

Second Sunday of Easter
Sermon for March 30, 2008
Raymond Raney

Acts 2:14a,22-32
Psalm 16
1Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

Doubting Thomas. Poor boy! For nearly 2,000 years Thomas has been yoked with the name evoked by anyone who wants to flaunt their faith. “Don’t be a Doubting Thomas. You have to have faith.”

I think Thomas gets a bad rap here. Is he asking all that much? All he’s saying is that he doesn’t believe what the disciples are telling him. Hey, they didn’t believe Mary when she said the exact same thing to them. They had to go see for themselves. Why should Thomas believe them anymore than they believed Mary. All he asks is what any of us would ask – particularly now in this age of science and reason.

Anyone who has been educated in the hard sciences or even exposed to them will ask for proof. Are the phenomena you are describing observable? Are the results you report able to be reproduced? What was the methodology you used to achieve the results you are reporting?

I mean, where do the disciples get off criticizing Thomas. They’ve been locked in a room, hiding in the corners, afraid of shadows on the wall. Then Jesus shows up in person and says to them directly: *Shalom Aleichem* – “peace be with you”. I’d be willing to bet they all jumped, because, apparently, they were too shocked to return his greeting. They should have responded *Aleichem Shalom*

Of course, Thomas was not with them, so they tell him, “We have seen the Lord.” And he says what they thought when Mary said the same thing: “yeah, right. I’ll believe that when I see it. I’m from Missouri. You’ll have to show me.” Sounds perfectly reasonable to me.

And it is a problem in reading the text because for most people this story from the Gospel is all about Thomas, his doubt and his judgment. But I think that blocks us from hearing what the story is really about. Like all the Gospels, the stories, like this story, are about Jesus and the love he bears for the disciples and for each and every one of us.

Jesus is not criticizing or judging Thomas. He actually gives Thomas exactly what he asks for. He gives Thomas what he needs to bolster his faith. Jesus reaches out to his friends, and touches their lives in a truly deep and meaningful way, so that they can witness to what they have seen. Jesus gives them a gift of faith.

I was given a gift on Easter. An envelope from Sarah Averhoff addressed to me with a note on the front that said: “There is a note about Jesus inside this envelope.” The note inside said” Dear Father Raney. Does Jesus really come back to Life on Easter. Write me a letter to see if he does.”

So I’d like to share with you what I wrote to her:

Dear Sarah,

I've been thinking a lot about your question: "Does Jesus really come back to life on Easter?"

The simple answer is "yes." But it's more complicated than that. Jesus was resurrected, not revived. He didn't come back to live, he moved on to the next life – the one that comes after this one. If he just "came back to life" it would be like when your Mom is able to start one of her patient's hearts that had stopped, and they live again. It's like the story of Lazarus, the friend of Jesus who died and who Jesus brought back to life after he had been dead four days. A pet, who is revived, or Lazarus, who was dead, are just given a little more time to enjoy life. In the case of Jesus, he was resurrected – he will never have to die again. And it only happened once – about 2,000 years ago. It doesn't happen every Easter – just the first one. That's what we celebrate each year – the resurrection on that first Easter Sunday.

Our celebration reminds us that after we die, we each will be resurrected and will never die again. And we know that we will see our loved ones who died before us in that new life.

It's a little confusing for me because after my Mom died I didn't see her again – though I know she was a good person, and went to be with Jesus. I wanted to see her again just like Jesus' friends got to see him again. It's like in the Gospel this Sunday when Jesus appears to his friends so they can see that he was resurrected.

It wasn't easy to believe. His friend Thomas had a really hard time believing that Jesus was back. He didn't believe the other disciples when they told him they'd seen Jesus – "I won't believe unless I see his wounds," Thomas said. So Jesus made a special trip to show Thomas, and Thomas finally understood that Jesus came from God.

In a few weeks we'll celebrate the feast of the Ascension, when Jesus went back to Heaven to be with God. And I believe that's where my Mom and all the people I've loved have gone now that they're no longer living with us here on Earth. And some day I'll be able to be there with them just like Jesus promised us.

So that's a long-winded answer to your question, so I hope that's what you wanted to know. Yes, Sarah, Jesus does come back to life on Easter, and he lives still in each and every one of our hearts, too!

Faithfully your,

Fr. Raymond+

We have all been given a gift, a gift greater than we can ever comprehend: A gift beyond all gifts – the gift of the assurance that God loves us more than we can ever know. That is the peace that Jesus gives us, the freedom from the anxiety and uncertainty that God's love is true. That's what Jesus meant when he greeted his disciples: "Peace be with you."

And so I greet you: "Shalom Aleichem".

Amen.