

Last Sunday, when Mary arrives at the tomb, she does not recognize the risen Jesus. It's only when Jesus calls her name, "Mary," that she comes to believe. That same evening, the disciples gather for a meal behind locked doors, and somehow, somehow, Jesus joins them. He breathes on them the breath of the Holy Spirit, and he shows them his wounds. And they, too, believe.

Thomas, without explanation, was absent last week. Just like the disciples are skeptical of Mary's story, Thomas is skeptical of theirs. "That's nice and all," Thomas says, "But I've got to see to believe. I've got to touch Jesus' wounds with my own hands." And wouldn't you know it, Jesus arrives this week for supper, too, in a similar manner, and offers Thomas the opportunity of touch. Thomas, in full belief, proclaims: "My Lord and My God!"

It's one thing to hear about the risen Jesus. There's a whole lot of storytelling in this Gospel. It's quite another to hear Jesus speak your name; or to have Jesus speak a blessing upon you so closely that you feel his breath upon your skin, or to shake the hand of Jesus. In these instances, intimacy and immediacy are catalysts for belief.

Guess what? Intimacy and immediacy are not bad markers of belief. I tend to believe what happens in my presence, and in the present. What we see, hear, and feel are all legitimate and credible markers of our faith experience. God should be something we can sense! In fact, God gives us senses in order that we might share and receive what is experiential in our lives. We all, in some way, seek evidence, to undergird our beliefs and convictions.

We don't chastise Mary, and call her blind or stubborn for not initially seeing Jesus right in her midst. We don't write off Peter for being less

exceptional than the Beloved Disciple. We don't call the disciples who were at supper last week late-comers to the faith party. But tradition is a fickle thing, and Thomas, somehow, has been branded a doubter. "Come on, Thomas, don't you read the news?"

But tradition, whoever it or they are, hasn't spent much time with this text. We tend to read Jesus' last statement to Thomas as a lecture: "Then Jesus told Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; (*and even though it's not there, we insist on adding an imaginary but as a connector*), but blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" Tradition wants to chastise Thomas for seeking the same evidence as Mary, Peter, and the other disciples. Heck, even the Beloved Disciple (he's sooooo perfect!) needed to look into the tomb to have a partial understanding of the Easter events. The notion is that Thomas only believes because he has seen. And shame on Thomas for wanting evidence to believe.

But that's not what Jesus is saying at all. First off, of course Thomas now believes. I mean you showed him proof, Jesus! There're no takebacks! Suppose I was magically transported to Kitty Hawk in 1903. I believe that Orville and Wilbur's plane is gonna fly, because I've already flown in a plane. I can't unsee or negate the experience of flight. It doesn't, however, make the accomplishment of flight any less untrue or impressive. And it doesn't negate my belief or experience. Belief, not the impetus for belief, is the end goal.

Jesus isn't saying, "better belief is the kind that doesn't need to be seen." Jesus is saying, "blessed still, are those who have not seen for themselves." In other words, the historical Jesus, or for John's author, the *logos* or *word* manifested as Jesus of Nazareth, revealed itself in a particular time and place. God lived among us as a human being, and a

select number of people got to see, and hear, and touch, and feel, and even speak to that presence with their own voices, and hands, and hearts, and eyes. But they will not be the only ones blessed with belief.

The last two verses of our text become particularly important to our hearing this morning:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may come 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).

What this says, friends, is we may not have had the good fortune to be present in that very moment, but we DO have the good fortune to be present in this very moment. And we can rekindle a similar, and equally powerful and palpable experience with the Risen One for ourselves.

Easter – the ongoing story of God’s resurrection, and recreation, and reclamation in our individual and corporate lives – Easter, is not the two-thousand-year autopsy of a broken body. Easter is the continual and unexpected, miraculous even, healing of brokenness. Easter is God’s voice, God’s breath, and God’s touch experienced, even in the most quiet, the most remote, and the darkest corners of our lives.

Here's one of those stories of John (sayings of John, really!) to remember. Jesus told the disciples, because you have known me, you have known my Daddy also, and my Mama, and all the parental intimacy of God, too. The disciples knew God’s goodness for themselves, and then spent a lifetime witnessing, or sharing God’s

goodness with others. And some component of God's goodness, maybe it's like the water molecules that float through ancient rivers, or the soil that holds the dust of our long-departed saints, some component of God's goodness has been passed along to us. To be seen. To be heard. To be felt. To be experienced. The blessing of belief.

Yes, a thousand times, yes, how I would love to have been in that room, and felt the warm embrace of Jesus. But it's really just a curiosity. Because I have felt the warm embrace of each of you. And I know, I believe, I faith in a compassionate Creator, not because we've stood side by side, or hand in hand, but because I have lived with God's children. And I have known the love of Jesus in each of you.

I know God, I experience Easter, because I know you, and you, and you...

I want to close with a final thought. And my apologies, it's a bit long. I'll get back to short sermons next week. Perhaps it's a resurrection thought. I think it's fair to say, Sardis, that we are an Island of Misfit Toys.

Some of us came here as congregants, tired of top-down bureaucracy, and eager to feel the corporate movement of the Spirit.

Some of us came here as clergy, looking for the freedom of creative and authentic worship, not mention the credentialing and recognition of calling extended to all persons and expressions.

Some of us came here to give Church one more chance – could there be a place that extracts the toxicities of traditional systems and theologies, and refines something more emblematic of the Risen One?

Some of us are just starting our spiritual adventures – we’re seeking to articulate our own theologies, and the freedom to ask the questions that put us on such a path.

Some of us, perhaps all of us, have come to find a sense of connection we haven’t yet experienced at the gym, or the schoolyard, or neighborhood picnic – to speak of, and to live out, and to challenge ourselves to be agents of God’s goodness.

Still others of us may not yet know what it is that brings us to this place, or what it is we are pursuing.

And to be completely honest, each of us may have a totally different reason for gathering in this place next week, or the week after.

We’ve worked to be a community that makes space for people whoever, whatever, whenever, however, and wherever they are. Admittedly, we are not perfect in such a pursuit, but we are consistent and authentic in our efforts.

Over the past three and half decades, this community has created a consortium of people, ideas, and programs. The most notable and lasting expressions of this consortium have taken shape in Sunday worship, a chancel choir, Wednesday night suppers, a Sunday morning time of formation, quarterly social gatherings, and programmatic missions.

In 2023, we find ourselves in a changing landscape – nearly every facet of human life is significantly different than it was a decade ago. Work, school, leisure, worship, entertainment, travel, commerce, government, even Little League (did you know they play on Sundays

now, and have automatic pitching machines, and they don't even wear stirrups anymore!), every facet of our lives is different.

Amid all this change and anxiety, I bought some prayer crosses for our family. They are handheld, and made of olive wood. You rub your fingers and thumbs along the smoothed and curved edges of the cross, and remember the people and places in your life – the ones that evoke images of God – and there's a stillness and comfort.

I think about those crosses when I think about the expressions of Sardis Baptist Church. These expressions are like the grooves in my prayer cross, or the flattened edges of river rocks. We just sort of nuzzle up and fit right into their spaces. They have been for us, and consistently, the voice, and the breath, and touch of God in our lives. They have told the story. They have made us believers in our present.

I can't help but wonder, as the world changes around us, do we cling to our traditions for proof of God's existence, proof of the Risen Jesus among us, in the same way Mary needed to hear her name spoken by Jesus, the disciples needed to be at table with Jesus, and Thomas needed to shake the hand of Jesus? Can we imagine that a story told in a different way, in a different space and time can be as pure and potent as the one we tell now?

When I read today's text, here's what it tells me.

It's not that we meet at 11:00 on Sundays for morning worship. It's that we make space, corporately, consistently, and intentionally, to express praise for our Maker, and by gathering, to inspire the scattering of our God-given gifts back into community.

It's not that we have a chancel choir. It's that a chancel choir makes space for music to infuse our souls, to build community, and to share a gift of hopeful song with the world.

It's not that we gather on Wednesday for a meal, and for fellowship, and for a word of inspiration. It's that we hope, in the discovery of interacting with other partners in our community, the people of Sardis might be introduced to additional ways in which to share their varied gifts in Charlotte and beyond.

It's not that we gather on Sunday to discuss a book or to dissect a passage of scripture. It's that we make space for questions to be asked, for ideas to take shape, and for lives to take flight.

It's not that we eat pancakes, share birthday cake, or put on party hats. It's that we are intentional in creating opportunities to know one another, to value the lovable weirdness that we all express in safe corners, and to build meaningful relationships that can't develop in Sunday morning hellos and goodbyes.

It's not that we made 100 sandwiches for the soup kitchen, or hosted Room in the Inn, or raised money for Habitat for Humanity. It's that individually and collectively, we're working to generate opportunities and expressions of service and love.

Today, Jesus tells us that the story is gonna be told. I think it's high time we focused our energy on identifying the movement of the Spirit in our lives, and then, and only then, seeking to build those spaces where the story can be seen, and heard, and felt, and experienced.

It's Easter, and we yet we still have this desire to resurrect expressions that don't work as well in 2023.

Here's what I know. Our very existence is in jeopardy. The fate of our climate; the fate of universal human rights – reproductive, spiritual, social, political, economic, you name it; the fate of nearly every impactful thing in our world is contingent upon the whims of politicians chasing the winds of the current season. And that's to say nothing of the personal crises that neighbors face each day: grief, depression, heartache, loneliness, illness, addiction, divorce, stress, hopelessness, blah.

Long ago, the Risen Jesus stood in the center of all those threats. He was present. And he connected people in ways that created transcendent love – love that provides for real needs.

John's Gospel tells us we can hear that story, too.

So what's it gonna be, Sardis? Are we ready, are we willing, are we courageous enough to pursue a new story in order that we too, might proclaim, "My Lord. And my God!" And even more importantly, that our neighbors might be able to make the same proclamation.

Amen.