

Year B
2 Easter
Psalm 133
Acts 4:32-35
1 John 1:1-2:2
John 20:19-31

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Well—this morning we see the disciples on the evening of Jesus’s resurrection. That morning, Mary Magdalen had come to tell them that Jesus was risen from the dead—that she had seen and spoken to him herself—and indeed, Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved *seemed* to have understood this, having seen the empty tomb. But tonight the disciples don’t seem to have any confidence in what they’ve seen or what they’ve been told. Instead, they are frightened. They are locked in a house “for fear of the Jews,” that is the Jewish authorities. No doubt fantastic rumors about Jesus were everywhere, and some people were accusing Jesus’s followers of having stolen his body in order to fake a resurrection. Certainly the disciples don’t seem to know what to think about this situation—so they are afraid.

Jesus knows they’re afraid, so when he appears suddenly in their midst, in spite of locked doors, he says, “Peace be with you.” When they realize it actually is Jesus, because he shows them the wounds of his crucifixion, they rejoice—it *was* really true! He *was* really alive again! And then Jesus does personally what the synoptic gospels show as a very different Pentecost event: he fills the disciples with the Holy Spirit. In breathing on them he echoes the Genesis story, where the Lord God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of Adam, causing him to “become a living being” (Gen 2:7). Not only does Jesus fill them with the Holy Spirit, but he sends them out to spread the gospel: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you...if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21b-23).

But poor Thomas was not present at this event, so when his friends tell him about Jesus’s amazing appearance, he does not believe them. By this

time, you might see that John uses this as a theme: first someone doesn't believe, but when they see evidence a second time, they do believe. So it is with Thomas. Jesus appears to the group a week later, again unstopped by walls and doors, and invites Thomas to touch his hands and side. This time, with no need to touch Jesus, Thomas makes the statement of faith: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Here Thomas represents all of us. How often are we all inclined to disbelieve without concrete proof? How often are we reluctant to be taken in, to made fools of? Notice that Jesus does't chastise Thomas for this. He offers the proof that Thomas requested—and then says "blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe" (20:29b). Again, that would be us. We have not had the privilege of seeing Jesus in the flesh, yet we proclaim him to be Lord of all.

Jesus come to his disciples in spite of their fear, and in spite of their doubt. He comes to them as an act of grace: not as they *deserve*, but as *he loves them*. If he had given them what they deserved, he would probably never have returned to them. His resurrection was always an act of love.

As I was reading this lesson, I kept remembering a man whom I met a few years ago in the trauma bay of the emergency room. He had asked to see a chaplain, and all I knew about him was that he'd been in an accident on I81, had died on the scene, and then been resuscitated and brought in by the rescue squad. His nurse said he was very agitated and she was not sure what was wrong.

I walked into the trauma bay to see him lying on a stretcher, wearing a cervical collar to stabilize his spine, hooked up to multiple IVs. I introduced myself, and he immediately said, "I think I'm losing my mind."

"Wow," I said. "That sounds terrifying. Do you want to talk about it?" He did want to talk, and he poured out his story to me, rapidly, urgently, gripping his hands together until his knuckles became white. "I can't tell this to my family—they would never believe me. But I have to tell

somebody—somebody who will believe me. I don't remember the accident," he said, "but I remember seeing the rescue squad cutting open my car and pulling me out. They laid me down on the side of the road." I nodded, saying "okay."

"No, it's not what you think!" he objected. "I saw them doing this from *overhead*. I was, like, hovering over everything. I saw them start CPR on me, you know, pumping up and down on my chest...I was looking *down* on all this...and then there was this bright light, and suddenly I was in this, like this huge field of flowers. They were the most beautiful flowers you've ever seen, all over the place. And in the distance I saw the Massanutten." He paused, seeing this again in his mind's eye. "You never saw anything like this in your life, ma'am," he whispered. "

"And then, I saw somebody running towards me across the field, and when he got close, I saw it was my cousin Dan." He looked at me earnestly, "ma'am, Dan died in a tree accident two years ago. But it was him, and he was laughing and he hugged me, and slapped me on the back, and said, 'you're here! Joe you're here! This is great—just great to see you! Mam's here, and Pap, and uncle Jeff, and Aunt Ruby, and, oh everybody's here! But Joe you can't stay. It's not your time yet—you gotta to go back. But you'll be here again. This is where you're coming, and we'll all be waiting for you.'" And he hugged me and then...then I was laying on the side of the road, looking *up* at the guys on the rescue squad."

By this time Joe was in tears. "Ma'am do you think I'm crazy?" he asked. I shook my head. "No, I don't think you're crazy," I said, "I think you've been given a great gift. You know where you're going when you leave this life." Then Joe wept silent tears for some time. After a while he calmed down, and eventually he said, "I don't get it. I ain't been the best Christian. How is it I get to go to that place?" I touched his shoulder gently, "Joe, God doesn't love us because we are good," I said, "God loves us because *God* is good."

Joe looked unsure about this for a second, and then said, “But now what do I *do*?”

I smiled and shook my head. “I don’t know. But God knows. And God will lead you, if you will *be* led.”

To me, in so many ways, Joe was like the disciples. In a way, he had encountered the divine, and was afraid as a result. Not only that, but he was not sure he even believed the evidence of his senses. This experience couldn’t be true, right? I mean what rational person would believe it? And then—what does he do as a result of this encounter with the divine? I never saw him again after that, so I wonder if he was able to share his story with his family, or with his friends. I wonder if he was able to trust enough in his experience to allow it to transform his life. Did he tell his story to inspire others in their faith? I hope so. As John says in his gospel, “These [things] 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” (20:31).

Amen.

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis