

*Kate's message from the Second Sunday of Easter reminds us that this holy day is never really over. In the community of faith, resurrection continues as long as we live the way of Jesus. Based on John 20:19-31, the sermon is called "A Real Life Encounter."*

In the tradition of the church, the Second Sunday of Easter has often been called "Low Sunday." The big blow-out was last week! After a long and challenging Lent, Easter exploded in all of its sounds and colors. Amid cries of "Christ is risen!", the bells played, the choir sang, the water splashed, and I had a great time with the annual Easter basket! The First Sunday of Easter is one great extended "**Alleluia!**"

But after the celebration of unbridled joy, we come today to John's gospel, and we find the disciples still in **fear**, locked behind closed doors. It isn't that they hadn't heard the news. Mary Magdalene herself had already told them that she had seen the Lord! And Peter and John surely told the rest about the empty tomb and the empty linens lying within. But clearly, **hearing** wasn't believing for them...they had yet to have their Easter encounter.

If we read the text carefully, we see that the same scenario is played out twice here. First, with the fearful disciples who are gathered together without Thomas. Jesus enters the room, offers them peace, shows them his hands and his side so that they have no doubt it is truly him. They have an Easter encounter, and rejoice. Then a week later with Thomas present, Jesus again stands among them, offering peace, and an opportunity for Thomas to inspect his wounds. Thomas reacts with a powerful statement of faith – "My Lord and my God." He has his Easter experience and is ready for rejoicing.

This should never have been called "low Sunday." Easter is a **full fifty days** for a reason. The resurrection was **not just one moment** in time, but it is an ongoing event comprised of **real life encounters** with the Risen Christ. We will hear about some of them in the days to come. And as we hear, we will learn that this is not just about the man of Nazareth resuscitated from death. For, first of all, resurrection is **not** about the resuscitation of a body, if it was, we might be celebrating Lazarus today. And secondly, resurrection is **not solely about Jesus**.

In his book *The Living Gospel*, distinguished New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes this: "The resurrection was not so much about Jesus as it was about his followers. It was not an event in his history so much as it was an event in theirs. The recognition of his new status as Son of God was immediately connected to the recognition that the power of transformation experienced in community had its origin in him." Resurrection was experienced as **transformation of community**, not resuscitation of a corpse. This transformation had its basis in the ongoing presence of Jesus, a very real, but ultimately mysterious presence experienced after his death. Johnson continues, "*This* was the experience powerful enough to draw the disillusioned and disaffected followers of Jesus into a restored people. *This* was the experience that expressed itself in varieties of gifts that upbuilt and nurtured the assembled people. *This is* the experience that radiated across the Mediterranean world – in an astonishing proliferation of communities..."

Note the change in verb tense here. The point is made that the Resurrection event described in today's gospel, experienced by the disciples, moving them from fear to rejoicing, then experienced by Thomas moving him from skepticism to faith, is not stuck in the past, but continues to occur in the present. It continues to restore the disillusioned and disaffected, it continues to draw out the variety of gifts that build up the assembly, it continues to radiate in an astonishing renewal of faith communities as they reach out to a world in need of new life.

Easter is **never really over**. The powerful and palpable presence of the Risen Christ cannot be contained, either in a tomb or in a moment in time. After all, **living the resurrected life** is what it means to

be Christian. It is a life of constant movement from fear to rejoicing, from skepticism to faith. It is an ongoing embrace of life more fully and fully lived in self-giving love, the way of Christ. Often this embrace leads to pain as well as rejoicing, to challenge as well as comfort, sometimes even to death. But pain and death, doubt and fear, these never have the last word. How do we know this? The faith community models it for us, right here in our midst.

Last week I was very moved by Joel's sermon which recounted his journey of transformation from Ash Wednesday through Lent to Easter. I am married to him, he is my intimate partner, but I know that that journey was made possible not by me, but by this **entire** community of faith learning and living the way and practices of Jesus. These kinds of transformations are going on **all the time** in this community. Those who engage with their hearts are living the resurrection. Fears are named and overcome, doubts are spoken and eased, grief is shared, forgiveness is offered, tragedy is met and gently held, unlikely friendships are formed, bold promises are made, service is joyfully undertaken, illness is ministered to and healed, brokenness is faced and made whole, strengths are claimed, false selves are left behind, true selves take hold, and death, of all kinds, becomes a doorway to life. These things **don't just happen** in our ever more hectic and self-centered society. They **do** happen in a community that is committed to following the way of Christ together.

Our real life encounters with the Risen One happen right here. And just as Thomas showed up a week later, the Second Sunday of Easter, to join his community of faith, that is also where it begins for us – showing up where we patiently and steadily learn and follow the way of Christ. The way is not complicated. Not always easy, but not complicated. Jesus enters the room and the first thing he does is offer his disciples peace. The offering of peace to one another in the spirit of Christ is one of the most ancient practices of our faith, going way back to the earliest disciples who were committed to building up this new family of theirs, based not on blood relations or station, but on an experience of Christ in their midst. Their earliest gatherings did not take place in neatly lined up pews, but around tables, sitting on the floor, standing in the corners. They became one body as peace was offered between and among them. The body itself was an astonishing mix of difference and gifts, temperament and background, economic status and station. The passing of peace was **more** than a gesture. It was a practice of raising up a new and resilient body of Christ. A practice of resurrection. When we offer peace to one another, we are raising up this body in the spirit of Christ.

Then, in the gospel, Jesus reveals his wounds to those gathered. This is also an ancient practice of Christian community, revealing wounds, revealing limitations, revealing suffering, revealing the wages of sin. It has become known as the practice of **confession**, leading to the practice of **forgiveness**, of ourselves and one another. The wounded Jesus offered forgiveness freely for what sin had done to him, and passes this practice on to us for the care of the communal body.

Finally, for now, the practice that Jesus most directly and surely passed on is the sharing of the supper, the meal together. I can tell you, my most powerful encounters with the Risen Christ have come in the midst of the celebration of Holy Communion when I have felt myself being knit into a wide web of life, exuberant life, simply by sharing this simple meal. It is this experience that really called me into this vocation, not so much to preach as to gather people around this table. And it is this experience that continues to move me from fear to rejoicing, from skepticism to faith, from self-centeredness to love. Open your heart to what happens here...an encounter with resurrection awaits.

So, no low Sundays for me, or for this church community. As long as we practice the way of Jesus, as long as we gather into this unlikely assembly, as long as peace and forgiveness is offered, bread is broken and the cup is poured, resurrection continues to transform us into a restored, resilient, gifted, astonishing, **always rising** Body of Christ. Amen.