Acts 5:27-32

Psalm 118:14-29

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (response…)

On that first evening after Jesus was raised from the dead, the day that we call Easter, he appeared to the disciples who were gathered behind locked doors “out of fear,” and Thomas wasn’t with them. Does that mean that Thomas was fearless? Was he out in the town gathering supplies or trying to find out what the tone of the mob was now or perhaps proclaiming the Good News? We don’t know. All we know from today’s Gospel story is that Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them.

Let’s jump forward with the Gospel narrative to the following Sunday. Again we find the disciples in the same house, still behind closed doors, but now Thomas was with them. Jesus appears again and says, “Peace be with you.” Why do you suppose he said that rather than just a simple hello? Was it because Jesus sensed the fear and uncertainty among those gathered behind the closed doors. Did he perceive that they had already forgotten that at his earlier appearance he had breathed on them and given them the holy spirit? Had they forgotten that Jesus had commissioned them to be out among the people forgiving sins? Again, we can only guess. What we do know is that Jesus appears to the disciples and says “peace.”

Did Jesus know that Thomas was not at peace, that he was questioning the reality of Jesus’ resurrection, the possibility that Jesus had appeared to folks over the past week? Perhaps Jesus understood that Thomas’ doubts were part and parcel of who he was. He had to have a tangible object, something he could see, something he could grab hold of. Thomas wanted to be sure that this Jesus he thought he was seeing really was the Jesus that he knew, the Jesus that he had been following, the Jesus he believed to have died on the cross just one week ago. Jesus invited Thomas to look closely, to touch him in a most intimate way, to believe. Can you hear the compassion in Jesus’ invitation, the lack of judgment, the love? Now, as to whether Thomas actually touched Jesus or not, we don’t know. But we do know that Thomas’ encounter with Jesus that night, resulted in one of the most profound professions of faith that can be found anywhere in the Gospels: “my Lord and my God.”

Today’s reading from the good news according to John, calls each of us to move beyond Thomas’ stance of seeing is believing. We are called to believe in the risen Christ because of the stories we hear in the scriptures, because of the witness of all of those who have gone before us in faith, and because of the witness of those around us today, who tell us about how Jesus has changed their lives, how Jesus has brought them peace when they were in turmoil, how Jesus has shown them his love when they were despairing. Yes, we are called to believe on the testimony of others. And if we believe, we must act. We believers must be the ones who proclaim that Jesus is risen. We are the ones who must tell others that Jesus is here. We are the ones who must declare that not only is Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ….but that he also is our Lord and our God. Some of us will do this from pulpits, or out on the street corners. Some will give witness by service to others or by self-sacrifice for the good of the community. Others will demonstrate Jesus’ presence by a kind word to a stranger or by offering peace to someone who is afraid or anxious. It is not so important exactly how we live our faith, be it by preaching or by service or by a calming presence. But it is vitally important that our lives actually do reflect the fact that we do believe.

In the ancient church, this period between Easter and Pentecost was a time for the newly baptized to reflect upon how water brings new birth, how the bread and the wine made holy become food for the journey, how the anointing with the Holy Spirit empowers one to proclaim by word, and especially by example, the good news of God in Christ. These newly baptized Christians had already learned what it meant to be a follower of Jesus: to pray, to give alms, to forgive. But now they were being asked to go deeper and to see how these outer actions were truly a reflection of their inner beliefs. And here we are, some 20 centuries later, still engaged in this process of remembering, reflecting, responding. During these 50 days between Easter and Pentecost, we are invited to delve more deeply into what it means to proclaim: “Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.” Our scripture readings during this Easter season provide us an opportunity to open ourselves more fully to the presence of the risen Lord in our midst, to conform our lives more closely to his, to truly become Christ to one another. We hear the stories of our ancestors in the faith, so that we might come to recognize Jesus in our midst just as they recognized him in the sharing of a meal, or on the road to Emmaus, or in that room behind closed doors.

While we are called to believe because of the testimony of others, we are also called to believe because of our own experiences. When was the last time you recognized Jesus in your midst? Was it during Holy Week? On Easter Sunday when the Alleluias broke forth? Or perhaps in that chance encounter this past week with a stranger on the sidewalk, or with your neighbor in the grocery store, or when eating a meal with a member of your family? We may have seen Jesus in the storm or in the fire or in the gentle breeze. We may have experienced Jesus’ presence in the words of a loved one, the embrace of a friend, or the smile of a stranger. Yet who of us knows when or how Jesus will show himself to us next? So, may our eyes and ears always be open. May our minds and instincts always be attentive. May our hearts and hands always be outstretched. Alleluia. Christ is risen. (response)