

Bonnie Scott, Seminarian
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter Year B
April 11, 2021
Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL

Acts 3:12a,13-15,17-26 ,13-15,17-26
1 John 5:1-6
John 20:19-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be forever in your sight Oh Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

“Peace be with you.” Jesus greets his disciples with this phrase many of us have become familiar with—a phrase almost absurdly common for this incredible moment—the moment when the disciples are reunited with Jesus, whom they believed to be dead. Jesus stands before them and extends his hands and reveals his side, still punctured with the wounds he suffered on the cross. It is only then, once the disciples have seen the lacerations on his flesh that they rejoice, realizing that this is in fact Jesus, their Lord. In his brokenness, they recognize him. They can now see him fully as the Messiah—as the Son of God who has triumphed over death. And yet, his wounds remain.

Having revealed himself bodily, Jesus repeats to them, “Peace be with you,” telling the disciples that just as God has sent Jesus into the world, he too sends the disciples. Jesus then breathes on them and tells them to “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Interestingly, the Greek word used for “breathe” is the same word used in the Septuagint, when God makes man from dust and “breathed into his face the breath of life.” Just as God first breathed life into man, Jesus gives new life to his disciples; He has made a new life possible, one which He himself shows us by conquering death.

And yet, the Holy Spirit which Jesus grants his disciples is not given passively. In Greek, the word “*lambano*” means “receive,” “to take,” or “take hold of.” Though Jesus offers the Holy Spirit up to his disciples, they must take hold of it and to make this new life which Jesus offers us known within the world.

The disciples first try and spread this news by telling one of their own, Thomas, that they have seen Jesus. Thomas responds that it is only when he has “seen the mark of the nails in his hands” and put “his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in Jesus’s side” that he will truly believe that Jesus has visited them. It is not enough just to see Jesus—to behold his face and wounded body—Thomas needs to feel Jesus’s wounds with his own hands in order to believe. Jesus grants this to Thomas. He appears before him, and only once Thomas has intimately felt the contours of Jesus’s gashes does he recognize him. In his human weakness, Thomas needs *evidence* in order to believe—but Jesus knew this about him and provided it.

What do *we* need in order to recognize God in our own lives? Time and time again throughout the gospels, people come to Jesus and ask him to perform miracles—to see him, to touch him, to prove that He is the Son of God. They ask, as Thomas did, for proof. And again and again, He tells them, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Like a crutch, they lean against the physical world, not realizing what lies beyond it.

As easy as it is to understand the words of Jesus's message, I find it difficult to follow through on its demand. When God feels furthest away, I wish to pull Him close to me—to feel, to sense God in my life and in the world. The Spirit in its lofty transcendence can seem too far, when the pains of life are so visceral and worldly. Sometimes I—like Thomas and the crowds—need my proof.

And yet, as Holy Week has reminded us, Jesus's pains too were worldly. His suffering was extraordinary, beyond what most of us—God willing—will ever live to experience. But he bled the blood that we bleed, was pierced through hands not unlike my own. As Thomas touched Jesus's wounds, he felt the contours of Christ's sacrifice. As he beheld his teacher, touching him who had once been dead, he finally found the evidence he needed—and he believed.

In the book of Exodus, the Israelites are called “stiff-necked”: they are stubborn, incredulous, in constant need of correction and reassurance. The miracle-demanding crowds and skeptical disciples in the Gospels are no different. This tells us something, I think, about what kind of thing we are—what the human being is. We are proof-demanding creatures, for better and for worse. But God knows this about us, and he is merciful; and just as he presented his wounds to Thomas, humbling himself in order to satisfy his disciple's need for certainty, so does he come down to meet us in our doubt, our uncertainty.

The Eucharist, in which we will soon share, is our proof. In the sacrament, God meets us wherever we happen to be: broken, weak, troubled, in doubt. And as Christ gave the spirit to his disciples, connecting their ministry and evangelism to the very beginnings of creation, so too does he give his spirit to us. The breath poured into Adam brought something new into the world, transformed inanimate clay into the same flesh that would later house the infant Christ. It made the impossible possible: it brought forth new life. So let his Spirit do the same for us, to transform us from what we have been into what we should be for God. And let the Eucharist be our proof.

Amen.