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## *A Week Later*

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**The Cathedral of St. Philip**  
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**The Second Sunday of Easter- Year C**

I don't know about you, but it sure seems longer than a week ago that more than 3,200 of us gathered at one of our Easter liturgies to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. Of course the holy week before we gathered for daily prayer, to celebrate the Last Supper and wash someone's feet, to venerate the cross and hear the Passion. Then last Sunday we sang Alleluias, baptized new Christians, exchanged God's own peace and shared the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Then, for most of us it was back to life as usual: to work or school, to the news and tax preparation, to endless conversations about the weather and pollen count. Typically, less than a third of folks who were here last Sunday will show up today. This isn't a judgment, just a fact. It's hard to sustain the enthusiasm of Easter once the day is over and the memory gets further and further away.

Certainly John the writer of today's Gospel knew that. Writing near the end of the first century, he was addressing people who had never seen or heard Jesus in the flesh. The stories they heard were second or even third hand. John's problem, which is a continuing problem for the church, was how to encourage people in the faith when Jesus was no longer around to be seen and touched. The story of Thomas gave him an excellent way to do that. By focusing on the apostle's doubt, John takes the words out of our mouths and puts them in Thomas' instead, so that each of us has the opportunity to think about how we do, or do not come to believe.

In John Irving's novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator John has a number of conversations with his friend Owen Meany about the meaning of belief. In one scene at the schoolyard, Owen illustrates his faith in God by pointing to a gray granite statue of Mary Magdalene as twilight falls. When it has become so dark that the statue is no longer visible, Owen asks John if he knows that the statue is still there. John says that of course he knows. Owen keeps pushing:

"You have no doubt she's there", Owen nagged at me.

"Of course I have no doubt!" I said.

"But you can't see her""you could be wrong," he said.

"No, I'm not wrong""she's there, I know she's there!" I yelled at him.

"You absolutely know she's there""even though you can't see her? He asked me.

"Yes" I screamed.

"Well, now you know how I feel about God", said Owen Meany. "I can't see him""but I absolutely know he is there!"

The character Owen Meany is a great example of the kind of faith that St. John celebrates in chapter 20 of his Gospel. Because Owen believes so fully and completely in God, he stakes his life on his conviction. He does not need to see signs and wonders; he believes and orients his whole life around this belief.

In this chapter of John, almost everyone sees the resurrected Jesus. Surely Mary Magdalene does, but so do the disciples

who encounter Jesus behind closed doors later that same day. They talk with him and receive a commission for service. So why should be so hard on Thomas. Year after year on the Sunday after Easter we preach against poor doubting Thomas for not having enough faith to believe without seeing. His words carry a powerful sting: "there's no way I will believe unless I see it for myself." Perhaps Thomas' real dilemma is that he can't believe his own beloved friends and community that this had happened. Thomas can't trust their testimony, even though they witnessed Jesus' resurrected body. Their eyes and their fingers are not enough for him; he must see and touch for himself. The community that Jesus had tried so hard to build throughout the Gospel is threatened from the beginning by Thomas' skepticism.

A bit of Bible study. Thomas is not a proper name, but a nickname that means "twin" in Aramaic. According to the Gospel of Thomas, his given name is Judas. So, when John identifies him as the one "who was called the Twin" he is providing a Greek translation of a nickname intended to distinguish him from Judas Iscariot. Whose twin is he? Elaine Pagels is convinced that for the Gospel of Thomas, encountering the "living Christ" means recognizing "oneself and Jesus as, so to speak, identical twins." The Gospel of John counters that tradition by offering a "Thomas" a "Twin" who is unbelieving, who comes to faith reluctantly. Perhaps, he is our "twin?"

Sometimes I think, however, that it is far easier to believe in the goodness and reality of the Lord, than it is to believe in the goodness of one another. In A Prayer for Owen Meany, Owen believes in God and God's work in his life, without clear-cut evidence or proof. His lifelong friend John does not have the same solid conviction. What John has is a confidence in his friend that carries him though his own skepticism and into new life.

Those of us who have never seen or touched Jesus in the flesh must rely on the testimony of others to understand and hopefully to believe. Jesus' appearance to Thomas reminds us that doubts do not disqualify us from being good disciples. The theologian Paul Tillich once said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith; rather it is an element of faith. The writer and pastor Frederick Beuchner puts it in even more basic terms. He says that if we don't have any doubts, we're either kidding ourselves or are asleep. He characterizes doubts as "the ants in the pants" of faith "they keep it awake and moving.

On this beautiful April morning, when the world outside our doors has put away the baskets and the bunnies of Easter and moved on, we continue to be challenged to live new and resurrected lives. We are challenged to pass on the faith to our children, to shape our lives by the Gospel message, to share what we have with others, and to transform as much of the world as we can with the embracing message of God's love. And most of all, we are challenged to remember that while we may look at ourselves and see only doubting Thomas', God looks at us and sees the best: beloved children, faithful friends, partners in the ongoing work of creation.

Alleluia! Christ is still Risen!  
The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

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