

Second Sunday after Easter, April 3, 2016  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
John 20:19-31

### Written Down

In preparation for today's sermon I went through the pockets of my coats. I thought that in light of today's gospel, for today's sermon I should have a visual aid, something that you could see, and even touch. I went through the pockets of my coats and I found an assortment of papers with lists on them. Most of them are grocery lists. You can see them, and touch them, if you like, if you don't believe me.

The disciple Thomas wanted to see, and touch, to believe. Thomas says he needs this, because he was not there when the risen Jesus appeared to all the other disciples. We hear this story about Thomas every year on the second Sunday of Easter; it's always the gospel story appointed for this Sunday. Because it appears so regularly, and because the disciple Thomas has acquired something of a reputation because of it, you might think that this story appears in more than one gospel, but it's only in this gospel, the gospel according to John, here near the very end, this story about Thomas, who wasn't there when the risen Jesus first appeared to the disciples.

I wonder where Thomas was? Why wasn't he there, with all the other disciples? Maybe they sent Thomas out to get something. Maybe they told him to run to the grocery store. "Pick up another jug of wine!" they said, "The good stuff this time. And get some variety, some that is red, some that is white." "And I could go for some food, too, get some bread!" "Hold on," said Thomas, "How am I going to remember all these things? Give me a minute to write it all down."

Maybe that's what happened when the disciples got together, after Jesus died, maybe they realized how very hungry they were, how very empty. Or maybe they weren't so much hungry as thirsty, maybe they felt like the only thing they could do was drown their sorrows. There wasn't enough wine for that. All this is conjecture, of course, completely extra-biblical. We don't know what the disciples were doing as they met together, just after Jesus died—what we do know, the thing that the Bible does tell us, the thing that has been written down for us, is that they were scared.

They were scared because just a few days ago they had seen Jesus being arrested, and tortured, and publically executed. They had seen all that happen to Jesus, and as if watching that happen wasn't enough to scare them, they feared that what happened to Jesus would happen to them. People had seen the disciples together with Jesus. People had seen the way the disciples looked to Jesus, looked to him for leadership and direction. People had seen the way the disciples looked at Jesus, looked at him with wonder and hope. People had seen the disciples touching Jesus, clasping his shoulder in gestures of joy, shaking his hand in greetings of shalom, peace. People saw the disciples passing out the loaves of bread that Jesus had touched, that Jesus had blessed and broken and fed to thousands. People saw the disciples touching what Jesus touched: people who were hungry, sorrowing, people who were hopeless. The disciples were Jesus' known associates, and now Jesus was gone, killed, and then gone—gone from the tomb. How did that happen? Plenty to be scared about.

And then Jesus appears to them, and says, "Peace." The risen Jesus appears before the disciples, who were so very scared. Seeing him, receiving the touch of his breath, they felt more wondrously hopeful than they ever had before. They rejoiced, the disciple who were there rejoiced, and they told Thomas all about it, when he returned with all the things they told him to

get and even some things he hadn't written down, extra treats he picked up, hoping it would cheer them up. He returned and they told him this incredible news. So incredible that Thomas doesn't believe it. And who can blame him? Thomas is being imminently reasonable, practically focusing on the concrete and measurable.

Now there's a sermon that could be preached about that, about this focus on evidence, assessment, there's a sermon that could ponder its limitations, a sermon that could take Thomas to task—Thomas not being unique in this but serving as a prototype—a sermon that could take Thomas to task for being tied to the tangible, to touching, tracking, ascertaining—and is that what believing is?

But that sermon makes Thomas the one who doesn't get it right. And I am struck by the fact that Thomas does get it right—at least by the end of the story. At the end, Thomas gets it so very right when he makes the most profound confession in the entire gospel of John: “My Lord and my God!” Thomas says. No one else says that in this gospel. Thomas gets it right, because God consents to Thomas's visual and sensory nature. Thomas does get it right—but only because God decides to be seen and touched. Thomas gets it right, because God deigns to appear. God does this for Thomas, God does this in dramatic fashion and as if on demand. But we should also note that God has been doing this, ever since he was born. Ever since putting on human flesh, God has been saying, in Jesus God is saying, “I know that it helps to have something that you can see, and touch.” Appearing in Jesus, God says, “Here, let me help you. Believe.”

And so, and so on, ever since Jesus walked on earth, his followers, his disciples, Christians have been doing things that you can see and touch, because these are the ways we will see and touch Jesus. These tangible things include breaking bread and drinking wine and sharing peace. Jesus says do this, and I'll appear. And Jesus says that we'll see and touch him when we do things like give food to people who are hungry, and put an arm around someone who is sorrowing, and visit someone who is locked up in fear. These are the ways that you will see me, and touch me, Jesus says. People remembered that Jesus said that, and wrote it down.

That's yet another reason that I brought in my grocery lists, not that you need to see them to believe that I have them. If you've seen my desk, or sat next to me in a meeting, or asked me a question during coffee hour you know that I'm worse than Thomas about needing to write things down. It helps a thing become real to me, when I write it down. It helps me remember it, act on it, get it, do it. That's why Jesus' disciples wrote these stories down, on papers, on different lists, that eventually became something called gospel. There's a lot of similarities in the gospels, like the similarities in my grocery lists: all which say milk, fruit, pasta. But there are differences, too, depending on the week and the meals, different emphases for different contexts and events. So also with the gospels, each have their own distinct aspects—like this story about Thomas, which is only in John's gospel, near the very end. It's been written down here, the gospel explains, so that Jesus may appear to you, so that you may believe.

But that's not it, the end of John's gospel says, there are many other stories, too, appearances that didn't get included. What other stories are there? How else did Jesus appear? This gospel ends without telling us, because those other stories, they are still being written. Those others stories, those are ours to tell.