Sermon **Acts 5.27-32**
April 28, 2019 **Psalm 118.14-29**
Easter 2C (7:45 only) **Revelation 4.1-1**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **John 20.19-31**

You all probably know that most biblical authorities concede that John was the last of the Gospels to be written. Exactly when it was written is debatable, but, again, most scholars date it somewhere around the turn of the first century—two, three, or maybe even four generations after Jesus' life, death and resurrection. And one of the most renowned of the scholars who have focused on John's Gospel believes that it represents the theology of a community that centered around that "beloved disciple" who leaned his head on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper. In other words, John's Gospel is the product of a community calling to mind events and details of a life that had taken place almost eighty years earlier.

Imagine yourself in that community, gathered for worship some Sunday—as for us, that seems to be when they came together. Look around. What do you see? What don't you see? First and foremost, you probably don't see any of the eyewitnesses of the events recorded in John's Gospel; after sixty to eighty years, they were probably dead. In other words, the testimony of those closest to Jesus is missing; all the evidence that is left now is second-hand and hearsay. You are reliant upon the stories and remembered sayings that your community has held dear. On the basis of these you have come and remain Christian.

Then, one day, a member of your community—someone who hasn't been around much lately—returns and says, "You know? I've got some doubts about all of this resurrection stuff. I need some hard proof; all you've given me is some stories. In fact, none of you were even there! Where's the evidence?" What would you say to your friend? Would you tell him more stories? Perhaps marshall your forces and three of four people to tell the same story, you know, independent witnesses? Perhaps some expert testimony: "Well, I've personally examined the cloth in which I believe Jesus was buried (we keep it locked up over here). And I've concluded that, given the stains on the cloth, and the other markings, that Jesus had to have been resurrected out of this cloth. Convinced now?" And your friend says, "No."

Witness after witness (thought none are eyewitnesses) jump up to give their piece of "evidence:" "I knew a woman whose father tasted the wine that was once

water." "My uncle's son's sister-in-law's father served under one of the tomb guards!" "I have a fish-bone from that last breakfast on the beach!" "Look at the other gospels; they tell the same story! It must be true!" To all of which your friend replies, "So what! Were you there!" By this time, everyone in the room has spoken except you. The doubter looks at you, eyes boring through to your soul, and says"Well, what do you have to say?" And you think . . . . . And you think . . . "Darn, that's a good question! What do I have to say? All of those 'So what's?' raise some pretty good issues!"

Well, I imagine that that kind of scenarios has been played out a lot through the centuries since that day when the last of the eyewitnesses died. And, I know it gets played out in classrooms, coffee shops and other "upper rooms". It even appears in clergy's offices! We all seem to want proof; we want certainty. And, for some post-Enlightenment reason, that "proof" has to be scientifically verifiable. Because of our desire for "objective" proof, evangelical author Josh McDowell (and others like him) have made bundles of money with books such as *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. And their project is not new. The problem is, however, that if you want to believe Josh, you will. If you don't, you won't; there are always ways to cast doubt on his findings or to question his underlying assumptions. If that weren't the case, then every rational person since Jesus' time would believe, just like every rational person since the 16th century believes that the world is not flat.

Well, Thomas seems to have been rational And he doubted. And, from my reading of John's Gospel, he was not alone; he just has the distinction of being the only doubter mentioned by name. Let's look back at the Gospel lesson. The disciples were meeting behind locked doors out of fear. Jesus appears and says, "Peace be with you." Then he shows them the wounds of the crucifixion. Only after this do the disciples rejoice when they recognize the Lord It's the same pattern with Thomas; the only exception is that the others had told him of Jesus' re-appearance. In other words, it wasn't until Jesus appeared to the disciples that any of them believed. That first Thomas—like many of us Thomases—needed something more than hearsay; he needed a personal encounter with the risen Lord. He needs his own inner sense of God's presence and peace.

When we sense our inner voice, however, we tend to distrust it; we have been taught to be skeptical of anything we can't see or touch or hear. We have been taught to distrust anything that we can't know with certainty, that cannot be proved. But that is not biblical teaching; Jesus didn't promise proof, at least not in

John's Gospel. In his last conversation with his disciples, Jesus tells them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives." He did not say, "Proof I leave with you so that you can know as the world knows." "Peace be with you" was the wounded-but-risen Jesus' address to his disciples and to Thomas. And then they knew. Then they believed.

Imagine yourself again back in that second-century Sunday gathering. You are sequestered away out of fear of those who do not accept your experience., just as the disciples were locked in their house out of fear of the Jewish authorities. And, somehow, in that fearful doubtful community, the certainty that the wounded Jesus is there is almost palpable. You look around the room, past the doubter, past all of those who have tried their best to "prove" the resurrection. You look past all of them and there are the wounds, in the midst of the fear. You listen past all of them and you hear, "Peace be with you." You see the caring deeds and hear the words of love and encouragement that come from your friends. And you know beyond a shadow of a bout that it is true.

I cannot prove to you—using good scientific criteria—that there is a God, or that Jesus' resurrection is true. I cannot dispel Thomas', or your, doubts. I can assure you (although it probably will not bring much comfort) that those doubts will always be there. Certainty to doubt to certainty; it will be a never-ending cycle.

I can tell you that its is true for me, but not because I can look at a shroud, or pile textual evidence upon textual evidence. It is true for me because in the midst of communities like this, at altars like this, I feel—as irrational as that is—I feel the presence of the risen Lord. In my pain, I see his healing wounds in you, and I see that life goes on. In my distress, I hear his words of peace from you, and I know that life goes on. In the fearful, doubtful, locked rooms of my heart, Jesus appears and says, "Peace be with you" and I know it makes sense. I'm not sure why; I just know it makes sense. Indeed, sometimes it is the only thing that truly makes sense.

Amen.