Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church  
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John 20:19-31

Grace and peace from our risen Savior Jesus Christ.

Do you have a nickname? And if you do, do you like it? Is it a name that tells people something about you? At a restaurant where I worked as a dishwasher I was Peaches for a reason I no longer remember. A good friend from seminary calls me Schutzie. Each of these were or are a sign of closeness, fondness in relationship. We also, though acquire nicknames we wish would fade into oblivion, a name someone assigns us for less than honorable reasons, or thoughtlessness, or because they haven’t taken the time to really get to know us. For better or worse, nicknames can be a powerful influence on the way people see us and make judgments about us, or even dismiss us. Such is the case with Thomas.

We know him best as Doubting Thomas as a result of his refusal to buy into the joy of his friends and believe that Jesus is indeed alive. Every year on the first Sunday after Easter we read this story about Thomas’ demand to see the resurrected Jesus in the flesh, touch the nail marks and wound, or he will not believe Jesus has indeed risen from the dead, and we judge him for his doubt. Where’s your faith Thomas? What, though, might we say if we were Thomas in
that moment, devasted by Jesus’ death, locked in grief and hopelessness? Wouldn’t it be better to get to know Thomas better before we jump to conclusions?

This isn’t the first time Thomas has spoken out in John’s gospel, and to define him by this one instance isn’t really fair, or accurate. Further digging shows Thomas is a realist who speaks his mind, cuts to the chase and doesn’t beat around the bush, and can be quite courageous. Back in Chapter 11, we meet the bold Thomas. Jesus has just learned of Lazarus’ death and is about to leave for Bethany. Most of his disciples try to stop him because those John calls “the Jews” had just tried to stone him. Thomas, however, sees that reality can’t be avoided and, while the other disciple’s are afraid, he alone urges, *Let us also go that we may die with him.*

Near the end, Jesus tells his disciples that he’s going to prepare a place for them in his Father’s house, that they know the way to the place where Jesus is going. Thomas’ response is short and direct, the question that must have been on all the disciples’ minds but no one else dared ask: *We don’t know where you’re going so how can we know the way?* I’m not sure he was satisfied with Jesus’ cryptic answer: *I am the way, the truth the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me you will know my Father also,* but he doesn’t press Jesus further.
Why wasn’t Thomas in the locked room with the other disciples that day? John doesn’t say. Being the practical kind of guy he is, maybe he’s trying to get on with his life, trying to figure out what’s next. Maybe, so overcome with grief and fear, he goes back to what’s familiar and safe, fishing. Being a realist, the reality is his teacher and Lord has been crucified, the hopes he had quietly collected over the last three years reduced to nothing. Jesus might have said he was the way, but that way was now a dead end, literally. Thomas might as well move on.

Being a realist is a good thing. Realists look for and accept the truth of a thing; they make decisions based on facts and tend not to get hood-winked by impractical or wishful thinking. My daughter and her fiancé were thinking of buying a house, but they realized that paying for a wedding was all they could handle this year…thank goodness! Some of you are dealing with the reality of difficult health problems that right now define and limit your life and there’s no way around that hard fact. Sometimes we disagree on what the reality of a thing is, like the current debate on gun control. And then there’s those times when our view of reality is much too narrow because we’re locked in on our own ideas, or because what is really real is less about facts than it is about truth, less about being certain than about faith. And this is where Thomas gets hung up, locked in his limited vision every bit as much as the other disciples bolted themselves in the room.
Thomas makes his demand to see and touch Jesus figuring there’s no possible way it’ll ever happen. This isn’t doubt or skepticism, this is outright unbelief. His understanding of reality, about death and life, of what God is capable of doing, is now too limited in a post-resurrection world. Then Jesus happens to him. Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ, comes to Thomas and greets him with the peace only Christ can give, and calls Thomas out of his limitations into a greater vision of what God can do, into the life only God can give: Do not be unbelieving but believing. What changes with Thomas is not that he’s any less of a realist, but that Jesus has transformed Thomas’ awareness of reality itself. In the words of David Lose, “Jesus comes and takes his…words (of disbelief) and turns them back on him, not to humiliate or scold him, but simply to confront him with the possibility that his reality was too small, his vision of what is possible too limited. And when Jesus calls him to faith, he’s actually inviting him to enter into a whole new world.” This new world, this new way of being and believing, is present only in and through Jesus Christ raised from the dead. In that moment the power of the resurrection filled Thomas too and raised up in him the greatest, most profound confession in all of John’s gospel: My Lord and my God. In the presence of the crucified and risen Christ, Thomas is given faith to see and know Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, the one who is the living God.
The risen Jesus comes to us, makes his peace a reality in our midst, and calls us out of our locked rooms, our limited understanding of reality into the light and hope of the Resurrection. Jesus calls us out of our resignation to the presence of poverty, hunger, racism, gun violence and into God’s love and justice for the world, out of our false sense of scarcity into God’s abundance. The Jesus who once was dead and now is alive confronts us in our fear, worry, shame, guilt and gives us instead the freedom of God’s forgiveness and reconciliation and a new vision of believing what God can do in us and through us.

I don’t mean to diminish the heart break and hardship that is real in your life, or to in anyway suggest that your faith is somehow “less than sufficient” when you are overcome by worry and fear. As the saying goes, life is real and life is hard and sometimes life is real hard. Yet, God’s word of hope in this gospel text is promise that the trouble you see and feel and experience is not all there is. Jesus, who once was dead but now is alive, comes to you in the midst of your limitations, floods your life with his peace that surpasses understanding, and becomes the hope that courses through every vein in your body. Jesus himself is your new way of seeing and believing. You are a new creation in Christ, who has put sin to death and raised you up too, so that you may, by faith, believe…in God, in grace, in mercy, in possibility, in forgiveness…and in yourself. May the confession of Thomas be
yours and mine this day as we receive the living Christ and the gift of life in his name: *my Lord and my God. Alleluia!*