

The Second Sunday of Easter [C]

April 28, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Psalm 150; John 20: 19-31

Grace and peace to you through God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

They open the locked doors to Thomas. He immediately notices a change in the room, as if a spark had lit a fire where there once was only brooding darkness. Is this the right place? “We have seen the Lord!” the other disciples tell him. Their dulled eyes are now bright, and their faces animated with excitement. Just hours ago all of them had been wary and baffled. Mary and the women reported the tomb was empty of Jesus. All of the disciples dismissed it as an idle tale. None of them knew what to make of it, what to believe. Now all but him exclaim, “We have seen the Lord!” Thomas grabs hold of his reason to keep from drowning in bewilderment. How can this be? When Thomas can finally find words, all he can manage is, “I need to see it for myself. I need to see him like you have!” He was standing on the outside, unable yet to join the celebration of his own community.

I wonder if that is how many guests feel when they come to worship on Easter morning. The place is a feast of smells and color and excitement. They may have come feeling connected to their family, a childhood memory or a sentimental attachment to a place or tradition. Then the pastor joyfully proclaims, “He is Risen! Alleluia!” and the place spontaneously responds, “He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!” Soon there’s rejoicing with hymns electrified with triumph. Might that guest feel like a wave is crashing on him or does she feel like she has stumbled in on a celebration for a guest of honor to which she has little to no connection? Perhaps there are believers who on Easter, weary with worry or loss, feeling beaten by circumstances or health, also feel as stupefied and wary as Thomas does. That may even have been you or me on a given Easter or other Sunday. “We have seen the Lord!” the congregation says. Among us are folks whose hearts plead, “I need to see it for myself. I need to see the Lord like you have.”

When struggling to hold it together, to make sense of the senseless, to connect with the Lord who seems untouchable — Thomas speaks for us all. “Let me see you, Lord. I can’t find my way.” “Let me touch you, Lord. I’m sinking, I’m alone. I need to know you are real!” These are pleas born of pain or bewilderment or feeling negated or isolated. In those times, we understand our brother Thomas. We applaud his honesty and boldness to say aloud what is mulling in our hearts and heads. There may not be any doubt about loving Jesus or being loved by God. Still there can be a deep, deep need for some tangible sign of God’s presence... some concrete, touchable sign of God’s goodness and power to reassure us that God is with us, that God’s love *is* more powerful than the struggles with our health or in our world. There are days, there are times, for even the most devout, when our hearts cry out, “Show me, Jesus. I need to see you. I need to touch you.”

Our Lord understands that. Jesus came, stood among the disciples, offered them peace and offered his hands and side, even to Thomas. There was no scolding or withdrawal of love. The Lord offered the reassurance Thomas and all the disciples had needed. Jesus was not interested in generating guilt or shame. He was interested in fortifying this beloved follower, Thomas, so he could live in the fullness of his gifts and mission. Jesus was interested in restoring him into the community, so he, too, could receive the peace, power and purpose Jesus bestowed with his words and the breath of the Holy Spirit. “Jesus was born, lived, and died so we could have a tangible sign of God’s love. He appeared again to disciples and then to Thomas, so they would have tangible evidence that he arose....God understands our need for that which is tangible, [able to be seen or touched].¹ God sent Jesus.... and still does, so we can be blessed, believe and bear Jesus to others.

Linda Hilliard learned this early in her ministry as a hospital chaplain. She visited a woman who was struggling with a serious illness. When asked how she was coping, the women told Hilliard about all the special people who surrounded her with love and attended to her needs. She said, “All these people are like God for me, with skin. I see

them look at me with compassion. I feel their arms around me in a gentle yet strong embrace, assuring me I'm not alone. The touch of another person holding my hand or stroking my forehead gives me hope. People are for me like God with skin."²

Rev. Dr. Rob Nash, a Baptist Global Mission Coordinator, sent to lead worship at First Church in a Southern rural county seat town. As he drove into town, he nearly ran off the road when he saw a sign just in front of a little brick ranch home that said "Laotian Buddhist Temple." This was *not* a part of the country you'd imagine seeing a Buddhist temple. He scratched his head in wonder and amazement and drove on up to the church.

When he went into the pulpit, Pastor Nash, said to the congregation, "I notice you have a Buddhist temple here in town. I'm assuming you folks have been out to the temple to welcome the Buddhists to your community." The congregation just stared at him, and an uncomfortable silence filled the sanctuary. He decided to push on. "Well," he said, "I tell you what I'm gonna do. On my way home this afternoon, I'm going to pull up to the temple and meet the monks and tell them that the First Church is going to be coming out to see them and to welcome them to town." He saw a few nods around the church that seemed to give him some license to fulfill this crazy mission.

After church, the pastor made his way to the temple, knocked on the door, shared a Coke with the monks in front of the image of the Buddha, and told them about the people of the First Church. The next Sunday morning he crawled back up into the pulpit and reported on his success. He said, "The Buddhists are so excited that you folks are coming to see them."

At the end of his sermon, the women of that congregation met him down front and asked how they ought to approach this significant task. He noticed no men were among their number, so he said, "Just get your husbands to bake up a batch of chocolate chip cookies and take those out to the temple and give them to the monks as a welcoming gift." Those women did just that, well, except for the part where the husbands made the chocolate chip cookies. When Pastor Nash visited the congregation several months later,

they reported they now viewed the monks as friends and not as strangers when they saw them on Main Street downtown. Those women were God with skin and chocolate chip cookies.³

“Peace be with you.” “Receive the Holy Spirit.” “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus gives his followers the peace, power and purpose so others may experience **God with skin** — whether they are a hospitalized woman or Buddhist monks. When people bought needed items, packed food baskets and got them to those who needed them the week before Easter, the **Lord had skin** and stood before families saying, “Peace be with you.” When a guest or a member you do not know comes among us and you make a point of introducing yourself and letting them know you are delighted to worship with them, **our Lord has skin**. When you call someone who didn’t make it to church to see how they are... when you check in on someone who has experienced a loss or illness... when you reach out a hand or offer a hug when someone’s eyes begin to tear, **you are Jesus with skin** saying, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” (John 20:27) As Haven Lutheran Church strives to do the ministry and mission needed in our community.... as we seek to invited others to live in the power and love of God, **we are giving God skin**, we are making it possible for those who have not seen, to believe in God made flesh - Jesus the Christ --- who bring us life full of meaning, hope and truth out of pure love.

We *have* seen the Lord, no doubt. Each week we pass the same “peace’ proclaimed to his disciples. We receive and touch the very presence of Jesus in Holy Communion. We are dispatched to carry on Jesus’ saving mission, “Go in peace. Serve the Lord!” And we answer, “We will! Thanks be to God!” We cannot stay behind locked doors. We have seen the Lord who says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Our friends, our family, our community and world need to see the Lord, too. Keep your eyes open for the Lord made flesh among us and take heart. Keep your eyes open for

opportunities to be the Lord in skin and rejoice, as you get ready. "The Lord is Risen!

Alleluia!" **(He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!)**

Linda M. Alessandri

ENDNOTES

1. Linda J. Hilliard, "Second Sunday of Easter: Pastoral Implications," Lectionary Homiletics, April 2001, p.26.

2. Hilliard, pp 26-27

3. Rev. Dr. Rob Nash, "On Chocolate Chip Cookies and Dirty Water and Being Church in a Shrinking World," May 25, 2008 posted on www.day1.org