

“Hope Hurts Too Much”
+ Second Sunday of Easter Year A +
John 20: 19-31

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel for this day.

Virginia was 19 years old and pregnant when she went to live with her 15th set of foster parents. Her case file read like a textbook example of neglect, abuse and bureaucratic failure. She sat silently in a chair, hands neatly clasped, staring into her lap. Her new foster parents, whose three children were in school, had been apprised of Virginia's story. They were promised that this placement would be "temporary". (Temporary was the story of Virginia's life.)

Finally, the foster mother said, "Are you frightened, Virginia?"

"Kinda," she replied without looking up, "I've been in lots of homes."

"Well," the sympathetic woman tried to reassure the bewildered young mother-to-be, "Let's hope this time turns out for the best."

Virginia's reply is one of those statements that sticks to your soul -- it was flat, without change of tone - without Virginia even looking up she said -- "Hurts too much to hope."

I would imagine there is not a person here today who has not had a time in life like that. Thomas, the only disciple brave enough to say he'd go to Jerusalem to die with Jesus when the call came to go to Bethany where Lazarus was dying was now the only disciple bereft of hope. Thomas thought what the others were telling him about Jesus being raised from the dead was a delusion – that there was no real hope. He was entrenched in a very logical reality that the Jesus he'd loved so deeply, who'd been beaten, tortured and died as cruelly as any human could be could not be alive as the others said. Thomas could not allow himself to have that hope even on the sworn word of the disciples, Mary Magdalene or those who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus and seen our Risen Lord – it hurt too much – he could not lay aside his grief and pain to hope in the unimaginable. Dead is dead, after all – the Romans didn't make that kind of mistake. Those who'd hurriedly laid him in a tomb covered with 100 lbs of aloe and wrapped the very dead body in burial cloths had seen the gaping hole in His side. Thomas knew with certainty that Jesus had died and been buried.

What the others were saying to him must have sounded like the ravings of mass hysteria. The rather stiff phrase in our scripture reading about those who had seen the risen Lord Jesus, "...the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord," hardly communicates the depth of what it must have meant to see Jesus, who once was dead, now fully alive. But Thomas was not present to experience the joy/awe/wonderment and undoubtedly fear at the living proof that Jesus was no longer dead but truly alive. In a very rational and human way Thomas was grieving the certain death of Jesus. The depth of his hurt was too deep to hope. It was in that depth of grief and inability to trust and believe where Jesus meets Thomas – where Jesus meets us, we, who have not seen and yet believe.

Thomas, forever known as the “Doubter” was brave enough to offer to go and die with Jesus and bold enough to ask questions that others did not. When Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

It was Thomas who asked the question most of them might have had in their minds but didn't express; a question that stereotypical males never ask, “Well now -- actually Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way? Could you give us directions?”

It is then that Jesus answers with the words that give focus to every person, the entire body of believers who follows Jesus by faith, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Jesus didn't say, “I'm one of the ways – there are many, follow the path to enlightenment that best suits you and fits into your schedule.” No, Jesus said, ““I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” That is why we gather as God's people: to be equipped to go out and share the Gospel, strengthened by the Sacraments, informed and armed with God's Word, filled with the Spirit who will give us the words we need to speak in witness and will always open doors and lead us into situations where our lives and actions will give witness to God's love made known to us in Christ Jesus – the ONLY WAY, ONLY TRUTH, ONLY LIFE.

Thomas, a man broken by loss so that hope hurt too much to consider whose situation has so much to teach us:

1. He wasn't condemned by his friends for his lack of faith. He was still embraced by his community – a group of people still filled with fear, still trying to comprehend all that had happened but who kept him close – didn't shun or exclude him because of his doubt.
2. From what is recorded they accepted his honest feelings and didn't try to shame or blame him into compliance. There was no, “You shouldn't feel that way... (or) think that way... (or) be that way?” When Thomas was told the really good news about Jesus, he said in effect, “It hurts too much to hope.”

Acceptance like this has not been the strong suit of many churches, but it should be our hallmark – a mark of the love of God who finds us in our doubts and loves us still. What is so sad in the church is this profound truth: “We hide from each other the things we have most in common!” It may not be doubt about whether God exists or Jesus is our Savior but difficulty in being single, raising a child without a spouse, a fractured marriage, a sense of failure – we hide so much from one another here in the fellowship of believers where we should best be able to be accepted, consoled, strengthened and be authentically ourselves.

Church is the one place where you don't have to have your act together to show up – which is the #1 excuse most people give for staying away. Thomas is the ultimate example of “not having his act together” among the others who were still hiding. Thomas was not the first person to say, "Seeing is believing" – but his absence the first week, his doubt spoken, accepted and his still being included by the others who understood his doubts even though they had certainty leads to Jesus' blessed assurance of our reality that "Believing is seeing!"

Because of Thomas we can know that Jesus accepts us where we are and gives us strength to move forward in faith. Jesus didn't open His conversation with Thomas by saying, “You bonehead! How could you not believe in the resurrection? ” Instead He offers what Thomas had asked for – the proof of the wounds that purchased our salvation, the reality that Jesus was and is truly alive/resurrected.

The result? Thomas finally sees Jesus for who he is -- Lord and Savior. Once again Thomas has hope – the hope that marks all who believe. Now he fully believes what Jesus said to Martha (another much-maligned person) and confesses amazing faith just as she did,

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Martha said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Martha said that in the face of death – her brother's grave was sealed and his stinking body lay inside, soon to be raised. Thomas spoke to the firstborn of the dead who will never die again, Jesus, our Savior and Lord. In just a few moments we'll confess the same faith when we speak the Creed, then, strengthened by the Lord's Supper and blessed by God's breath in the Benediction we can go out – people of Hope – to share with those in whom hope has died or for whom hope is dim the sure and certain hope we have in Jesus as Savior and Lord - Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. AMEN.