT more real to me. It COULD not make that more real."*

There was a long pause, and then Alexander whispered, *"And that's when you said, "My Lord and my God!?"* *"Yes, that's when those words fell out of my mouth. Some things cannot be explained or seen or touched but must be simply accepted as mystery, as truth that is beyond our reasoning. I knew that I knew that I knew."* Then Thomas added, *"This is what I wish for you to know too."*

Alexander responded, *"Have you never then questioned or doubted your faith?"*

*"Oh, of course, I have, Alexander." "Doubts are actually a normal and natural part of faith. They keep our faith awake and moving."<sup>5</sup> As someone once said, "Doubt often brings us to poke at what we think we believe. When it topples, we realize it was an idol. Doubt ends up being a gift that can lead us deeper into God."<sup>6</sup> Doubt is part of faith, and it will ultimately*

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Mendenhall.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Buechner. "Doubt" <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/10/26/doubt> (accessed 4-6-18).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. Quoted in interview by Bob Abernathy in Religion & Ethics News Weekly. Mar 9, 2007. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2007/03/09/march-9-2207-barbar-brown-taylor1792/> (accessed 4-6-18).

*enliven our faith. It will help us grow. And another thing: You know, Jesus knows that life is real and life is hard. Jesus knows that life is often real hard. He knows that we have to walk tough roads. He walked them too. And sometimes our vision can do nothing but shrink under the weight of it all. It becomes easy to lose track that we are Easter people, people who can turn these things over to the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the God who promises that in the end, we too will be resurrected, and all will be made new. Do not be afraid to doubt, Alexander. Jesus is not undone by it. He is big enough to can handle it with mercy.*<sup>7</sup>

After this, there was silence in the little room. For quite a while there was heavy silence. Thomas could sense that Alexander was really pondering the words just given him. It had been a conversation that maybe came close to home for this young man who seemed to be like Thomas in so many ways. Thomas held his empty teacup out for Alexander to refill. When he returned with a filled cup, he took again his seat on the pillow beside him and Thomas said, *“The point here, the point of Easter, my son, is that we, the followers of Christ, need to get up and get moving. We need to walk out of whatever place that we’ve been hiding, whatever spot we’ve been huddled in and go out into the bright light of day, together as the Church, telling all others who believe that death is the end, who are worried about their future, or what will become of them that they need not fear because our Lord was dead, DEAD, and now lives, again. He has left his Spirit for us, and the Spirit is loose in this world to indwell, empower, comfort, and accompany us in this life and the life to come.”* *“Remember, that that night, Jesus breathed upon them, but he also said, ‘as the Father has sent me, so I send you!’”*

Alexander nodded and looked gratefully into the eyes of his mentor. He reached out and took Thomas’ hands, the hands that did not in the end, need touch the wounds of Jesus to believe,<sup>8</sup> the gnarled old hands of the disciple who with the others had gotten up that special evening, *“headed toward the door, walked into the future and changed the world.”*<sup>9</sup>

May we, by God’s grace, brothers and sisters, do the same. Amen.

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<sup>7, 8</sup> Laura Mendenhall.

<sup>9</sup> John Buchanan