

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman
Christ Church, Tarrytown, New York
April 3, 2016; Easter 2
Text: John 20:19-31

When I was twenty-one, I made a decision to “give my heart and my life to Jesus.” During the years of my adolescence, at Christian summer camps and at church youth groups, I had been invited, by people I admired and respected, to follow the way of Jesus. So when I became of legal age, I felt ready to do that in a grown-up, more intentional way.

Thankfully, I found a welcoming church with a large group of people my own age. The youth minister and his wife were also in their early twenties, and they took me under their wing. Just a couple of months into my new life as a Christian, this couple invited me to join them on a ski weekend. I felt chosen, and honored, and excited. After I had accepted the invitation, they told me that twenty-five junior high school kids would be coming with us. I had accidentally become a youth group leader.

On the appointed weekend, we loaded our backpacks and ski equipment into the rented bus. Before we left the church parking lot, we bowed our heads and closed our eyes as the youth minister offered a prayer - of thanksgiving for the opportunity to be together, and for protection for our travel and as we skied. In the midst of the prayer, he said, “Jesus, we feel your presence with us right now.” My eyes flew open and my head snapped up. I didn’t feel Jesus’ presence right then. What was he talking about? I looked around, and the other adult leaders and the kids, still deep in prayer, were nodding their heads in agreement. Apparently, they were all feeling Jesus’ presence. Why wasn’t I? What was wrong with me? Clearly, I needed this experience of Jesus’ presence to fit in, to really be a part of this faith community, especially if I was supposed to be a youth group leader! During the entire two-hour drive to the ski center, I prayed fervently, “Jesus, let me feel your presence. God, let me feel Jesus’ presence. Let me feel what everyone else is feeling!”

So I can totally relate to Thomas’ dilemma when, in today’s Gospel, he wants to experience the risen Jesus just as the other disciples had. We don’t know where Thomas was when Jesus appeared to the rest of the disciples, huddled together in a locked room. They were hiding for fear of what might happen to them, given what had happened to Jesus - their beloved teacher and friend. Maybe Thomas had found an even better hiding place. But when the disciples reported to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord,” Thomas wanted to see him, too. Of course he did. And when, a week later, Jesus showed up again, Thomas was there. His response? “My Lord and my God.”

“We have seen the Lord!” “My Lord and my God!”

Last Sunday, we celebrated Easter - the Feast of the Resurrection. We proclaimed and sang that God has raised Jesus from the dead! In these weeks of

the season of Easter, we have the opportunity, in our assigned lectionary texts, to consider what that means. God raised Jesus from the dead. What did that mean to Jesus' earliest followers? What does it mean for those of us who call ourselves Christians today?

Theologian Marcus Borg, whose work informs this sermon and my theology,¹ has said that today's story – of the risen Jesus appearing to the disciples, and then to Thomas – makes two important claims about what Jesus' resurrection means. First: The disciples' declaration, "We have seen the Lord" means that Jesus lives. Jesus – whom the disciples had experienced as a Galilean Jew in his early thirties, a fully human teacher and healer with whom they had walked and talked and eaten, and had seen, with their own eyes, arrested and executed – lives. Death couldn't hold him. Jesus is not in the past, but is of the present. In this story, and in other stories about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, Jesus continues to be present to the disciples, even after his death. He isn't present to them in exactly the same way that he had been before. The risen Jesus isn't limited by our normal boundaries of space and time, as had been the flesh-and-blood Jesus. The risen Jesus walks into locked rooms, and he sometimes appears to his followers without being immediately recognized. And yet, the disciples know it's him. The wounds that had been inflicted on him during the last hours of his life are still there. The same Spirit that they had experienced when they were with him during his human life continues to be present. The power that they had known in and with Jesus – the power of healing, the power of radical transformation, the power of creative inclusion that formed community from very diverse people continues to be at work. In the human Jesus, the disciples had seen what a flesh-and-blood life-full-of-God looks like. In the risen Jesus, they experience him as a divine reality – fully and completely one-with-God. Jesus of Nazareth has become Jesus the Christ. "We have seen the Lord;" Jesus lives.

The second claim about the meaning of the resurrection that this story reveals, is this: Thomas' declaration, "My Lord and my God," means that God has vindicated Jesus. Borg writes that "Easter is God's yes to Jesus, and God's no to the powers that killed him." Remember, Jesus didn't just die. Jesus was killed by Rome – the empire that was in charge during Jesus' time. Jesus didn't just die; he was crucified – a form of torture and execution that was used for those convicted of sedition; those who challenged the authority of those in charge. Jesus didn't just die. He was killed publicly to send a clear message: This is what happens when you stand up to the ruling systems. Thomas' proclamation, "My Lord and my God" recognizes that God has overcome the powers that afflict and enslave God's creation. Jesus is Lord, and the unjust, violent, oppressive systems of this world are not.

¹ All quotes in this sermon taken from *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, by Marcus Borg (HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), and *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – and How They Can Be Restored*, by Marcus Borg (HarperCollins Publishers, 2014).

The disciples experience Jesus, who was crucified by Rome, alive. "We have seen the Lord." The disciples experience Jesus, who was crucified by Rome, vindicated by God, making him both Lord and Messiah. "My Lord and my God."

Marcus Borg reminds us that Jesus' passion was God and the Kingdom of God – "... what life would be like on earth if God were king and the systems of the world were not. It's the world the prophets dreamed of – a world ... in which everyone has enough, in which war is no more, in which nobody need be afraid." And Borg says that for us to take Jesus seriously is to be passionate about what Jesus was passionate about – God and the kingdom of God.

Thankfully, it doesn't require a spectacular sighting of the risen Jesus to take him seriously and to follow him. I finally arrived at that junior high ski weekend, having begged God for two hours in prayer to let me feel Jesus' presence, but nothing at all felt different. But I put one foot in front of the other, and I helped where I was asked to help. And it was in those completely unremarkable moments that I began to experience the presence of Jesus for myself, as I - utterly clueless about how to do it - led a study of Scripture with a small group of girls, and they opened up to me and to each other about what they were afraid of.

I wish that I had had an encounter with the risen Jesus like my Aunt Dora did. One sleepless night, as she grieved the death of a family member, she experienced Jesus as a physical presence sitting at the foot of her bed. I've never felt Jesus sitting at the foot of my bed. But yesterday, when I visited a 90-year old friend in the nursing home to which she's just been admitted, and I sat at the foot of her bed, I felt the presence of Jesus in and with her. Her sense of peace and purpose, even in the midst of the loss of her own routine in her beloved house, revealed Jesus to me. The truth of our profession that God has raised Jesus from the dead is rooted in our personal experiences, and those of others around us, that Jesus is alive – experiences that are dramatic or, usually, much more ordinary.

What does the resurrection mean? It means that Jesus is alive and present. It means that God has said "yes" to Jesus, and "no" to the dominating, oppressive systems that try to rule the world. Jesus is alive and present and at work in this world, bringing about the kingdom of God. We have the privilege of joining God in that work – putting one foot in front of the other – and in doing so, experiencing the risen Jesus in our very midst. Amen.