

“Believing”
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter
April 11, 2010 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Acts 5:37-32; Psalm 118:14-29; Rev. 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

Last Sunday, Easter morning, we stood in a garden with Mary Magdalene. She didn't recognize the man standing in front of her – until he called her name.

This morning, we find ourselves behind locked doors with a group of disciples when suddenly a man appears, like out of nowhere. The disciples don't recognize him, this person, standing in the middle of them, until he shows them his hands and his side.

And we sympathize with a man named Thomas when he draws his own line in the sand and says I won't believe until I can touch the man's hands and his side – see this for myself.

Isn't it great to have characters we can identify with – folks like us?

Easter did not end at sundown last Sunday. In our church calendar we have fifty days of Easter – six more Sundays, including today. This seems to surprise a lot of people. That Easter goes on so long. It's longer even than Lent. But, then, for some of us it can take a long time to get to the point of seeing the Divine, feeling its presence.

This Easter time culminates in Pentecost when, as described in the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit comes like tongues of flame to energize, to empower, to propel the disciples forward into action, into living the Gospel as taught them by the Son of God.

Fifty days – really only a short time to grasp what the Resurrection means. To come to understand, even a little bit that a Good Friday death was not an end but a beginning.

Today's Gospel passage has been dubbed “Doubting Thomas.” Sometimes, a title can be too limiting. That's the case today. Yes, Thomas doubted, but so did all the other disciples in this story. They didn't recognize the risen Jesus until he showed them his hands and feet. Everyone in the room doubted. None of them recognized the man who appeared out of nowhere in front of them. Now Thomas could have believed his friends when they told him that they had seen their Lord. But he didn't. That's real life, too. My guess is nobody really believes somebody else's story – about an experience they attribute to God, or Jesus or the Holy Spirit. It makes for good reading or good storytelling, but unless it happens to me, it's hard to really believe it happened to someone else. We like proof, don't we, something we can see, touch, experience for ourselves?

Buff and I were sitting on our sun porch a few weeks ago at sunset time. The sunsets around here, as so many of you know, can be really spectacular. But this one was unique. I have never seen one like it before. I doubt we will ever see another one just like it. It was due probably to the unique pattern of the clouds that evening. As the sun went down, its orange and rose rays split through the clouds, first in a horizontal pattern (the usual way), but then also split vertically. For about seven minutes there was a rose colored cross on the horizon. We were stunned. We ran outside to get a better look. And then both of us ran back inside to try and find a camera to take a picture of it. Because we figured that no one would believe us – unless they were seeing it too, at that very moment, or unless we could show them a picture. Just telling

people, “Guess what we saw – a cross in the sky” might not cut it. Thank goodness Buff was there and at least we both saw it – affirming one another.

Now I’m not here to say that seeing a cross in the sky empowered my faith or made me more of a believer, I’m just using the story to make a point. That having the experience first-hand and then trying to communicate it to someone else is not easy.

Another name for our Gospel passage today could be “Seeing is Believing.” But, actually, there is a zinger at the end of the passage. Jesus says to Thomas in front of the gathered disciples, “Have you believed because you have seen me? And now here it comes. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

The Gospel of John was written around 90 A.D., some sixty or so years after Jesus, as human being, died. Slowly but surely there was no one left who had actually seen the flesh and blood Jesus.

John was writing for a small community that desperately needed assurance that the Christ they followed was a “living” truth, a “living” presence in their lives. They were in the midst of huge conflict with the Jews in the community who were throwing the Christ followers out of the synagogue, excluding the Christ followers from their original faith community. The Christ following Jews needed to band together for support. John realized that their “belief” that Christ was who he said he was (the Son of God) was what would hold them together. They had not “seen” the flesh and blood Christ, but yet were struggling to believe in the face of challenge. Christ’s words here were to affirm and give strength and courage to these later believers.

So, to us very later Christians, Christ followers, these words are very important. Christ’s blessing carries through almost two thousand years to us today. We might not feel that we are full-fledged believers. Like long ago disciples we don’t always recognize Christ in front of us, at work in our lives. But we hope, don’t we, that we are **coming** towards a belief in Christ, the Divine, as a living presence in our lives. One that wants us to have new life, the kind of new and empowered life that does happen when we believe.

There is nothing, not even locked doors and sealed shutters that can keep Christ from coming to us. However hard we may lock ourselves away, close ourselves off from his love and his desires for us to live a fuller more abundant life in his service, Christ comes.

Christ’s words over and over again are “Peace be with you.” That’s God’s desire for all of us: to experience the peace of his love and acceptance no matter what is going on around us.

In this Gospel story, Christ breathes on the disciples. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he says. We are reminded of Genesis, the creation, when God molded humankind out of the dust and then with his breath, breathed life into man. Jesus Christ, Son of God, can breathe new life into each of us. May we be open to believing that he came to do just this.