

**Easter 2 Sunday, Year C,  
Sermon by Glenn A. Brumbaugh**

28<sup>th</sup> April, 2019

**Acts 5:27-32 NRSV / John 20:19-31 NRSV**

So this morning we're going to start our message with an interactive exercise.

Look in the pew in front of you and pick something up to hold and take a look at,  
whether it's a hymnal, a bible, or one of the cards.

Take a good look at it.

Notice the color and as many details as you can with your eyes.

Take a minute and really look at it.

Then feel around the surface and edges with your fingers.

Notice the shape and details of the edges.

Turn it around in your hands.

Next tap on it, flick it, hear the sounds it makes when you engage it.

Finally, hold it up to your nose and inhale, see what smell it has.

Probably a little musty and dusty

sitting here in this empty sanctuary most of the time.

Once you've really checked it out, you can put it back.

When we think of what makes something real to us,

it's largely our individual experience that defines what is real and what isn't to us.

We often rely heavily on our senses to define our reality.

What we can see, feel, taste, and hear is what we view as real.

Even if we don't directly experience something,

we often rely on the observations of others to relay those details.

When we think of scientific facts,

those are simply truths that others have done the legwork for us

in sizing up whatever the object or reality

they are reporting back to us.

And our experience this morning is no different

than the experience of those men and women

in the locked room in our story from John this morning.

They too experienced reality with their senses. Jesus was very real to them.

They had been on the road with him.

They saw the healings, they heard the sermons.

They pondered the parables with him.

They saw him arrested,

and some saw him crucified, and they all knew he died and was buried.

Now they've seen and touched him resurrected.

His continued existence is reality for them now.

Except for one.

“Doubting Thomas” is a term most of us are familiar with, I'm sure.

Most sermons on this passage give him a bad rap for his lack of faith.

But let's think about that.

Thomas wasn't present the first time Jesus appeared in the room

so he didn't have the same opportunities as the others.

And they didn't sign on right away, sight unseen either.

Let's not forget just last week in our passage from Luke

that Peter didn't believe Mary Magdalene and the other women  
when they said the angels had told them that Jesus had risen.

Yet poor Thomas is made out in a negative light

because he stepped out to run an errand at the wrong time.

But is that really the point of this story anyway?

After all, this story is highlighting a major turning point in the faith.

Right now we have a room of people

who all experienced Jesus as a living, breathing, in the flesh human being.

Within a couple of decades from this moment, they all will be gone.

No one is then left who can testify to the real living, breathing Jesus.

All that is left is the community, the groups of believers

that this initial group spread out and evangelized.

And maybe that is where the real shortcoming of Thomas lies.

It's not that he didn't believe without seeing,

but that he didn't trust in his community, his fellow believers.

These are the women and men he's been travelling with for a couple of years now.

They are his fellowship, his brothers and sisters in the faith.

Yet he doesn't have faith in them.

Jesus is highlighting in some respect the fact that in this new community,

one should be able to trust in the testimony of one's faith family.

He knows going forward there will be no direct evidence to be shared.

It is solely their testimony, initially in person,

but going forward into the future,

just the testimony of shared stories,

some written down into the texts we have in front of us today.

He tells them, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

But how successful can the message be when the messenger,  
indeed even any real direct witness of the messenger,  
is long gone in the annals of history?

Well, let's consider some real facts.

Based on the population around where Jesus walked and taught  
in his physical ministry in Palestine,  
a few hundred or optimistically a thousand  
may have come to the faith in Jesus' lifetime.

However, in the centuries after, literally billions have come to the faith,  
when Jesus was not seen except figuratively in paintings.

Jesus imparts the Spirit into that initial group,

starting a chain of Spirit leading that carried on through the centuries.

The church spread throughout the known world

because the early disciples and evangelists were inspired to testify effectively  
to what they had witnessed and learned,  
and those they taught likewise testified to the truths they had heard,  
and eventually wrote down.

But was it their Spirit-inspired oration alone that exponentially grew the new movement?

Or was there more to it than that?

The word that is used in John for “breathe” is an oddly specific Greek word for “breathe,”

*emphysao*, that is only used in two other places in the entire Bible,  
in Genesis 2 and Ezekiel 37.

In both those passages,

God breathes life into the dust or the skeletons of the dead and creates new life.

This isn't just a spiritual handoff from Jesus through his exhale,

this is the creation of something new, a new way of living and being,  
through the leading of the Spirit.

New life from where there was no life.

This, after all, wasn't just a bunch of individuals

running hither and yore as independent evangelists.

This was a new community, a new way of living together

in contrast to what had always been.

We have this conception that once Jesus was gone, his presence was no longer experienced.

But is that really true?

After all, isn't there a reason this new community

that began to expand across the world was called "the body of Christ?"

Jesus was teaching of a new way of living,

living into the kin-dom of heaven that draws near.

An upside-down order from what the world thought was important.

The "peace be with you" that Jesus speaks of

involves bringing into the fold the marginalized and outcast.

It's redefining in a radical way who is first and last, blessed and cursed,  
rich and poor.

Jesus' peace invites the lion to see the lamb as neighbor and friend,

the Jew to speak with the Samaritan,

and the prostitute to dine with the Pharisee.

Such actions show, to those with eyes to see, a new way of being in the world,  
a vision inspired by the inbreaking of the kin-dom of God  
present in Jesus' very existence.

It is this peacemaking work, the core of his ministry, in no small part, that got Jesus killed.

If we wish to call ourselves disciples of Jesus,  
we must be willing to step out boldly into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory.  
We must be willing to take risks, and work together,  
sharing a lifestyle and message  
that can be just as challenging today as it was two thousand years ago.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it bluntly:

“When Christ calls a [person], he bids him come and die.”

The first disciples found that out all too well in the years following Jesus' resurrection.

All of them faced persecution, many faced a martyr's death as well.

While most of us in the global north do not face death for our discipleship today,  
the fact remains that following Christ  
and engaging in the ministry we are called to, and led in by the Spirit,  
often bring one into conflict with many public policies and social norms –  
and this conflict is not without its own cost.

If we take our call to discipleship seriously,

it should be clear that not only is there a cost to bear, but that we do not,  
and CAN NOT, do this on our own.

The temptation to sin by avoidance is too great.

By ourselves, we want to fit in, we want to maintain our social status,  
we want to preserve our financial status and good name –

all of which are threatened by the work Jesus calls us to do.

The Spirit is sent to each of us to give us strength, fortitude and guidance.

But just as importantly, we are called to community.

Together we are the body of Christ.

We are given Jesus' eyes to see the injustice and inequality of the world.

We are given Christ's hands to work to undo that injustice and inequality,  
to serve our fellow human beings and to reach out with a hand up.

We are given Divine feet to move us out into the world

to find the work that needs done,

to walk with (and sometimes march for)

the downtrodden and marginalized.

Those first disciples had the memory of the physical experience of Jesus.

They could remember seeing his face, hearing his voice,

feeling his hands and even smelling his breath as he breathed the Spirit unto them.

Today, Jesus' presence can still be felt.

His body is felt and experienced by the work that we do.

Many Christians see the darkness in the world today and point the blame away  
in many directions.

Or even worse, just give up and look for the end times

that must surely be just around the corner

But when was the last time we took an honest look in the mirror.

Where have we really been the last forty years as things have grown dimmer?

Have we been out in the thick of things in our community,

touching people's lives in a real way,

making a real difference and being a witness

to the work of Jesus and the Spirit in our lives and our world?

Or have we spent most of that time inside these walls, keeping largely to ourselves,

wondering why there have been less and less people coming through those doors?

Sure we do make occasional efforts and do some good things.

But are we defined by our witness?

Our scripture stories today make a few things perfectly clear.

Our mission involves a communal faith,

that relies on our working together and trusting in our witness together,

not leaving room for doubt between us.

Jesus breathes the Spirit into us,

sending us out of our locked rooms into the world outside

in need of our witness and our work.

The challenge we have now as the body of Christ

is how to re-engage with a world

we have largely stepped away from as a community for awhile now.

Where is the Spirit leading us?

How can we reflect Jesus' presence to folks

who are no longer interested in what we've always done on Sunday mornings?

In many ways, we've come full circle.

Like those first disciples, we're faced with reaching a darkening world in need of light,

a world of "nones" and "spiritual but not religious."

It's challenge but a great opportunity as well.

My hope and prayer is that we can find a way to be the church we are called to be,



and be the new apostles, the presence of Jesus to those in such need around us.

May we find the path or paths the Spirit is leading us to. Amen.