

**John 20:19-31**

<sup>19</sup>When 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.” <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), 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, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>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.

*Guiding God, send your Holy Spirit upon the preaching of your holy Word that it may serve to illumine the path of life and lead us into your presence where there is fullness of joy. Amen.*

If today’s reading sounds particularly familiar to you, it should. It comes up every year in the Lectionary on the Sunday after Easter. At the center of the story is Thomas. Who is Thomas?

In the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – Thomas appears only as a *name* on a list of Jesus’ disciples. He is mentioned nowhere else in the first 3 Gospels. Thomas is also mentioned in Acts, but again his name only appears on a list of names of those who were together in an upper room in Jerusalem after naming Matthias as the disciple to replace Judas.

In the Gospel of John, Thomas is first mentioned in chapter 11 when Jesus was summoned to go to see Lazarus who was sick. This meant going back to the place where things had gotten quite contentious; indeed, it had gotten so bad the authorities were attempting to stone Jesus. The disciples were understandably nervous, yet Thomas is recorded as having said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

The next time Thomas is mentioned in John’s gospel (chapter 14) Jesus was talking about his Father’s house with many rooms. Jesus was telling about going to prepare a place for them; he said, “*And you know the way to the place where I am going.*” You can almost hear the exasperation in Thomas’s voice when he replies to Jesus, “*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” Jesus answered, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*”

So it appears that Thomas was an engaged disciple. He was bold to follow Jesus into what could have been harm’s way. He was bold to be honest about *not* knowing the “way” that Jesus was talking about. In today’s reading he is once again bold in his demand to see his risen Lord for himself.

Thomas wanted to see and touch. His wanting to see and touch was certainly understandable for one who was anchored in the material world. So what do you think? If you were in Thomas’s shoes, would you want the same? Do you like to have concrete evidence? Do you feel more secure when you can see the proof? My sense is that we all like to see the real thing to know where we stand.

Yet I believe John’s account is a witness to something much more; indeed I believe John’s account is a witness that invites us into a mystical reality. Let’s remember Paul’s witness to the Corinthian church some 4 decades earlier. In his first letter Paul wrote: *What is sewn is perishable, what is raised is imperishable* (1 Cor. 15:42). Again: *It is sewn as a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body* (vs. 44). Paul goes on; *What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God* (vs. 50).

Let’s consider the setting: On the first day of the week the disciples were locked in a room. The risen Lord did not knock on the door to be let in. The risen Christ came and stood among them; face to face! Then eight days later Thomas had his chance to come face to face with the risen Lord. Jesus invited Thomas to see and touch. But John’s gospel never says that Thomas actually touched the marks of nail and spear wounds. It only records Thomas’s reaction to *seeing* Jesus risen.

Whatever Thomas experienced, he was changed, seemingly in an instant and confessed that he had encountered *his Lord and his God*. Thomas’s confession was way more, and way more important than

touching the wounds of crucifixion and knowing for sure that this was Jesus come back to life. Identifying wounds and touching them is an experience of the physical and material realm. It gives us information, but it doesn't have the power to change us in the way Thomas was changed.

Something happened to Thomas when he met the risen Lord. I think the point of this story is that Thomas came to know that Jesus was with him in a new way that went beyond the physical. I believe Thomas experienced the risen Lord as a spiritual presence that was now part of him, and would always be with him, no matter what he did, no matter where he went, and no matter how he was feeling.

I believe Thomas moved beyond the need to see and touch. In a sense he was raised with Christ to a new experience of being in Christ; sensing at the same time Christ in him. Did he remember Jesus' analogy of the vine? Jesus called himself the *true vine*. "*Abide in me,*" Jesus said, "*as I abide in you.*" Jesus said, "*I am the vine and you are the branches.*" And the life of the vine flows through the branches.

God sent Jesus to be God's transforming presence in the world. The *life* Jesus lived became our Gospel, for God sent Jesus to *be* the Gospel not just preach it. *As God sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us.* Jesus sends us to be bearers of the same Gospel life. Jesus sends us to make our lives the living Gospel in our time and place.

(move down to floor level)

So if you are willing, I would like to lead you in a guided visualization which I hope will help you imagine how the risen Christ might live and abide in you. So as you feel comfortable I invite you to close your eyes and gently bring your attention to your breath. Allow yourself to relax and just try to be present to your breathing. Notice how your diaphragm drops and your chest rises as you breathe in. And feel your body relax as you release each breath.

As you stay with your breath, hear Jesus say to you, "I am the vine, you are the branches. I am the vine, you are the branches..." Hear Jesus say, "Abide in me, as I abide in you. Abide in me, as I abide in you."

Now, imagine if you can, Jesus breathing in you. As you attend to your breath, imagine Jesus breathing in unison with your breath. As you breathe in, Jesus is breathing in with you. As you breathe out, Jesus is breathing out with you. Your breathing is Jesus breathing in you.

The risen Christ lives and breathes in you. Your breathing is the rhythm of Christ in you. This is how intimate Christ is with you. Your breath is his breath, and his breath is your breath. Once more, when Christ breathes in us, we receive the Holy Spirit.

I invite you now to take a couple of deeper breaths and gently bring your attention back to our gathering here.

May I suggest that whenever we become aware of our breathing, let us remember that our risen Lord is breathing in us. When we are tired and our breath feels weary, remember Christ is breathing with us to sustain us. When we are anxious or tense and our breathing becomes shallow and labored, remember that our risen Lord is breathing with us; always with us.

As Jesus risen breathes in us, we become the living gospel, and in a sense we are all sent into the world to breathe this gospel to any who are longing for more than what can be touched and held. As our lives take on the breath of God through our risen Lord, we are transformed and raised to a new place. And a sure sign of this transformation is a quiet, yet overflowing sense of joy.

Christ is breathing in you. You *are* a new creation. Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!