

“I Want to See!”

Sermon: Year B, Second Sunday of Easter

Texts: John 20:19–31, 1 John 1:1–2:2

Preached: April 8, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, the Risen One who stands among us to speak peace. AMEN

“I want to see! Let me see!” I had friends who had a little boy named Jordan. Jordan was a little barrel of energy, and could really tire you out. He was in constant motion, and had an insatiable curiosity. No matter what was going on, no matter what you were doing, here would come Jordan, wriggling in between you and whatever you were doing, with that insistent demand of “I want to see! Let me see!” If his mom was preparing dinner, there he would be, clambering up onto a kitchen stool, kneeling precariously on it to see what she was doing. He would sit there spellbound, taking in every movement of chopping, stirring, slicing. If his dad was sitting writing at the computer, there would come Jordan, sneaking under the desk and slithering up onto his father’s lap, saying, “I want to see!” And then he would sit contentedly, watching his dad’s fingers on the keys, staring at the screen, not comprehending anything on it, of course, but he just wanted to see. He would rest his hand on his dad’s hand as he moved the mouse, would occasionally touch a key shyly. If they were out gardening, he was squatting down staring into the dirt, trying to spot seeds, or bulbs, or grubs, touching the leaves of the plants, figuring it all out in his head. I can remember once when I was playing the piano, he asked if I could open the lid so he could see the workings. He would touch a key, straining to look inside to see how the levers moved the hammer to strike the string and create the sound, and then he sat enthralled as I began to play and he could watch the ripple of the hammers playing across the soundboard. As he got older, you could tell him *about* things...but it was never enough to describe things to Jordan—he needed to see them, touch them, experience them. And always would come that question: “Can I see? Can you show me?”

As we hear today’s Gospel story, it occurs to me that maybe Thomas is something like Jordan. But you know, poor Thomas gets a really bad rep. What’s the first word you think of when you hear that name? “Doubting.” Doubting Thomas. The one who didn’t believe. The one that Jesus had to prove himself to. We say it like it’s a bad thing. Two thousand years later, still we call anyone who wants proof, anyone who questions things, a Doubting Thomas. It’s really unfair, because Thomas doesn’t doubt any more than anyone else in the resurrection stories. When Mary Magdalene and the other women come rushing back from the tomb, Luke tells us that the other disciples considered what they were saying to be nonsense (the word Luke uses is actually closer to “bull...crap”), and Peter insists on going to see for himself. And even after Mary and Peter have told the others, they still go huddle together in a locked, darkened room, not believing that Jesus could be risen from the dead until he comes and appears among them, and speaks peace to them, and they see his hands and side. It’s not enough for any of them to just hear the accounts. If you look at the Thomas part of the story, you’ll see that he doesn’t disbelieve any more than the others...they didn’t rejoice until Jesus had shown them his hands and side and had spoken his familiar words of peace to them. Jesus appears to him in exactly the same way. He shows up in the locked room once again, speaks the same greeting of “Peace be with you,” and shows his hands and side once more, exactly as he has for the other disciples. The real difference is in the intensity of Thomas’s desire, his need, to see and experience for himself. Thomas needs to see and touch in order to know that resurrection is real.

I was having a deep conversation with a woman who was going through a dark and traumatic period in her life, a time that involved some significant losses, a time that had required dying to large parts of her past, a time that meant reimagining who she was in relation to the world, in relation to her family. Slowly, things were starting to change for her, though, and light was beginning to shine back into her darkness. But still, she was uncertain about the future. It was hard for her to shift her focus from the past, from the painful experience, from the parts of her life that had gone through death. As we talked, I brought the conversation around to the season of Easter, and asked her the question, “Where do you see signs of resurrection around you?” She thought for a moment, and asked, “What does resurrection look like?” And thinking of the story of Thomas, I said, “Well, resurrection never looks like what we think it looks like. Have you noticed that in the resurrection stories, Jesus’ friends *never* realize that they’re looking at the risen Jesus until they hear him speak their names, or touch him, or he breaks bread, and then suddenly it becomes clear to them? In some appearances, they have a

vague sense of who this might be, but they aren't sure. So we don't always spot resurrection right away. And notice that the resurrected Jesus still bears the scars of what has happened to him...so resurrection doesn't mean that everything that is past has been wiped away. The scars of suffering and experience don't go away in resurrected life...but they're transformed somehow."

And then I turned the question back to her: "What does resurrection look like to you? Where do you see signs of new life around you?" And as we talked, she began to look at the amazing and good and new things that were beginning to happen around her, even in the midst of her pain: new relationships, old relationships that were being transformed, her own transformation with a deepened spiritual outlook from the experiences of pain, kindnesses people had done for her ... once she started, the list really began to grow, and as she spoke, I could see on her face that some glimmer of hope and peace was being sparked in her. She needed to recognize the tangible, viewable signs that God was indeed at work in her life, that the darkness was not conquering the light. As we left our time together, she still had many questions, of course, still had a lot that she was carrying and would need help with... the wounds were still there. But I think she was beginning to look for signs of new life all around her that she may not have realized were signs of resurrection until she began to look at them for herself. And as she was leaving, she said to me, "Thank you. You're one of my signs of resurrection."

Resurrection is not easy for us to see, much of the time. We sit in our darkened, locked places, seeing only the death of what has been. We are determined not to believe that resurrection can come, because we're so bound to what has come before, we're so convinced that dead is dead, that life will not come again. Instead of looking for signs of resurrection, we focus on signs of death. And we will not believe that God can bring life out of death for us. But into our dark places, our fear-filled places, our tombs, comes Jesus, the Risen One, speaking peace to us, inviting us to experience resurrection, breathing into us the Holy Spirit, and sending us out from behind locked doors where we huddle in fear into the light of day to see and experience resurrection for ourselves, and to declare what we have seen and heard.

The funny thing about resurrection is that we never believe it when somebody tells us about it. It's not until we open our eyes, open our ears, touch it with our own hands, that we can believe it's possible, can believe it's real. That's true of the people around us, too. Resurrection is not something people can believe just by hearing about it. All of us are like Thomas, I think...and to be fair, all of us are like the other disciples, too. Just hearing about Jesus isn't enough. We need to experience Jesus, hear him, see him, touch him. How do we do that, we ask? We haven't seen him, we haven't touched his hands and side—and honestly, we're not going to have that direct experience.

We experience Jesus by being the Risen Christ to one another and to our neighbors. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we become the presence of the Risen One in our world. It is up to us to be the hands and body of Christ, reaching out as flesh and blood people to show others that full and abundant life is all around them, showing them signs of resurrection and newness. It is up to us to rise up from our own woundedness, raised by God's power, and to live from that woundedness, still bearing our scars, in ways that show others that life can indeed spring from death, that light does conquer darkness. It is up to us to speak that word of peace, the very words that we practice here week after week when we share the peace with one another. It is up to us to call people by their names in ways that reach deep inside so they realize that they are truly seen and known. It is up to us to break our bread and share it, because it is in the breaking and sharing of bread that the Resurrected One is glimpsed. It is up to us to breathe empowering breath when people are tightly holding their own breath in fear or anxiety. It is up to us to be Children of Light who shine light into darkened, locked places where people live in fear.

Sisters and brothers, hear the Good News: We are resurrection people, raised up along with Christ Jesus to new life so that we can be signs of resurrection ourselves, so that we can become visible, tangible signs of Christ's peace and of Christ's own life. And in becoming signs of resurrection to one another, we will recognize the presence of the Risen One among us over and over again. In helping one another see Christ's presence among us, more and more we will be able to breathe with Thomas those words of joyful recognition: "My Lord and my God!"

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!