

Grace Episcopal Church
Galena, Illinois
The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell

2nd Sunday of Easter April 12, 2015
John: 20: 19-31

I wonder if you will indulge me for a few moments this morning as I engage in just a bit of personal nostalgia. This second Sunday of Easter, when the water in the vases of lilies has been refreshed a time or two this week in hopes of eking out a few more days of their sunny, golden splendor, when the tulips in the driveway clearly did not make it through the week let alone the entire Easter Season. They are not unlike so many of us who have needed some “downtime” after the magnificent and moving liturgies of Holy Week and Easter Day. This second Sunday of Easter, called not only “Low Sunday” but “the march of the associates, the seminarians...” as the pinch hitters for the lead clergy. That is the source of my nostalgia, because so many times, I was the associate or the seminarian—and so many times, I have preached on this text from John’s Gospel, because it appears, not on the usual three-year cycle but every year.

The last time was exactly three years ago—my very last Sunday before I came here to Grace. It was, in part, a farewell to the place that had nurtured me and prepared me. But even before that—long before—this second Sunday of Easter was the day that I preached my very first sermon ever. I was the seminary intern, in the other place that nurtured me and prepared me for parish ministry—and I was TERRIFIED. Oh, it went well, but, then these were my people. That wanted me to succeed, so their assessment might not have been entirely objective.

I tried very hard not to preach a typical “seminarian” sermon—heavy on the history / context of the text, its literary form and so on—more like lecturing than preaching. Instead, it leaned toward personal experience, more than needed, I fear. So, as I read through it now, I think the message, the Good News could have been stronger.

I focused that day on Thomas. And on physical, human sight, and how we put so much emphasis on our own senses: “Seeing is believing,” we say; “Show me, I want to see it for myself”; “I won’t believe it unless I see it with my own eyes”. Even though we know those senses are sometimes less than reliable. Things we see with our very own eyes are often other than they seem. And how we see makes such a big difference in how we act and respond!

My illustration came from one of many mission trips to an underprivileged area in South Carolina. My friend Jan and I had gone into a hardware store to pick up some supplies. (I

was very good at supply runs—not so good with the tools!) As we waited for roofing nails to be counted out, we noticed a small, older man who came in. He was clutching a folded-up shopping list in his hand, and he waited quite a while for service. When the clerk finally turned to him he became agitated. He unfolded the list and then held it way out at arm's length and began to rub his eyes. Finally, he said, "I don't know what's wrong with my eyes. I can't read this--I need some help. Will you help me?"

My heart went out to him as I thought about this poor man who needed glasses and he didn't have enough money to buy them. But my friend saw it differently. She said, "There's nothing wrong with his eyes. It's not glasses he needs. He can't read, and he's ashamed." I was stunned. Such a thought had never occurred to me! My everyday frame of reference did not include abject poverty and the kind of response that might be required. The everyday frame of reference for the disciples and followers in that upper room in Jerusalem on Easter night did not prepare them for Jesus' appearance.

We all know the story-- the locked room filled with a band of frightened and confused people—not just the twelve (minus Judas and Thomas) and the women who witnessed the empty tomb, but probably a larger gathering of those whose hopes for a new world where oppression would cease seemed, now, to be in question. A gathering for whom the meaning of the empty tomb had not yet penetrated. So, in fear and confusion, they mourned the loss of their leader and wondered what would become of them without him.

And when Thomas joined them the next week, they were still locked in that room! In spite of Jesus' blessing, his affirming and commissioning them to go about their ministry, even in spite of his breathing the Spirit into them, that gentle breath of new creation just like God breathed into the very first human, they seemed to still be stuck—in that point of view, that perspective that would not allow them to see beyond their usual physical senses. Thomas did the natural human thing, too, relying on his own eyes, his own touch, rather than taking their word for what they had seen.

Well, in 1994, I jumped from there to another experience. I was content then—and for long after—with Thomas' looking upon Jesus' wounds, maybe touching them, and immediately making his profound statement of faith, "My Lord and my God." I was content that that sight, that touch were sufficient to instantly transform him. But I have changed since 1994. Now, I'm not so sure. I think it was more than that. Much, much more. I think that in that moment, Thomas' sight expanded. It was no longer about his eyes. All that he knew, all that he had experienced with Jesus, all that Jesus had taught came together in an instant—the companionship, the healings and teachings, the laughter and the pain. All of these coalesced and Thomas knew—not only with his rational brain but with every bit of his being. The doors of his heart, his soul, and his body blew open and the breath of the Spirit—Ruach—burst through.

What a story John gives us—one that signals a brand new thing and the fulfillment of all that Jesus had promised. This thing called resurrection is revealed in a blend of mystery and embodiment. Mystery in one who enters a room with a locked, closed door and is not immediately recognized by his closest friends. Embodiment in the physicality of the wounded, scarred body, the touch, and the breath.

A story that also answers what must have been a question for the people of John's community some 50 or 60 years later—and, I'm certain, remains so for us, centuries and centuries later. "What about us? What about those of us who didn't have the chance to see with our own eyes, touch with our own hands, hear with our own ears?"

Locked doors are not just relics of the past for those who fear for their lives. We find them in our own lives—our homes, our society, our churches. In a little while, following the Eucharist, you will all be invited to stay here for a brief presentation on the results of the survey we took last fall. If you have already looked at the report, you will have noticed how very well Grace Church scored. The key measures of church vitality—satisfaction and energy—place us in a quadrant of just 20% of congregations that are transformational.

How will we look at these results? Will we breathe deeply and say, "wow, we're great." Just keep on doing what we're doing. Be content and satisfied, comfortable with just the way things are? Good enough. Or will we look deeper? Beneath the surface to curiosity? How can we be certain this high satisfaction is not self-satisfaction; how can this energy be transformational and not decline into complacency? How can it expand beyond our own satisfaction with, perhaps, our individual preferences to an invitation for others to share in what we have and what we do?

I do not know whether I was right—whether that man in the hardware store just needed glasses or whether Jan was the one who got it. I will never know. What I do know is that I must always look beyond the easy answer—look deeply for the possibilities.

Oh, we have been given great gifts here at Grace. We have been given the risen Christ right in our midst, just as those folk gathered in that upper room. And, like them, big things are expected of us. We, too, are called and commissioned to take that gift to the ends of the earth. Like them, we are called to unlock those doors—the red ones out here, the doors of our hearts, minds, and souls, to fling them open and expect the whoosh of the Spirit to stir things up and to bring new life! And to send us forth in the power of that Spirit to take the risen Christ wherever we go.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed, Alleluia! Amen.