

**The Rev. Victoria Kirk Mouradian
Sermon for All Saints by-the-Sea
Sunday, April 27, 2014**

Readings – Easter 2 Year A: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31.

Happy Easter! We actually get to use that joyful greeting for the next six weeks until Pentecost for we are in the Season of Easter. When we use those words, we give witness to the resurrection. They indicate that we actually believe in the message of the risen Lord. He assured us that all who believe in him by faith would have eternal life. His resurrection is a message of reassurance, not only that beyond this life there is more, but also that God exists. And if God exists, then hope exists. And we need hope, because we encounter life and we want life to have purpose and meaning. As we all know, life can pass by way too quickly. So again I say to you, “Happy Easter!”

As we heard in our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus' disciples were hiding behind locked doors in fear. Betrayed by one of their own, Jesus, their beloved leader and teacher had died a tortuous death. Where was their saving God that Jesus had preached? Would they meet the same fate? You can almost sense their quiet and their agony. And then in a blessed instant, their Lord appeared. Jesus stood among them saying, “Peace be with you!” He showed them the wounds of his hands and feet where nails had been driven through to hold him to a cross. They saw Jesus and were transformed; for now they knew that his words of God's salvation promise were undeniably true.

Thomas was not with them however. Poor Thomas. I feel he has gotten such a bad rap over the last 2,000 years. He will always be known as Doubting Thomas; you can even look him up by that name in the dictionary. Thomas, who did nothing but find such a miraculous story hard to believe, has been labeled and slightly belittled into eternity. Perhaps he wasn't on hand when Jesus raised Lazarus

from the dead. Even if he was, how could he expect Jesus to be raised when Jesus was the one who had been doing the raising? I wonder how we would have fared in the situation. We know from other gospel accounts that the women who went first to the empty tomb were witnesses to the risen Christ, but when telling of their encounter with Jesus, the disciples did not believe them. Thomas, who struggled with the disciples' account, was really no different from them, just singled out. Thomas declared he would not believe until he could see and feel Christ's wounds.

When the disciples were again gathered a week later, Thomas was with them. Jesus again, in an instant was inexplicably among them. He invited Thomas to touch his wounds so that he would not doubt, but believe. Thomas' response was, "My Lord and my God!"...probably the shortest confession of faith ever stated! Scripture says that Thomas answered Jesus. I must say that I feel the word "answered" does not do the situation justice! I think it was probably more like "Thomas exclaimed" or "Thomas whispered" or "Thomas gasped" accompanied by such descriptive words of Thomas' state of being...like "Thomas trembled" or "Thomas shook" or "Thomas wept." Scripture can be so maddeningly devoid of adjectives and adverbs! Our imaginations need to fill in the words of encounter. I think it safe to say that Thomas had a profound experience!

Jesus asked Thomas if he had believed because he had seen. Obviously we know that he did but I wonder what would have happened to Thomas if more time had gone by without his bold encounter. He would have heard the stories of more and more witnesses and would probably have begun to see the transformation in others. It would be hard to ignore their excitement. It would be hard to ignore their confessions, especially if they came from those he trusted and admired. Eventually he would probably go over and over Jesus' teaching in his mind, review the prophecies of old, and pray the way Jesus had told him to pray. Perhaps he would have begun to hang out at Sunday gatherings to share bread and wine in Christ's name, hoping to encounter him in such a manner. Perhaps he would

have begun to live out the second greatest command, to love neighbor as self, hoping to encounter Jesus through his actions. Perhaps he would have suffered other tragedy and grief, other than to lose his beloved leader, and call out to Jesus in despair seeking the comfort only he can bring. Perhaps he would have begun to seek real answers to his hard questions when he gazed at those he loved, wanting to give them hope or peace. If Thomas had not had his encounter, he would be as one of us.

Jesus continued, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” I think at first all we hear is a shortened version, “Blessed are those who have not seen and believe,” as if it was all very matter of fact or simple. What we can fail to hear is “come to believe”. “Come to believe” implies a process, a journey. What have we done to come to belief? Seeking a personal and transforming encounter with Jesus involves desire, prayer, study, openness, and honesty. If you seek, you will find, because Jesus knows your heart and will not disappoint you. The moment of belief can be just that, a moment, a wondrous dazzling moment, but it is a road which leads you to surrender in Christ. If Thomas had not witnessed the resurrected Jesus, he would have made the journey to find Easter. Perhaps Jesus could have said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have journeyed to belief.”

I want to tell Thomas, “I am like you. I would have done exactly the same thing under the circumstances and would have insisted upon seeing Jesus' wounds before believing.” Compromised by grief and despair, Thomas could have been hurt that he had been left out of the initial witnessing. Perhaps he asked himself why Jesus wasn't appearing to him and thought it shouldn't have mattered that he wasn't in the room with the others. If Jesus really loved him, he should have come to him. Maybe Thomas felt he didn't count. (Leave it to grief to make a situation self-serving instead of about the deceased, or in this case, the resurrected.) Frankly, I think it would have been very easy to put together a support group for Thomas for how many millions have doubted since, doubted because they

couldn't see or doubted even after they knew? Thomas was probably embarrassed that he had ever doubted. How flustered and in awe he must have been in the presence of the risen Christ. How human. Yes indeed, how Thomas-like, I could have been. And how forgiving I'm sure, Christ would have been.

A few years ago a tragedy occurred at Long Beach Memorial Hospital. Three men were shot and killed one morning in the lobby pharmacy. I had done my Clinical Pastoral Education at the hospital spending a year in training for the pastoral side of my ministry. Occasionally I would go back if time permitted to volunteer. When I heard the news, I knew the Pastoral Care Department would be overwhelmed and offered to go in the following day. I walked into waves of shock and grief, quiet and disbelief, that a well beloved co-worker could have taken the lives of two pharmacy supervisors and then turned the gun on himself. He left behind a wife and children. Flower tributes lay in front of the closed pharmacy doors in the lobby of the hospital, a prayer service was quickly organized for employees, and chaplains were available at all hours to help those struggling for answers or meaning. There was a general hush over the usual bustling hospital scene.

A post-op nurse was brought in to see me, a larger than life former marine. He was devastated. He couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, and couldn't stop crying. He was friends with the shooter and one of the victims. He and the shooter had a particular bond because they were both marines, felt a sense of brotherhood. These men had been trained to protect their country, kill if need be under circumstances of war, but not this. Both men had now been in the occupation of healing. The nurse told me that he had complained of a severe headache while in the pharmacy the night before the shooting; had jokingly said to the perpetrator, "My head hurts so much, just shoot me now." He was overcome with guilt that somehow his words had caused the actions of the shooter. He was able to verbalize that he knew rationally that it wasn't his fault but he couldn't cope. I observed a heart so

heavy that he was grasping for reason, any reason. This man sat in front of me broken, heart-broken, and traumatized. He was able to tell me that he believed in God but vehemently said not in religion, that he studied Eastern meditation and actually had a mentor. His grief was so raw that it was important to allow his grief to run until spent. I was able to arrange a plan with him that gave him concrete steps to follow which included taking time off from work and contacting his mentor for support.

What did I really want to do? I wanted to say that it was OK to have doubt about God or religion; but that I could witness that there really was an Easter and that this horrible tragedy he endured had a flip side. I wanted to tell him that there was a message of hope, redemption, forgiveness, and eternal life. Why didn't I? Because God used me to meet him on a level which he could understand at the time, one of care and compassion, a presence which assured him that he was being heard and not alone. Pastoral care is not the same as evangelism. God's Easter message was to be for a day when he could hear the words.

Tragedy seems so useless, so wasteful. It is certainly nothing we would choose or wish on anyone. Try as we might, we cannot escape it for there is always the work of egos, evil, illness, or natural disaster. We can't make sense of a beloved man who would kill two co-workers and then himself. We can't make sense of cancer or Hitler or 9/11 or an overturned Korean ferry taking the lives of hundreds of students. But we can offer to God our tragedies and ask God to redeem them, transform them into something which gives meaning to lives lost and those left behind. God did not promise easy or perfect or care free...but he did promise to be with us and he promised eternal life for those who believed....eternal life that was not of this world. God used the death of his son Jesus to tell the world about love, and forgiveness, and about relationship with him. God ushered in new life through profound tragedy provoked by egos and injustice. He became one of us so that he could walk beside

us...feel our joy, feel our sorrow, feel temptation and suffering. God didn't avoid life; he became part of it. He took tragic death and turned it into life everlasting. God gave us hope.

Like doubting Thomas, I think most of us share his heart. We want to see in order to believe, so much easier that way. Unlike Thomas, we have not literally seen the risen Lord, but something has happened to us. We really have experienced Easter. We may think we're more like doubting Thomas, but actually we are not. We have not seen but for some reason we are drawn here and it isn't just for the story or the coffee hour. We have either been touched to believe or touched to seek. We are open to relationship with God through Christ Jesus. We want meaning and purpose to life and we want meaning and purpose to death. We know we will experience joy but we also know that we will suffer sorrow. We want to make sorrow count and we know deep down that through sorrow we can see the exquisite gift of life and how precious it is. We want to know that we are not alone and loved for our uniqueness. We want to know that we can make a difference, if only to the person next to us. We want the promise of Easter. We just need to realize that we already have the promise of Easter.

Happy Easter!

Amen.