

# **“I Just Can’t Believe It!”**

John 20:19-31

Easter 2-B, April 8, 2018

I certainly am glad to be here with you today, my brothers and sisters, on this “Second Sunday of Easter” and the “Second Sunday of Easter” is indeed the proper liturgical name which has been assigned to this Sunday! I am pointing this out to you because unfortunately, there are many people in the Church who simply refer to this Sunday as the “Sunday after Easter” rather than the “Second Sunday of Easter;” that in my mind, at least, is most tragic indeed!

You might tell me that I am merely splitting hairs this morning and that a rose by any other name is still a rose; but to refer to today as the “Sunday after Easter” could give some folks the false impression that Easter is now over; that Easter is something that happened last Sunday but not this Sunday; when nothing could be further from the truth!

And what do I offer to you this morning, in the way of Biblical support, for my claim? Well, how about our appointed Gospel lesson today!?!

Here St John tells us about two events that took place among Jesus’ first disciples that greatly transformed these disciples lives: (1) The first event (John 20:19-26; 8 verses) takes place on the evening of that first Easter Sunday, and (2) The second event takes place on the Second Sunday of Easter (John 20:27-31; 5 verses)----and let me remind you that both of these events are major interrelated!

On that first Easter evening, we read that *“the disciples of Jesus were locked behind closed doors for fear of the Jews!”* And this certainly was no easy time for them!

The way I picture these men on that first Easter evening, to use a 20<sup>th</sup> Century expression is that they were all huddled together in that Upper Room in Jerusalem “sweating bullets;” meaning that were perspiring profusely -- while suffering a great deal of personal, mental anguish!

These disciples assumed that the Jewish authorities would have only been more than happy to root out the last remnant of the “Jesus Heresy” as they had assessed the Jesus Movement to be! They were frightened that they would soon be hunted down like wild animals. If the Jewish leaders could kill Jesus, nobody was safe! And so, these disciples were into hiding behind locked doors--as quiet as a mouse--listening for footsteps coming up the stairs, fearing a knock on the door, while imagining the worst!

**ALL OF A SUDDEN, HOWEVER, AN EMORMOUS TRANSFORMATION TAKES PLACE WITHIN THE HEARTS AND MINDS--OF THESE 10 DISCIPLES OF JESUS! How? Why? Because the Risen Christ suddenly appears among them! Jesus enters that room without coming through a door or even by sneaking into it through a window or by a secret passage way! Jesus, in his resurrected, glorified body, simply appears there! And his first words to them are: “Peace be with you!”**

“When he had said this,” St John continues, “He showed them his hands and his side! Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (v. 20)!

The only thing that could have been disturbing to these 10 disciples **THAT NIGHT** is that their dear friend and colleague, Thomas, was not present there with them to share in their

joy! For all the joy that they experienced, for all the gladness that came to their hearts, their joy and their gladness was diminished to some degree because of that “missing disciple.”

Don't you wish you could have been a “fly on the wall” that evening, there in that Upper Room with those first 10 disciples, when that 11<sup>th</sup> remaining disciple, named Thomas had come back, from wherever he was and entered that room! Don't you wish you could have heard their persuasive arguments that they were setting before Thomas? “Jesus is alive! Jesus is here! Jesus is risen from the dead!” All ten of them said this to Thomas, just as Mary Magdalene had told all of them, earlier that day: “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18) but that they refused to believe her! The men's word to Thomas that first Easter evening were the very same words Mary Magdalene had spoken to all of them, but in the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural form of the verb “to see” this time! Not: “I have seen the Lord!” But: “We have seen the Lord” (v. 25)!

But Thomas was relentless in his refusing to believe something that his dearest friends, and not just one or two of his friends, but all ten of his friends--told him was true! There is a big difference--however--at this point--in what those first 10 disciples had going to them, versus what Thomas had going for him! There are at least two major differences between what those 10 disciples had going for them, versus what Thomas had going for him!

(1) At this point: Those 10 disciples of Jesus had “evidence,” but all that Thomas had going for him was “hearsay” -- and if you have ever been a fan of Judge Judy--one thing Judge Judy always points out to the people in her courtroom again and again is that there is a great deal of difference between EVIDENCE and HEARSAY.

Thomas replied: *“I just can't believe it! And I won't believe it--unless I see the nail wounds in his hands--and put my fingers into them--and place my hand into his side”* (John 20:25)!

What IF Thomas' primary struggle, however, was not--if---Jesus had risen from the dead--but whether the words of his dearest friends were reliable; Whether these words of his dearest friends, could be trusted?

Had they proven themselves to be trustworthy followers of Jesus in recent days? Not hardly! When Peter says that he would die rather than to deny ever having known Jesus, the Gospels tell us that the other disciples, present upon that occasion, also said the same thing!

(2) Secondly, these 10 disciples of Jesus had SOMETHING ELSE GOING FOR THEM, THAT THOMAS DIDN'T--THEY HAD RECEIVED THE PROMISED GIFT OF GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT!

During the Last Supper, right before Jesus was arrested and taken to the cross, he told His disciples that He was about to leave them. They were very sad to hear this, but Jesus told them not to be sad. Jesus said that after he left, he would send the Holy Spirit to them: *“I will ask the Father and he will give you another Friend to help you and to be with you forever. The Friend is the Spirit of truth. The world can't accept him because the world will not be able to see him or to know him.*

*But you will know him. He will live with you and he will be in you. But the Father will send the Friend in my name to help you. The Friend is the Holy Spirit. He will teach you all things. He will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:16-26)!*

Like I said last Sunday, to interpret the Bible correctly, you must consider what a text is saying to us—within the larger context of the whole written document itself—and within the context—of the entire Holy Scriptures too!

When Thomas said, *“Unless, I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand his side, I will never believe”* – wasn’t he really stating out loud to everyone: “I just can’t believe it!”

And none of the disciples could believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, until God provided them with the proof—they needed—also—to believe that the angel’s pronouncement at the empty tomb was really, true!

Do you remember what St Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 12:3? *“No one can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Spirit!”*

And isn’t this the only way that those 10 disciples, who were locked behind closed door, for fear that what happened to Jesus—might happen to them also—came to faith.

Jesus became really present for them! Jesus suddenly appeared among them in his glorified body—not because he rang the doorbell, and one of them said, “I wonder who that could be” and looked through the peephole ON THAT DOOR—and seeing that it was Jesus—decided it was okay—to allow him—above all the other people—still out there in the world—into their domicile?

Jesus came among them—and the first words out of Jesus’ mouth to them were: “Peace be with you!” Then he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were GLAD WHEN THEY SAW THE LORD.

Therefore, Jesus said to them a second time: *“Peace be with you!”* But also continued: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you!” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them: *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:21-23)!* Thomas wasn’t there in the house with the others that first Easter evening.

Thomas wasn’t there when Jesus came and stood among them! Thomas wasn’t there when THE RISEN CHRIST gave them his peace, showed them his wounds, gave them power over sin, and bid them receive the Holy Spirit—basically everything he had to bring his little church back to life. Before they saw him, all they had been able to see was the end of them. That locked up house was the end of the line for them, the end of the vision they had walked away from all other visions of their lives to serve.

They had the breath knocked out of them, the life. They could not remember how to breathe. If you or anyone you love has ever had a panic attack, you know what fear can do to you! A panic attack can result in a pounding heart and profuse sweat; much like having the breath, literally knocked out of you! A panic attack can convince you that you are dying!

Maybe you are here today and if you had the courage you might stand up and say to our whole assembly this morning: "I just can't believe it!"

And if you did, I know what I'd tell you: "Join the crowd!" Furthermore, I'd tell you: "Maybe you can't believe it, but God can give you the gift of faith—so long as you do not harden your heart against God's Word!"

Nevertheless, you and I have one major advantage over Thomas and all those other disciples this morning! We have the gift of the Holy Bible; especially the pages of the New Testament! John is saying: God is providing you and me with all that you will need to have saving faith in him!

*"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book! But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31)!*

So please let me close this morning by telling you a facetious little story about this single young man, who decided that his life was, well, for the most part rather uneventful and to be quite honest with you--at times, downright boring!!

One Saturday morning, however, he thought he got a bright idea! Perhaps his life would become a little more exciting if he had a pet! Therefore, without further ado---he jumped in his car and made a trip to his local pet store.

Upon arriving there, he said to the owner of the pet store--I want to buy a pet--but not just any old pet--I want to buy an unusual pet--if by chance, sir, you were to have anything along these lines!

That's when the pet store owner rested his chin in his right hand momentarily, as he considered all the possibilities! Maybe he should offer this young man a pet salamander, or better yet, a pet boa constrictor, or even best of all--a newly acquired parrot that he had just imported to the shop from South America! But, none of these options, seemed to be just right!

Finally, the pet store owner spoke up and said: "Young man -- I think I have just the thing for you. After a brief discussion, this young man took the proposed unusual pet home with him--that turned out to be a TALKING CENTIPEDE, YOU KNOW A 100-LEGGED BUG, WHICH CAME IN A LITTLE WHITE BOX TO USE FOR THE CENTIPEDE'S HOUSE!

The next day this young man decided that one way that they could get their new relationship off to a great start was to offer to take his new pet to church with him! So, he asked the centipede in the box, "Would you like to go to church with me today? We will have a good time!"

But there was no answer from his new pet. This bothered THE YOUNG MAN a bit, but he waited a few minutes and then POLITELY asked again, "How about going to church with me today and receive a blessing?"

But again, there was no answer from his new friend and pet. So, he waited a few minutes more, thinking about the situation. The guy decided to invite the centipede a third time, which would most definitely be his last time. This time he put his face up against the centipede's house and shouted: "Hey, in there! Would you like to go to church with me and learn about God?"

This time, a little voice came out of the box, "I heard you the first time! Can't you be a little more patient: For after all, I am putting on my shoes!"

And the moral of the story is--that just because we invite an unchurched friend to come to Sunday morning worship with us, and they seem only to ignore us, doesn't mean they don't have their own reasons for not going with us initially! But let's make certain that we do not give up on them too quickly--for perhaps when they finally are ready--they'll be more than happy to join in with us here together on a Sunday morning!

Let's be grateful that the other disciples did not give up on Thomas prematurely! And above all, be thankful that our God doesn't give up on us either!

**AMEN**