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Second Sunday of Easter, St. Thomas Sunday 2020

St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Bloomington, Indiana

Supposing him to be the gardener...

In the beginning {when God created the heavens and the earth} was the Word.

In Christ's death and resurrection we all died and a new creation began. One of the ways John gets at this new reality – this new normal – is to begin his account with the words of Genesis: In the beginning. In the beginning – when God created the heavens and the earth – was the Word. Everything that is, seen and unseen, was created in and through this Word. Which means that the Word was also present in the Garden in the second chapter of Genesis. In the garden.

Last week we heard about Mary Magdalene going to the tomb while it was still dark. When she saw that the stone had been removed from the opening of the tomb, she freaked out (of course she did! Who wouldn't?) and ran to tell the disciples and tells them not just what she had witnessed, but the conclusions she had drawn from what she had witnessed: "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb and I don't know where they've taken him!" (Which is, of course, the only logical explanation, given the fact that he was dead...) After Peter and John survey the scene, they agree that the body is gone and go back to the upper room. Mary remains outside the tomb and weeps.

After the angels ask her why she is weeping, Jesus shows up and asks her the same question, along with, "Whom are you looking for?" (Which echo his first words in John's gospel, "What are you looking for?" The answer to the first time Jesus asks this question and the time he asks it after his resurrection is, of course, Jesus.) After Mary tells him, he says her name, "Mary." *That's* when she recognizes him. When it becomes personal. When he calls her by name.

In the evening of that same day, Jesus shows up again. This time in the upper room when all of the disciples (well, *almost* all...) are gathered together behind locked doors because they were terrified of what the Jewish leaders might do to them. Jesus just shows up, in spite of the locked doors, which are clearly no obstacle to him (I guess if death and the stone outside his tomb are no obstacles, locked doors would be a cinch.) The first words he says to them (of all the words he could have said to them, given their recent denial and abandonment of him in his hour of need...) is "Peace be with you." A few moments later he says the same words, to make it clear that he wasn't just saying "hello" to them (Shalom, or the Arabic, Salam, are both standard greetings throughout the Middle East), that he really wanted them to know his peace, that peace which the world cannot give, the peace that is only found in him.

After this, he shows them his hands and his side – where the wounds from crucifixion are still quite visible – and *then* they rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Then he doubles down on the "Peace be with you," which is why one of the things we are saying when we

share in the peace is that Christ is risen! It's a celebration of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ!

But he goes on! "As the father sent me, so I send you." After saying this, he breathed on them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins, they're forgiven. If you retain them, they are retained." By this associating the peace that we have in the forgiveness of sins, which we have received, and which we share with all.

That's when we find out that Thomas wasn't there. Which, if we've paid attention to him throughout John's gospel, shouldn't come as a huge surprise. He only has a few lines in this drama, but they are all significant and reveal much about his character.

The first is in chapter 11. They have just left Jerusalem and Judea because they were going to stone him for heresy. They retreated to the region by the Jordan where John had baptized and remained there. And then word comes that Lazarus is sick and Mary and Martha are asking him to come heal him. Jesus announces that they're going back – Bethany, where M. and M. and L. live, is right outside of Jerusalem – and the disciples protest because they had just run for their lives from there.

But Thomas, after he realizes that there's no changing Jesus' mind on this, says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." He's loyal and he's got guts, that's for sure, and he knows how to cut through the crap. He understands what's at stake here. If they tried to kill him once, they'll do it again. It's not safe. But, as Peter answered Jesus when he asked if they were going to leave him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life," so now Thomas sees what others do not.

The next time Thomas speaks is in the upper room in the night in which Jesus was betrayed. Jesus is telling them that he's going away and that he's preparing a place for them, concluding with by saying "And you know the way to the place I am going," Thomas then states what is painfully obvious, "Lord, we don't know where you're going; how in the world can we know the way?" Which is the very question I hope that I would have asked at that point! Which means that he's smart and not afraid to share his opinion. He also does not suffer fools gladly and thinks Jesus is being a little foolish here, and says so.

Finally, now comes his big moment. While the other disciples were all there in that room, terrified of the danger outside their walls, Thomas is not. We are not told where he is, but it's probably enough to know that he's not there. I think Thomas is the ultimate realist...who is seeking the truth. I believe he was trying to move on with his life, to begin to adjust to the new reality, to work at getting to a "new normal." He was not going to let fear be his guide. So he's outside, not inside. He is alone, not with the others.

I suppose we could stop there and say that this is what can happen if you miss even one Sunday of church, but that's not where John's story goes.

Thomas, who does not suffer fools, demands more than the word of his terrified friends. Fear can make us see things that are not there, Thomas knows this well. He's seen it in their eyes, he's felt it himself, but has not allowed it to own him.

So when they tell him that they've seen the Lord, he's having none of it. Not only does he say that he has to see it with his own eyes, he needs to *feel* it with his fingers and hands...inside Jesus' wounds! (Ew!! Gross!!) I'm pretty sure this is hyperbole, but still. He needs proof, by God!

Then again, isn't he simply asking to see what the others had seen. Is that so wrong? I think we would all feel the same way if we were in his shoes.

The next Sunday, again, much to everyone's surprise, Jesus shows up again, in spite of the locked doors, and says, "Peace be with ya'll." And then he focuses his attention on Thomas. "Here. Put your fingers in the nail wounds, put your hand in my side where they stabbed me with a spear. I want you to have what you need in order to trust me, to believe in me."

I believe that Thomas died in that moment. The moment it became personal. The moment when he realized that Jesus had come back for *him!*

The reason that I believe Thomas died in the moment he saw Jesus and exclaimed, "My Lord and my God," is because we *all* die in Christ. All of creation is recreated in his resurrection. When Mary supposes him to be the gardener, she ain't wrong! He is the Original Gardener, the one who planted all of the trees in the garden of Eden, the one who formed us out of the earth and then breathed on us, filling us with his breath/Spirit, causing us to live! And now he does it again, but to a new reality, a new life, a new normal.

It doesn't mean that everything's going to be easy now, it doesn't mean that we won't suffer, that things won't go wrong, that there isn't still sin in the world and in our hearts. But it does mean that we are a new creation in Christ's resurrection. And no amount of doubt and skepticism can get in the way of Christ breaking into our lives. And when that happens, we are filled with the peace of Christ and the Holy Spirit...and we are sent. To love as Jesus loves, to share the news of a new creation.

The rubber hits the road, however, when it becomes personal. It's only when Jesus says her name that Mary sees the resurrected Lord. It's only when Jesus shows up and invites Thomas to do as he demanded the week before that he truly believes.

We say things like this in church: "The peace of the Lord be with you *all*." "This is my body given for *all* ya'll." "This is the new covenant in my blood shed for *all* people for the forgiveness of sins." All of these statements are plural: all ya'll. But it's not until you understand that it is also *for you* that this becomes real. It is most certainly for all of

creation – for God so loved the world – *and* it is also a personal thing, or it is not a thing at all.

This is something that Luther addresses in his explanation to the Apostles' Creed. "I believe that God created me...Oh, and everything else..." "I believe that God has saved and redeemed me...Oh, and everyone else..." It's one thing to know that God created, redeemed, and sustains all things, it's a whole different thing when you know that he did this **for YOU!** And I am convinced that, just as Jesus came back the next week for Thomas, and Thomas alone – giving him what he needed to trust in him, to believe in him – I am also convinced that if you were the only sinner in need of forgiveness in the whole world, Jesus would still have come to save you alone. That's how precious you are.

Now, Jesus did many things that are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may trust and believe and have life. And blessed are you who have not seen and yet believe.

Now go and love as Jesus loves, sharing the most excellent news that all things have been made new in Jesus Christ! Even you. Even me.

Amen!