

Thomas needs a better press agent, and maybe we should apply for the job.

Thomas gets a lot of bad press, and probably doesn't deserve it. He wants to touch Jesus, and who wouldn't? A lot of us feel that way.

That experience of knowing – really knowing – that Christ is alive, still able to touch and love and heal, is something we want and need, especially when times are dark and uncertain. And for Jesus' followers in this morning's gospel, the times feel VERY uncertain.

They've had a terrifying series of experiences. They saw Jesus arrested and led away without resistance. The ones who were brave enough to watch saw him, put to death by government sanctioned murder, through crucifixion. The women and Peter saw that Jesus' tomb was empty. This wouldn't be a reassuring sight to someone living in the first-century Roman Empire. If anyone had seen them around the tomb, Jesus' followers would have been suspected of grave robbery – a crime that carried a death sentence—as so many things did in first-century law.

So, at the beginning of this morning's gospel, the disciples are gathered secretly, behind locked doors, for fear of the authorities. They had followed a man brazen enough to conduct a public demonstration in the Temple, in full view of the Roman garrison stationed there, so the disciples would be considered highly dangerous to the peace of Rome, and to the Judean leaders Rome supported.

The question on the minds of Jesus' followers is probably not so much "will we be next?" as it is, "how long do you think we can hold out?" So --to reach them, breathe his spirit on them, and commission them to serve as agents of his forgiveness-- Jesus has to come through the locked door behind which they were all hiding.

Well, ALMOST all of them are hiding. One of them was not. Thomas was not with those cowering in the locked room when Jesus appears to them.

And so Thomas doesn't see Jesus, doesn't experience Jesus' breathing on his followers, doesn't receive the commission the risen Jesus gives the others.

But does this mean that Thomas is less faithful than the other disciples? Not necessarily. In the appearance of the risen Jesus that Thomas misses, Jesus commissions his disciples to go out into the world, forgiving as he forgives, loving as he loved them. Perhaps Thomas wasn't present to hear those words because he wasn't locked inside in fear, but was already out there, in the world.

Perhaps Thomas, the disciple who wanted to touch Jesus' wounds, was onto something.

If we want to touch Jesus, if we want to KNOW that God is real, that Christ is alive and at work in the world, the best place for us to be is out there, in the world. And Thomas is onto something even more important:

If you want to have the most profound experience possible of the risen Christ, you'll need to touch Christ's wounds. Thomas is entirely right about that. Touch Christ's wounds, and you'll find yourself crying out with Thomas, "My lord and my God!"

There is one point where Thomas stumbles in this Sunday's gospel, and it's an important one, and Christ is cautioning us to heed it. Thomas, who might have been the only one of Jesus' followers brave enough to be out there in the world while the others were hiding behind locked doors, takes the other disciples' report to mean that they had experienced Jesus' presence in a way that Thomas missed out on. Thomas worries that he'd been in the wrong place.

But that isn't true: the biggest mistake Thomas makes is in thinking that the body he wants and needs to touch, the body of the risen Christ, is the body that had been nailed to the cross. But it's not like that. If Thomas was out in the world, he was in precisely the place Jesus wanted him to be. If Thomas

was out in the world, he didn't need to hear Jesus' commission to the others because he was already following it. He was encountering Christ in the faces of the broken world.

Do you need to know that God is real? Do you need to know that Christ is alive, that sin and death itself are not the last word, but are passing away? Do you need to experience Christ's presence? Do you want to touch Jesus, and KNOW that Jesus is really right there with you?

Then hear Jesus' commission to those upon whom he breathes his spirit: you are being sent out, into the world, and specifically to the world's brokenness. You are being sent to touch those places, to proclaim and participate in the reconciliation and healing that is Christ's work – and ours-- in the world.

We are being sent because we -- each us about to gather at Jesus' table here, and at every other table at which bread is being broken in remembrance of him – we are now the Body of Christ, Jesus' presence at work in the world, called and empowered to do what he did, and more.

If we want that-- we'll have to leave the rooms we lock ourselves in because of fear. We need to do what Thomas did -- get out into the world, and insist upon touching the world's wounds. When we try to sequester ourselves and our children away from the world's pain, we are hiding them from Christ's presence. Fortunately, Jesus keeps after us, breathing peace and power to go out there and touch the places where the Body of Christ is still suffering.

What can one person do? I don't know what we can each personally do. But we know what Jesus can do. We can know we are his Body in the world, touching, loving, healing, forgiving in his name and to his glory.

We can follow Jesus, and Thomas' example. Amen.