

Marks of Faith

With Thomas we long to see for ourselves, that we may believe in Jesus the Christ. Thomas's story reminds us that people come to belief in different ways, that there is room for question and doubt. To disciples, then and now, Jesus gives peace, Spirit, forgiveness, faith, and power to witness. Fellowship and joy are marks of this believing community.

Focus Scripture: John 20:19–31

Mark's gospel does not contain any post-Resurrection stories, so in this Easter season the lectionary turns to the gospel of John for accounts of Jesus' appearances after the Resurrection. In this account, the disciples are huddled in fear behind locked doors. Jesus has been killed. Perhaps the religious authorities are searching for Jesus' followers. Where can they turn now?

Into their midst Jesus comes, with the familiar Sabbath greeting, "Peace be with you." They see the marks of his wounded hands and side, and rejoice. Then Jesus speaks the same words of peace again, and this greeting is now transformed forever by their encounter with the risen Christ. Jesus breathes on them, an echo of the creation story (Genesis 2:7) when God breathes life into humankind. Jesus says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." *Receive* is the same Greek word translated "take and eat" in the account of the Last Supper. Christ is now present with the disciples in a new way. "Receive my body, receive my Spirit," Jesus says to us each time we gather at the Communion table. We, with the disciples, are the Spirit-led Body of Christ.

Verse 23 raises questions about forgiveness and absolution. Jesus spoke earlier (John 16:7–11) of the work of the Spirit. The gospel now is entrusted to the community of disciples, who are commissioned to continue the work of Christ, to continue what God sent Jesus to do. The faith community is to be a people shaped by the gift of the Spirit. One of the marks of that gift is the responsibility of the community to declare God's forgiveness to one another.

Thomas is not present on this first occasion and insists that he will not believe unless he can see the marks of Jesus' wounds, reminiscent of the disciples who earlier had

not accepted Mary's verbal witness of the empty tomb. A week later (already the disciples have begun the custom of gathering on the day of resurrection), Thomas is there when Jesus comes into their gathering. Jesus invites Thomas to touch him, but Thomas has no need of such proof. He declares that Jesus is "my Lord and my God."

Christians today can take comfort from Thomas – it is all right for us to hesitate and wonder. We come to belief in different ways. The root of the Latin *credo* (I believe) is *cor* (heart.) Belief is more than intellectual assent; a person who believes gives one's whole self to something. Thomas did just that.

John says that he has written this gospel so that others may come to believe. Telling the story in many ways brings the gospel message to others. Acts 4:32–35 describes the life of the first Christians, sharing possessions and witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus the Christ, changing the world around them.

1 John 1:1–2:2 continues the theme of witness. Those who were present at the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection proclaim what they have seen so that all who believe may be drawn into the community of Christ's followers, living in God's forgiveness. Psalm 133 celebrates the joy when all people can live together in unity.

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Jesus breathes the Spirit into his followers to enliven and transform for mission. We rejoice in these gifts. Like Thomas, we continue to seek God even when we do not fully understand. What do you need in order to believe, for your confession of Christ to be your own? How might you and your church welcome others who bring their wonderings about Christ to you?

April 19, 2009

Focus Scripture
John 20:19–31

Additional Scriptures
Acts 4:32–35
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1–2:2

**Risen Christ,
breathe upon us
your spirit of new
life. Where we
cannot see, help us
to keep our minds
open toward faith.
Strengthen us as
we seek to know
you, and help us to
grow in love
for you and for
each other.
Amen.**

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

