

It strikes me that a week after celebrating Easter, this may be the perfect time to examine John's "mission statement" and also take it as ours. The reason we gather each week together isn't to make God happy (though I'm sure it does) or to learn sound morals (though perhaps that happens) or even to learn the essentials of the Christian faith (that would be nice if that happens, too). Rather, we gather so that we might be encountered by the Risen Christ and be caught up in faith and experience God's abundant life.

We come together because the life of faith can be joyous and wonderful and it can frequently be rather challenging. The loss of a loved one, or the inability to find a job or get into the school of one's choice, or the persistent ache of loneliness, or a prolonged bout of illness, or a pervasive sense of anxiety about our world – all these things wear at us. At these times, faith can be a great strength and support, or faith can be a casualty of these assaults. So we come together to hear the stories of Jesus read and interpreted so that we might hear Jesus speaking to us and, in turn, we might leave renewed in faith, hope, and confidence.

Jesus' words to Thomas at the end of their encounter are less a rebuke of Thomas' lack of believing and more of a blessing to all those who came after Thomas – right up to us that have believed without seeing!

Who is Thomas? We know his nickname; he is called the Twin. Was his sibling a boy or a girl? I wonder, might we be his sister? His brother? Faith and doubt coexist in Thomas...and in us. Some days it seems easy to believe and other days, we say no way—everything seems dark.

As we awake in the morning, maybe we pray the prayer of the father in Mark 9: "Come, help my little faith." And then we swing one leg off the bed and onto the floor and then then the other, and with some good coffee, we are ready to trust again.

Thomas wants something real, not stories: *"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."* He has the courage to be honest; he wants the truth. Thomas has been one of the twelve since the beginning. He has always been searching. Thomas is never indifferent or passive; there is much we can learn from him. Through prayer, silence, and listening to Scripture, we too can know truth and abundant life.

A week later, Jesus appears again to the the disciples in the shuttered room and he invites Thomas to touch his wounds. It is an invitation to touch our own wounds and the wounds of the world, the wounds of division and death.

Forgiveness and new life well up as Jesus comes close to us. As we feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and bind up the broken hearted: the wounds of Jesus, our wounds are healed. I know we tend to recoil from contemplating the wounds of Christ yet we can be transformed as we reach out to touch them. John testifies that the blood and water flow from the pierced side of Jesus, it is a symbol of love without limit. The paschal mystery is the movement of Jesus' passion toward God's beauty.

Jesus comes through closed doors; he comes for Thomas. It is a picture of perseverance becoming community. What would it look like to consider everything we do in the life of our community that more and more people would encounter Jesus and experience God's abundant life? What would worship look like? And youth ministry? And church governance? And the budgeting process? And Christian education and formation? Today is a perfect day to think about these questions, because right now there's still time to think about what next fall might

look like. Belief is not an accumulation of facts or evidence. It is a seed already planted in the heart of everyone; it needs time and care until there is this explosion of trust: *"My Lord and my God!"*

We come together so that Jesus might encounter us and, through this encounter, change us into the people God wants us to be. And we know that change doesn't happen overnight; thank heavens there's another Sunday just seven days away!

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St. Thomas' Church, Camden, Maine*