



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Easter 2
Year C**

Among His Disciples

[RCL]: Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29 or Psalm 150; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

Jesus came and stood among his disciples.

Anywhere else in the Gospel story and this would not be a strange statement. It must have occurred countless times before this particular moment, yet this time was different. This time, the presence of Jesus in the midst of his disciples was not only unexpected, but it was seemingly impossible.

It comes as no surprise to us—the modern audience. We have likely been here before. We know the story. Jesus was supposed to be dead and the disciples were now afraid for their own lives. Their fear was not unreasonable; the person in whom they had put their trust, whom they had believed to be the messiah and whom they had given up everything to follow was now dead. The story in which they had invested their lives appeared to be over and they had been wrong. Even worse—they believed that they too might share the same fate as Jesus. Perhaps their following had led them not to liberation, but to certain death.

It might be difficult for us to imagine ourselves in the place of the disciples. How many of us have risked our lives for something that we believe in or followed after? Have we ever been seriously threatened for our beliefs? How would our lives of faith be challenged and ultimately changed if our lives were actually on the line?

In the midst of their fear, Jesus came and stood among his disciples.

How astonished they must have been! Jesus, the one whom they believed was not only their Messiah but their friend, was alive and standing in their midst. How could it be? What great reversal, beyond the bounds of possibility, had occurred in the natural order of things?

Jesus must have sensed their bewilderment. The first words he spoke to his friends were “Peace be with you,” reassuring them that his presence in their midst was not an illusion or hallucination. He really was alive. Their belief was not misplaced. The story was not over. Their hopes had been resurrected with Christ.

They must have wondered what exactly this would mean for them. What will the continuation, this resurrection of their shared story, require of them? Jesus, again, responds to their innermost concerns by repeating, “Peace be with you,” and then continuing, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Put plainly, Jesus tells the disciples that they cannot remain in the comfort and safety of the home in which they had gathered. His story isn’t over, and because of this, their story wasn’t over yet either. This was always the plan, and the next step would require them to go out into the world and share the good news of the Resurrection with everyone.

I wonder if this request made them even more afraid. I wonder how you or I might have responded if we would have been gathered there with them. In our modern context, sharing our faith with others can be a vulnerable experience, but most people we might encounter in our day-to-day lives have at least heard a portion of this story before. I wonder what it might have been like to break this story, to be the first people to share the news of the Resurrection with another. This claim would surely be met by disbelief. How could it not?

While disbelief had to have been at least one of the expected outcomes, they probably didn’t expect it to be the response of one of their own. Yet the next line in our passage reveals that Thomas, one of the twelve disciples, had not been present with the others when Jesus came and stood in their midst. While the other disciples had witnessed and come to believe in the resurrected Jesus, Thomas could not bring himself to believe without also seeing Jesus for himself.

Thomas often gets a bad rap. We, who have the benefit of reading this story with a fuller knowledge of what would occur, often dismiss Thomas’ unbelief, assuming that we would have been less hesitant to believe or more faithful in our resistance of reasonable doubt. We too often afford ourselves the benefit of the doubt when placing ourselves in another’s shoes, assuming that we would not be subject to or would somehow overcome the same human weaknesses that others have displayed throughout history.

But is doubt a weakness? Or is it simply an opportunity, a space, a possible fertile ground in which faith might grow and ultimately blossom?

I am reminded of the words of Francis Bacon, the English philosopher, who stated in *The Advancement of Learning*, “If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts he shall end in certainties.”

Perhaps Thomas understood this when he said, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas knew what had happened to his friend and Messiah. He, like the other disciples, had carried the weight of fear and doubt that came from having his hopes dashed. He had not seen the resurrected Jesus as the others had and he would not be satisfied until he had seen him with his own eyes. He would take no one’s word for it.

I cannot blame him. Can you? Who among us would not have responded in a similar fashion?

A week later, the disciples were gathered together again in the same house where they had last seen Jesus. Only this time, Thomas was with them. During the last encounter, the doors of the house were locked, but this time the doors were only shut. Perhaps this small detail offers some clue that while the disciples still desired safety, their first encounter with the risen Lord had caused them to hold a posture less defined by fear and a desire for self-survival.

Once again, Jesus came and stood in the midst of his disciples. He greeted them again, saying, “Peace be with you,” before turning and addressing Thomas directly. He said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

The Greek word we translate to “doubt” is ἄπιστος (apistos), which means unfaithful, faithless or unbelieving, without trust in God. Jesus is touching on something deeper here than Thomas simply doubting that the person of Jesus was no longer dead and had resurrected. Jesus was touching on Thomas’ belief or lack of belief in the God who had sent Jesus into the world and who was capable of resurrecting not only Jesus, but the entire creation.

Jesus’ words, “Do not doubt but believe,” are aimed not only at Thomas, but also at all those who encounter this passage, and are struggling to believe that God is able to do the thing which God has promised—call our world into new and unending, resurrected life.

Thomas responds, saying, “My Lord and my God!” This too should be our response, as we so often find ourselves in Thomas’ shoes, struggling to believe and remain faithful when the world around us often seems hellbent on its own destruction rather than resurrection and new life.

Jesus responds with all future generations, including us, in mind, saying, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Because what other choice do we have?

We believe not because we have seen his wounds or placed our hands within his side, but because we have seen Christ in the face of another, who has also not seen or touched Christ, but lives their life in such a way that Christ has been made present in our midst.

We, just like the first disciples, seek safety and too often let fear paralyze us, but it is in gathering together that Christ is made known. Jesus continues to stand among his disciples, beckoning us to believe not only in his resurrection but also in our own and in the resurrection of the whole world.

Behold, all things are made new.

Newly graduated from Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Joshua Woods is now the Assistant Rector at Saint David’s Episcopal Church and School in San Antonio, Tex. When not working, he enjoys being spending time with his wife, Laura, and their two dogs, Ezra and Roxie.