

**Second Sunday of Easter, 16 April 2023 – Sermon by Rev. David McCoy, Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

*A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

The central focus of our Gospel reading this morning is the place where the disciples were hiding after the authorities had captured and killed their leader. They worried: would they be next? They did not dare venture out.

There had been much stress and civil unrest in Jerusalem. A man named Jesus had been going about the countryside, telling amazing stories—parables—and he was healing sick people, just by his presence. He even seemed to have brought a dead man back to life!

He had begun to have great crowds follow him; the authorities feared an insurrection.

When the powers-that-be feel threatened, they want to get rid of the threat. So in this story, they arrested Jesus, had a quick trial, found him guilty, and sentenced him to death.

They gave him a heavy cross of wood, made him carry it up a nearby hill, where they tied him to it, put nails in his hands and feet, and strung him up for all to see.

Some friends and family were there and watched it all happen; they could not stop it. They stayed, heard his last words, tried to give him some liquid for his thirst, and watched as he took his last breath. Jesus, called by some as King of the Jews, was dead.

He was taken down from the cross by friends, put into a small cave in the side of a hill. A large stone was rolled across the front. Remembering one of his last words, his friends and family knew: "It is finished."

.....

This story, as recounted by the apostle John: says that somehow, he who had been nailed to a cross and laid in a tomb, had appeared suddenly to his friends who were gathered in a locked room.

His disciples were in that locked room, and, as we might expect, were astonished! How could it be? This man whom they saw to be dead and buried, stood before them and greeted them with the words we still use—all these centuries later—“Peace be with you.”

You know what took place: as it happened, one of the disciples, Thomas, had not been in that upper room when Jesus appeared. Afterward, he said, “Unless I see the mark of the nails and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Then, a few days later, Thomas and the other disciples were all gathered together, and Jesus suddenly appeared, offering Thomas the chance for the proof he had sought. Thomas, overwhelmed with the wonder of Jesus’ presence, simply said, “My Lord and my God!”

This many centuries later, that incredible life lives on through us, as we celebrate our belief in an event that seems utterly impossible.

What might be said about that moment—that incredible moment—we now celebrate as Easter Day? This is what the columnist, Ross Douthat, wrote: “(Here is) what’s obvious each and every Easter: That in their immediacy and mystery, their lapel-shaking urgency, their mixture of the mundane and the impossible, the Gospels are at least — at the very least — the strangest story ever told.”

Yes, this is the strangest story ever told—and it is one we have committed ourselves to believe.

Now here we are, so many centuries later, always ready to echo the words of the one we call Doubting Thomas, “My Lord and my God,” ready to serve him in this world of God’s creation, where we see the wonders of God’s grace and grandeur—the magnificence of flora and fauna, of story and song: they are all around us. We exult in the handiwork of the Almighty.

If only we could leave it at that—at the exclamation of Thomas, at our wonder in the world of God’s creation.

But if we truly live *in* God's world, we acknowledge that, as we remember *Jesus'* death, we, too, are bedeviled (and maybe that's the way to put it!) by *other* kinds of death, where we find so many people living in *our* society's "locked rooms": the "locked rooms" of desperate lives where people live in fear of—death, both physical and spiritual, brought about in various ways by

- \* hunger
- \* lack of housing/shelter
- \* loneliness
- \* color of skin
- \* personal faith

These are places of societal deaths, the contemporary "locked rooms" where people are either afraid or unable to leave. Certainly, those parts of peoples' lives keep them in bondage in one form or another of today's "locked rooms", unable to live a fully free and happy life.

Our faith, however, tells us that as Jesus entered the locked room where the disciples were hiding, so, too, his spirit can enter the "locked rooms" of our lives—even the various kinds of "deaths" we encounter in our day-to-day lives. There is Resurrection, there are new beginnings. That is what we mean by baptism, by cleansing and being born again.

As people baptized in the name of Jesus, we proceed in his name to bring hope, perhaps even freedom and release, to God's people locked in those rooms of hunger, homelessness, skin color, choice of faith, lack of close friends. As followers of Christ, we seek to serve him in all peoples.

We know of God's mighty works through the lives and struggles of the Jewish people; the life and ministry of Jesus, the Lord; the ministry of the disciples after the Resurrection; and the continuing witness of Christians everywhere—the witness we proclaim, even here, today, that Jesus lives, that God is present in this world—and even if we see despair and death and evil around us, that God will always overcome those deeds and love will triumph.

We have been entrusted, through our baptism in his name, to carry on his work as best we can. We do not demand to put our hands in his side; rather, our baptism propels us to proclaim "My Lord and my God", and to continue to rejoice in the strangest story

ever told: the story of the empty tomb—the story that has propelled women and men like you and me for centuries—the story of the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

*A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*