

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

April 12, 2015; the 2nd Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31.

The Hands-on Experience

Belief.

It happens for people in a variety of ways.

Some people have an experience of God, in the way Thomas experienced Jesus...Jesus right there, certain, definite...but there are many ways to have a hands-on experience of God. Jesus indicates, as we hear in this Resurrection account, that others are blessed in their belief who have not seen as Thomas does. There are many ways to 'see' Jesus.

Let's pick up the story as we hear it today in John's Gospel.

A group of Jesus' friends are gathered in a house scared, grieving, worried - the best leader that they had ever known, the best friend they had ever had, the one who seemed to embody God's promises to the people had been arrested, tried, and executed.

If that could happen to Jesus, they knew the same could happen to them. And...please note...in John's Gospel, whenever you hear something like "the doors were locked for fear of the Jews" that means those in authority who were in league with the Romans, a very specific situation, in a very specific time, about a few people.

One of the tragedies of Christianity has been its history, at times, way too many times, over many centuries, of antisemitism and lack of understanding about Judaism, and even demonization of the Jewish people.

Nothing could be more wrong.

Christianity grows out of the beautiful and holy faith of the Jewish people. Everyone was Jewish.

It may seem ridiculous to have to say this, but because I've actually met people who seem unaware of this, we need to say, "Jesus was Jewish."

Jesus did not start a new religion, but rather, following his death and Resurrection, the people who continued to follow Jesus, created, inspired by God, a new religion, with its roots in Judaism.

So one of the ways that we can "see" and "touch" Jesus, is to learn about his life and his faith...what is often called, the quest for the Historical Jesus.

Skit for Vacation Bible School

Mary- Liv

Joseph- Grant

Bystander- Hilary

Mary- I told you we should have made a left at that last fork Joseph! Now we are lost!

Joseph- No we aren't Mary. I know EXACTLY where we are going. Nazareth is this way, I am sure of it... I think...

Mary- Well, if you had stopped at that inn a ways back and asked for directions like I suggested, we would be home by now.

Joseph- We don't need to ask a stranger for directions Mary. I know we are going... See, Nazareth is that way! (points towards the back altar)

Mary- I think I'd rather ask for directions that trust your sense of direction again... (turns to Hilary)

Joseph- Well go ahead then, there are plenty of people here to ask...

Mary- Hi there, my name is Mary and this is my husband Joseph. We seem to be lost and can't get back to the main road. Do you know where we are?

Bystander- Nice to meet you both. My name is Hilary. You are at Holy Comforter, in Richmond, Virginia.

Joseph- Richmond, Virginia??? Never heard of the place!

Mary- See Joseph, you did get us lost!

Bystander- Yes, you both are very far from Nazareth, but I believe that if you take this road here, you will end up back home. (points towards the narthex).

Mary- Many thanks to you Hilary. Tell me, what are you all doing here?

Bystander- Well, we are gathered here to worship and learn about God. We do this every week.

Mary- Really! It looks like tons of fun, very similar to what we do back home. Have you ever been to Nazareth?

Bystander- I can't say that I have. What is it like?

Joseph- Well, Nazareth is tons of fun! We have a thriving market, filled with dye shops, bread makers, carpenters, and a beautiful synagogue. And the food, the food, is to die for!

Mary- It is also a great place to learn about God. People in our town are very friendly and open about discussing their faith. We are always learning something new about God there.

Bystander- Wow! Sounds like a great place to live and visit!

Mary- It really is! You and your community should stop by for a visit sometime; you would really enjoy it!

Joseph- Yes, please come visit us. We would love to have you come and see our quaint little village. And Mary here is a fabulous host!

Bystander- Why, thank you! I think I can speak for all of us when I say that we would love to come visit you both in Nazareth!

Mary- Fabulous! It will take us awhile to get back home, considering we get lost so easily and are traveling on foot, so why don't you all swing by during the summertime. July is the best time to come visit!

Bystander- Sounds like a plan! We will see you both in July! Safe travels on your way home!

Mary and Joseph- Thank you! See you all very soon! (departs to the narthex)

I'm delighted that our Vacation Bible School this year will give us a chance to 'see' and 'touch' the childhood of Jesus, learning about the culture in which he grew up.

Our VBS program is called, "Hometown Nazareth: Where Jesus was a Kid."

Register your children and grandchildren now, and sign up to help as you would like.

We are holding it in the evening so whole families, and adults who work, can also participate -- July 13-17...put it on your calendar now. In addition, on one of evenings, I will be offering a class for adults and older teens about the 'Jesus of History'.

So often, Thomas is known as 'doubting Thomas', and of course there is the saying, "Don't be a doubting Thomas." But I say, *be a doubting Thomas*...in the sense that Thomas asked God for what he need for faith...the only way to grow in faith is to be real about where we now, and what we need to grow and deepen our relationship with God.

And poor, Thomas, to be labeled the doubter, when in fact all of Jesus' friends doubted until they experienced the Risen Christ, the on-going life of Christ, in their midst.

Continuing to engage the questions, your questions, the great questions of faith and belief...continuing to engage the questions is very faithful.

The opposite of faith is not doubt.

Doubt, questions, seeking, is part of faith...and part of the process of what we might 'faith development'.

This is one of the great gifts of the Episcopal Church to the world of faith, to welcome all questions and to welcome all to the community of faith, aware that we have differences of belief among us.

This is ok, in fact, that is a gift.

This week I begin a class, on Wednesdays at 7pm, entitled Episcopal 101, which will be a safe and welcoming place for all questions and also an opportunity to learn about the Episcopal Church, its character and practices.

It has been said the the opposite of faith is not doubt but fear.

I would also say that the opposite of faith is not doubt but apathy...a lack of interest in pursuing the questions.

For those who may be listening to this sermon on soundcloud or those

who may talk with you about God, Church, faith...the message I would like to get out there, is that, it is here, in the community of faith, that faith is nurtured.

God has given us this Body of Christ, to touch and to see, so as to learn, and grow and believe.

This is, in a sense, our school for faith, and if one has never tried to engage with a faith community, or tried once but left, maybe for good reason, but now stays outside wondering why anyone would ever be a Christian....well...that is like not knowing Spanish, and standing outside of a school that teaches Spanish, and saying I could never know Spanish.

So don't worry if you have doubts...doubts are a part of a healthy, growing, engaged faith.

Don't worry if you once felt that your faith was rock solid, but circumstances in your life have caused you to feel else solid, that happens...it is natural...part of the dynamics of faith, in fact.

Thomas is really a hero of the faith.

Rather than going off on his own, grumbling that those others were crazy, he goes back and stays, voicing what he needs.

And God answers his prayer....meets him where he is.

May we be so bold and courageous as Thomas, trusting, or maybe, if trust seems like a lot, hoping just a bit, that God will meet us where we are, or even, that God is already there, in what is real for us, just waiting for us to show up with our questions.

Amen.