

“Now What?!“

Acts 2:14a, 22-24; 1 Peter 1:6-9; John 20:24-31

How many of you know what today is? Yes, Sunday... duh. If you happen to look at the top of the bulletin, it is the “2nd Sunday of Easter.” It is informally also known as ‘Low Sunday.’ Doesn’t sound too complimentary, does it? As you likely know, it is referred to in that way because attendance on this Sunday after Easter is historically very... ‘LOW.’ Again, ‘duh.’ WHY IS THAT? To look at it from a ‘4:8 perspective,’ one could say that many people DO recognize the overall **importance** of the **Christian faith**, and that those ‘high holy days’ of Easter (and Christmas) merit more effort than most days to acknowledge that **importance** (and are SO worn out from all that ‘acknowledgment’ that it takes *months* to recover...)

There are, of course, much less noble reasons for the Easter spike in attendance. The music. The flowers. The dresses. The food. The Egg hunts. Being with people you don’t see too often. But by now, a week later, all of that has worn off. Whether occasional attenders or ‘frequent flyers,’ we’ve all gotten back into our normal, secular routines again. We have left the ‘victorious notes of the *empty* tomb’ for the everyday challenges of our NOT-so-*empty* lives. And the question becomes, ‘How do we **continue to live out** the kind of **exuberant, triumphant life** we so enthusiastically proclaimed on Resurrection Sunday?’ In these days following that glorious occasion of Jesus rising from the dead, how will that **reality** continue to be REAL to us? Or to put it simply, **‘Now what?’**

This is a question that could have well occurred to our brother Thomas. You know... ‘*Doubting*’ Thomas. Poor Thomas. Always a ‘day late and a dollar short.’ Always the one who was ‘missing out’ on what Jesus was doing or saying. Just a few chapter prior, when Jesus assured his disciples that they **knew** the way to the place where he was going, Thomas was like, ‘Lord, we don’t know where you’re going. HOW can we know the way? We’re just your mere followers...’ Of course, Jesus would quickly answer his question: **“I AM ‘the way’... the truth... and the life.”** ‘You want to ‘*know the way*,’ Tommy? Follow ME!’

And here today we have another example of Thomas missing the boat. Jesus appears to the disciples... minus Thomas. Have you ever wondered just *where* he was? Did he step out for a pita sandwich? Was he in the bathroom? Whatever the reason, when his friends are all hyped up because they have seen their Lord in the flesh, he doesn't buy into it. He must have thought they were hallucinating, or exaggerating, or just plain nuts. 'Oh no... unless I can see it for myself... to put my fingers in the nail-holes in his hands and side... **I will not believe.**'

So Jesus, in his usual patient, compassionate way... you know, like his Dad... heard Thomas' defiant doubt and came back again. (Though He DID let him stew a week before doing so!) And even then, while Jesus DID let Thomas do what he wanted... touch his nail-scarred hands and pierced side... the Savior did leave Thomas with a few 'piercing statements' of His own: "***Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.***" (John 20:29) In effect, Jesus is saying 'Seeing in order to believe'... that's one thing. Believing in order to see... that's another!'

Thomas is therefore left with a 'cunundrum' (or as one of my seminary professors used to say, a real 'DI-LEE-MA'): the **excitement** of being in the presence of Christ... and the **challenge** of Jesus' words of chastisement. Thomas is left to ponder his next steps. He has seen the **reality** of the **risen Christ**... is he now to 'keep it real?' Jesus has come and gone... **NOW WHAT?**

As we too seek to 'keep it real' in our efforts to 'practice the presence' of the risen Christ in our daily lives, I would lift out a few points from our Bible readings for today. And as we consider that particular source of wisdom, the first would be pretty logical... we must **continue to remember** the...

SCRIPTURES. God's good Word to His NOT-so-good children. In those last two verses of John's Gospel passage, we read that "***Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are NOT written in this book.***³¹ ***But THESE are written so that you may come to [continue to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.***" (John 20:30-31)

This book has distinct purposes in mind. It is NOT merely a handbook for living a good life. There are plenty of 'self-help' books that can do that for you as well. It is NOT a 'regal rule

book' to be reminded of ALL the ways that you and I fall short of living a life worthy of our God and King (or, for us to remind OTHERS of how THEY fall short!) ***"These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus IS... The Son of God."*** AND that ***"through believing you may have LIFE in his name."*** JESUS IS LIFE!

You may have noted the 'parentheses' that followed 'come to believe.' That verb 'come' in the Greek has both a current and progressive meaning. That the purpose of this Book is not only to 'come' to belief, but to 'continue' to believe. We must never get lulled into a false sense of security about our Christian faith. Our beliefs are under attack every day, every hour, every minute. And we must **continue** to be in God's Word to build up our spiritual 'muscle,' and resolve. The only way for the 'body' to get stronger is to exercise. That applies to both our personal, **physical** bodies, and our **spiritual** bodies as well.

I also want to comment on the first part of this quote: ***"Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book."*** What this reminds me is that there was a LOT that Jesus did with his followers that didn't 'make the headlines.' His relationship with His friends and co-laborers went much deeper than we find on the pages of Scripture. There were many ways that He worked in their lives that we will never know. And that's the same way that it is for us, His current-day disciples. His relationship with us goes much deeper than mere pages in a book. In the words of a song (gee, imagine that), 'He works in ways we cannot see... He will make a way for me.' It is just that type of 'blessed assurance' of God's quiet work in our lives that we find in His Word...

We also keep that spirit of Easter alive as we continue to remember Jesus'...

SUFFERING. WELL, now THAT sounds pretty exciting, doesn't it?! We know, of course, that our lives are not simply filled with all of the beautiful harmonies of joy and celebration... that we also encounter the somber minor keys, the tension, the dis-harmony of pain, conflict and loss. The Apostle Peter, who knew well the ups and downs, the victories and failures of life, wrote that... ***"In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."*** (1 Peter 1:6-7)

It's easy to praise God when 'life is good, people are great, business is terrific.' But what about when life really stinks... people are jackasses... business is terrible? BUT that if our faith is genuine, is real, it can stand those 'tests of fire.' Because genuine faith is indeed more precious than gold, and can withstand the fiery furnace of trials and tribulations. Indeed, fire burns off the impurities of gold to make it more pure. As we continue to seek the face of Jesus, who endured more pain and suffering than we could ever imagine, we pray for a faith like His... precious, pure. An unconditional love that can look at our betrayers and say, 'Father, forgive them.' A patience that stands by others in their own crises of faith, saying to them in word and deed, **"Peace be with you."** A confidence that the same Lord who was there for his friend is there for us, saying, **"Do not doubt, but believe."**

And finally, as we seek to move from an 'Easter Christ' to an 'everyday Jesus,' we should also continue to remember that we...

SHARE in His glory! As you heard in our opening Scripture reading, Peter said to the people of God in Judea and Jerusalem, **"Listen to what I say: this man... Jesus of Nazareth... God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power."** (Acts 2:14, 22, 24) Was this awesome act of power over death done just for God to 'show off?' Just to demonstrate what a powerful God He is? NO. That 'resurrection power' is one that is given to US, so that we might SHARE in Jesus' victory over sin and death. That, in the words of His Gospel, **"through believing you might have LIFE in his name."** (John 20:31)

Peter and Paul, who demonstrated their belief in Christ like few others, both spoke of how we are to share in Christ's power and glory:

"But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." (1 Peter 4:13)

"...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." (Phil. 3:10)

And so, while the sufferings of Christ that we can share in to only a small extent, what we can share in to the fullest measure is the power of his resurrection, and rejoice when his glory is revealed.

So, just how is that 'glory revealed?' We may have caught a glimpse of it in our Holy Week observances... we can continue to look for that glory in the Scriptures... in appreciating the suffering that Jesus went through on our behalf.. In pondering how we share so much more in this power than in that suffering. But where does Christ presence become most real? Where is it that we can really touch our Lord in a tangible way? How do we fully realize the truth of Peter's words: ***Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*** (Peter 1:8-9)

How are we, right now, 'receiving the outcome of our faith?' Where are we 'doubting Thomases' able to see and touch the living Lord...in order to ***"rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy"***? You can see the Lord when you look into the face of that young child at OPES. Or that new brother or sister you met at Pilgrimage, or Mo-Ranch. You can touch his hand when you hold onto that patient's hand in the hospital. You ARE that hand of Christ when you write a note, or pick up the phone, or knock on a door to call on a lonely shut-in.

Friends, we can be that Thomas, filled with doubt. We can encounter those Thomases who are skeptical. Let us be Jesus to them. Let us bring the joy of the Lord to the pain of His people. Knowing that the same words of comfort Jesus gave to Thomas and the disciples he offers to us, and all who will listen: ***"Peace be with you... Do not doubt... but believe."***