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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/7/2013, The Second Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my *God!*” (John 20:29, RSV)

The words seem to have flown to the tongue of Thomas. We do not get the impression that he actually touched the wounds of Jesus, or even needed to. The blessed thought formed itself in his mind and straightway he gave his great testimony: My Lord and my God!

To enjoy Thomas’s testimony, let me borrow some words from the Athanasian Creed. The Creed says that this is the true faith that we believe and confess about our Lord Jesus Christ:

[He] is both God and man.
He is God, begotten before all worlds
from the being of the Father,
and he is man, born in the world
from the being of his mother--
existing fully as God,
and fully as man

Let me use these two identities of our Lord Jesus to discuss this morning’s story. Jesus is both man and God. I begin with our conviction that Jesus is a man.

PEACE

When Jesus appears among the disciples, he does so in a wondrous way, for he suddenly appears among them though they had been hiding behind locked doors. If he is a man, he is an unusual man, for he is able to pass through a solid door as a sunbeam travels right on through solid glass. But there he stands, and he immediately does two things that persuade the disciples that it is indeed their Master Jesus—the very *man* they had known. First, he speaks of Peace. It is as if with that one word Jesus summarizes the whole benefit of his life, passion, death, and resurrection:

“Peace be with you.” (John 20:19, RSV)

Peace! Not fury, not revenge, not even an immediate word of rebuke to Peter who had denied him or to the others who had fled and abandoned him. Peace. This is what Jesus has won for the world. And that one word does sound like their Master Jesus. That is not out-of-character with the man they had known, the man they had walked with and listened to. His preaching in the Sermon on the Mount had been a peaceful preaching, drawing people away from hatred and anxiety. His miracles had brought a season of peace to troubled folks: to those possessed by demons, to those thrust to the perimeter by their leprosy, to those in fear or grief for the sick and dying. And in that night in which he had been betrayed, he lingered in the upper room and spoken of peace:

²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (John 14:27, RSV)

So if the resurrected Jesus stands among them now and speaks of peace, they could well conclude, It is the same man! It is our Lord Jesus!

THE WOUNDS

But it is Christ's *wounds* that seem to cap the argument:

Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. (John 20:19-20, RSV)

It is the wounds on his body that seem to be the decisive point for the disciples—not just for Thomas but for the other disciples too. Who can ever forget those wounds? Who cannot shudder at the thought of the spikes being driven into the hands and feet of our Lord and the spear being driven into his side? It is when Jesus shows his wounds to the disciples, that they can recognize him as the man he is. He lived his thirty-three years among our kind, and he has the scars to show it, as many of you do.

To that rhetorical question, "Who can ever forget the wounds of Christ?" we should believe that not even God above can forget them. Indeed, it turns out that the old promise of Isaiah is literally, physically true:

¹⁴But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." ¹⁵Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these

may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands... (Isaiah 49:14-16, NRS)

We should cherish those wounds. The great Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard puts the point beautifully:

...Christ retained the scars of His wounds after His resurrection. For this is not a deception or smoke and mirrors act; rather, this was the truth... Christ still daily shows His wounds to His heavenly Father. By virtue of them, He pleads for us poor sinners. The flames of love still shine forth from Christ's wounds to this very day. His wounds still stand open, so that our souls—like frightened little doves—may hide themselves therein (Song of Sol. 2:14). His wounds are still a “don't forget me” note before the eyes of God (Mal 3:16). (Ibid. page 364-365)

So, the disciples see the wounds, and the text states their reaction in the most simple terms:

Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. (John 20:20, RSV)

It bet they were glad! Glad indeed.

If the disciples were puzzled by the sudden appearance of Jesus among them, though they hid behind locked doors, they seemed to have tossed those puzzles aside. For here stands the man, body and all! They seem to have concluded that they had too paltry a notion so far of what a human body is, for here stands Jesus and he certainly has a human body, with a voice that speaks of peace and with hands and sides bearing wounds on them. If Jesus can pass through a solid door, then the disciples are just going to have to elevate their notion of a human body, and they do. Soon the Church speaks of a “glorified body”—a good old-fashioned body that can be touched and can eat fish at breakfast along the shore, but a body better than the ones we have so far.

Jesus did not rise as a ghost or a principle, but as a man of flesh and blood, ready to renew his battle for the life of the world.

A few years back I was terribly grieved to be walking behind some seminarians in a very liberal seminary in our town. I overheard them mocking an old-fashioned preacher in town. “Why, he speaks of Jesus! He does not speak of the Christ-principle or Christ-Sophia or peace or love or justice or inclusivity or anything modern. The old fool speaks of Jesus.”

But you see, the Gospel is that the man Jesus is risen! Principles and causes come and go. Indeed, I fear that we will never get any of our principles and causes right until we learn to interpret them by way of the story of Jesus, for that man is the risen one!

So, that is the first part of this sermon: Jesus is fully man, scars, convictions, character, and all.

FULLY GOD

Now let's turn to the second part of our Creed: Jesus is fully God! For this part, do not reckon anything small concerning Thomas. Indeed, count him the hero of the story.

For where did we stand before this encounter between Jesus and Thomas? Well, we have the disciples happy again:

Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

But to say that they were glad when they saw the Lord is not quite the same thing as confessing that their Lord is God. It is consistent with the story so far that the disciples conclude simply that the Jesus they had lost had wondrously been restored to them. Their situation so far could be akin to Mary and Martha rejoicing when their dead brother Lazarus was restored to them.

But Thomas travels farther than this. Much farther. The words that spring to Thomas's tongues are not simply a recognition that Jesus has been restored to them, but that Jesus is God!

Furthermore, judging by the overall flow of the St. John's Gospel, it is not that Jesus *became* God, as if he were elevated to Godhead as a reward for his piety, but that God *became* Jesus. And so the disciples had been dealing with God all along, only they did not know it. When they had walked and talked with Jesus, they had been walking and talking with God! Now, there is quite a thought!

So, in the cool of the evening, as the LORD had come down into the Garden to talk with Adam and Eve, so in this story in the cool of the evening the LORD again came down and talked with his people, this time bearing the scars of his wounds.

This is the great theme of St. John's prologue: And the Word became flesh! It is not that flesh became the Word, but that the Word became flesh—became the man Jesus that they had known all along.

The Twelve had been walking with God all along, but they did not fully take it in. Thomas is the one who puts it all together. It is in him that the tremendous thought coalesces: My Lord and my God!

THE WOMAN ON THE SIDEWALK

About a week ago, Maundy Thursday morning, I gave a dollar to an old African woman. She was snaggle-toothed and old and wrinkled. I gave her the dollar and she told me that she was going to use it to buy her lunch. I said, "That is good. I give it to you in the name of Jesus." Then she broke into a big smile and said, "Oh, isn't he wonderful!" I said, "Indeed he is!" And she said, "His resurrection is this Sunday!"

And that is how I am glad to close: Isn't he wonderful! The one who arose on Easter morning is not simply the good Lord and master of his Twelve Disciples. He is even greater: He is God. And he speaks his benediction upon you and me, here in our city in this modern age:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

He is God, and we rest in his good hands, and it makes all the sense in the world for us to fight on his good side. I am speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.