



Sunday April 11, 2021
John 20:19-31 (Second Sunday of Easter)

Pastor Tony Acompanado

March Madness is my absolute favorite time of year. Now, if you don't have a clue what I'm talking about, then first of all, shame on you. Second of all, if you don't appreciate March Madness the way I do, then I'm wondering if I have to reconsider my call as your pastor! Well, for those of you who don't know, March Madness is the NCAA basketball tournament that takes place every March, and each year for as long as I can remember I've looked forward to it. The excitement of every game, buzzer beaters, upsets, brackets to fill out, games on tv's, laptops and phones, basketballs being shot around our house...I love every minute of it! And one of the things that makes it so exciting is that it's a single elimination tournament that on any given day, any team could find their journey brought to an early and unexpected end.

But as much as I get excited about March Madness, there's something else I look forward to even more around this time...and that's the celebration of Easter. But unlike the teams playing in the NCAA tournament, Easter is not a one and done event. For the next six Sundays we're invited to celebrate and rejoice in the resurrection. And we've been given these 50 days between Easter and Pentecost to focus our attention on the resurrection and all that God accomplishes through it. ***Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!***

And yet, on this day, I'm also quite aware of the daily realities we continue to face. We're living in the midst of one of the world's deadliest pandemics in history. The fear and mourning caused by senseless acts of violence occur with alarming frequency. And a week doesn't seem to go by without the disturbing news of yet another public figure being accused of some type of indiscretion or criminal behavior. And as if this wasn't enough already, each of us carry around our own personal struggles and tragedies – some we choose to share with others, and some we keep locked away out of fear or embarrassment.

The unfortunate result is that sometimes our Easter seasons are not necessarily filled with rejoicing. So, if any of you have ever felt this way before, then stay with me because today's gospel story is one I think you'll come to appreciate even more by the time we're finished.

Let me begin by saying that I've never understood why Thomas receives such harsh criticism for his doubts, because throughout my own life there have been plenty of times that I've shared in his doubts. See, I don't think Thomas was so much a doubter as he was just being human. He just watched Jesus get tortured, nailed to the cross, and die – so can you really blame him for wanting to have an *actual* encounter with the risen Jesus? Besides, he wasn't asking for any more evidence of the resurrection than any of the other disciples had already been given.

And I think what strikes me most about this story is the reality of how hard it can be to believe at times. When you read through the resurrection accounts of all four gospels, you quickly realize that Thomas is not alone in his doubt. No one – even after all the prophecies – no one says, "*Welcome back!*" or "*We knew it!*" or even, "*What took you so long?*" No one anticipates Jesus' return and when he does show up – everyone doubts. ***Everyone!***

The Gospel of John tells us that Thomas wasn't with the others on that Easter Sunday when Jesus appeared to them. And while we don't know why he wasn't there; we do know that Easter didn't happen for him when it happened for the others. They saw and heard Jesus before Thomas did; and even though they tried to convince him that Jesus had been raised from the dead; Thomas wasn't buying it. He wanted to see, and hear, and touch Jesus for himself.

Of course, a week later, Thomas got what he asked for. Jesus came to his disciples again, and this time Thomas was present, and Jesus said to him: "*Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.*"

Then Jesus said something profoundly important to Thomas that I believe he also meant for the rest of us. Jesus offers a reassuring word, especially for those of us who stand alongside Thomas in his doubt, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*"

You and I don't have the benefit of standing with Thomas and receiving the gift of seeing Jesus with our own eyes, so, if you and I are going to believe then we're going to have to do so without seeing.



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Understanding this shapes the way I hear Jesus' words to Thomas, "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" I don't think Jesus is criticizing Thomas. Instead, I think Jesus is blessing all those who struggle with doubt and still find a way to believe without the benefit of a face-to-face encounter with the risen Christ.

So, what does it mean then to live with our doubts in the light of the resurrection? Well, I think it means that as people of faith, we don't have to dismiss our doubts, but we can believe in spite of them. We don't need to have it all figured out before coming to church, or helping out a neighbor, or feeding someone who's hungry, or caring for someone in need – because if we have to figure it all out ahead of time, then we'll never even get started.

And if you're anything like me, then I wonder if you ever question whether or not your acts of compassion or generosity really make a difference? "*With so many hungry people in the world, can my help really change things? With so much hurt in the world, does the care I extend or the compassionate listening I offer really have any impact?*" I believe they do, but at times I wonder...and I doubt. And yet, as followers of the risen Christ, we can believe as well as doubt, and in the midst of this complicated believing, we can act – we can reach out, we can feed, we can care, we can struggle, we can work, and we can love – all without any guarantees, because of the promise from God who continues to bless those who believe in spite of their doubts.

My friends, being faithful isn't about not having any doubts – it's about learning to live and follow in spite of them. The question I have, and maybe you do too, is "*How?*" Because, if we're not going to see Jesus with our own eyes and hear Jesus with our own ears, then what evidence do we have to base our faith on? What are the signs of the resurrection?

Perhaps this may surprise you, but the answer is *us*. We are called to be witnesses to the resurrection – to be the evidence to the world that Jesus Christ is alive – here and now. We are God's signs to the world that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that God is victorious over sin and death.

When those first disciples finally realized that they had an unbreakable connection to Jesus -empowered with resurrection confidence, and energized by this connection, they lived with compassion, love and grace, they lived with generosity and authority, and the only reasonable explanation for their life together was the presence and power of the risen Christ.

Such joy, celebration, and excitement – such compassion, generosity and love had only one possible explanation – Jesus was with them. And because Jesus was with them, they gave themselves on behalf of the broken, bruised, and battered; they shared their lives with the least and the last. They had deep love for one another, tender compassion for their neighbors, and passionate devotion to God. Everywhere you looked, there were signs of the resurrection.

Those early disciples were vibrant reflections of the living Christ. But even though they were radiating with the presence of Jesus, they weren't perfect. They were human and flawed, and yet, in spite of themselves, they managed to reflect the presence of the living Christ.

As we gather together, break bread, tell our stories, sing our songs, pray our prayers, proclaim the good news, care for those in need, work for peace, and struggle for justice – we can discover again that Jesus is alive among us and that God's overwhelming grace is upon us.

When I'm tempted to doubt the Easter message, I'm reminded of the faithfulness of the people in this faith community I serve. When the church staff put in long hours and create meaningful ministry opportunities, it is a sign of the resurrection. When comfort is provided to those grieving the loss of someone they love, it is a sign of the resurrection.

When those who don't look or talk like us are welcomed, when fundraising campaigns are supported, when a family volunteers to clean up the yard of a neighbor, when an invitation is extended to a stranger, and when the followers of Jesus take a stand for the least of these in our community, I see signs of the resurrection.

When adult volunteers step up to mentor and pass on faith to younger generations, when students run around a grocery store with their own money to buy and donate food to the hungry in our community, when pastoral assistants make calls



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and visits to the sick and lonely, and when our prayers warriors encourage and support those who are struggling, I see evidence that Easter has happened.

When people laugh and cry together over the joys and disappointments of their lives, when death is faced honestly and hopefully, when grace and mercy, not judgment and cruelty direct our relationships, and when the church opens its heart and its doors to any and all who come longing for the love of God, I am convinced that Jesus is alive.

I see it happen, and the wonder of it all takes my breath away. Jesus embraces the world with *our arms*. Jesus speaks words of grace and mercy with *our voices*. Jesus demands justice and offers peace through *our acts* of compassion to one another. Again, and again, and again by the grace of God and through the simple and ordinary practices of kindness, patience, generosity, and forgiveness Jesus becomes real to us and we in turn reflect the love of God to a world in need. These real-life moments are the sights and sounds of the resurrected Christ – they are evidence for the truth of Easter – and they are ways for each one of us to see, to touch and to trust Jesus. ***Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!***
Thanks be to God! Amen.