

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta

“Jesus Personally and Individually Seeks Out You” (John 20:24-29)

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In today’s gospel passage John tells us that on the evening of the day Jesus was raised from the dead he appeared to the disciples with words of love, “Peace be with you” and with a gift of love as breathed on them: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:19-22). But one of the disciples was not there that evening, a disciple Jesus loved just as much as the other disciples, a disciple who loved Jesus so much he was willing to die for him as he declared to his fellow disciples when Jesus’ life was being threatened, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16).

That disciple, as you know, was Thomas. When his fellow disciples exclaimed to him, “We have seen the Lord” Thomas was dismissive: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (John 20:24-25).

But when Thomas was not there at Jesus’ first resurrection appearance to his disciples, Jesus did not say, “Oh well. 90% of life is showing up and Thomas couldn’t even show up, so I guess he’ll miss out.” Jesus would never do that to Thomas, and by the way he also would never do that to you. Instead, John recounts what Jesus did:

A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:26-29).

Jesus did not write off Thomas, he personally and individually sought him out. We see this over and over again in the Gospel According to John, as Jesus personally and individually seeks out those who need his unconditional love.

In the fourth chapter of the Gospel According to John Jesus seeks out a lonely Samaritan woman at a well, a woman whose personal life was a train wreck. I imagine she went to the well in the middle of the day instead of in the morning and evening like all the other women in town because she had grown weary of their finger wagging at her, weary of their whispering and gossiping about her. Did Jesus say, “Well, I’ll go to the well later—I don’t want to tarnish my reputation by being seen with her”? No—Jesus sought her out, and reassured her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14).

Then later in the conversation she told Jesus, “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us” and Jesus replied, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (John 4:25-26). Jesus personally and individually sought her out and in doing so assured her of his love.

In the ninth chapter of the Gospel According to John Jesus heals a man who had been blind his entire life, a blind man who had been dismissed his entire life even from birth because one of the leading causes of infant blindness was venereal disease so he had spent his whole life being judged instead of loved. But Jesus did not judge this blind man; he loved him. When his disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus responded, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (John 9:2-3). After he had been healed by Jesus and was seeing things all around him for the very first time—things he had heard and felt and smelled and tasted but never seen—he was driven away by the Pharisees.

And what did Jesus do? Did he say, “I already healed him of his lifetime of blindness, what does he want now? I have other people to see and other things to do”? No—as John tells us, “Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’” The healed man cried out, “Lord, I believe” and “worshipped him” (John 9:35-38). Even after healing him of his blindness, Jesus personally and individually sought him out and in doing so assured him of his love.

In the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel According to John the Risen Jesus did so again, this time with Peter. Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry Peter had a primary role among the disciples. Along with James and John, only Peter was there when Jesus healed Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:35-43), only Peter was there when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain (Matthew 17:1-8), and only Peter was there in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-37). When Jesus walked on the water to the disciples whose lives were threatened by a wicked storm, only Peter had the courage to step out on the boat and walk on water toward Jesus (Matthew 14:22-33). When Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" only Peter correctly responded, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:15-16). Peter proclaimed to Jesus at the Last Supper, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you...Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you"—and yet, as you know, Peter did both deserted Jesus and denied him. And Peter was most likely overflowing with regret and remorse and self-hatred.

Even then did Jesus say, "I told Peter he would deny me. He was always so cocky. Maybe he'll learn his lesson this time"? No—the Risen Jesus welcomed Peter to a breakfast he had made for him and invited him, "Come and have breakfast." Jesus knew that regret and remorse and self-hatred can work up quite an appetite. And Jesus did not stop there, for after breakfast he asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" thus giving Peter, after denying Jesus three times, three opportunities to reaffirm and declare his love for his Lord. Moreover, Jesus instructed Peter three times, "Feed my sheep"—fully restoring him in front of the other disciples. Although Peter had given up on himself and maybe his fellow disciples had also given up on him, Jesus never gave up on Peter. Jesus personally and individually sought Peter out and in doing so assured him of his love (John 21:4-17).

And circling back to today's passage that is exactly what Jesus did for Thomas. When Thomas dismissed Jesus' resurrection Jesus did not appear to him to argue with him with erudite rational explanations about the validity of his resurrection; Jesus did not rebuke him for his unbelief, citing miracle and miracle that Thomas had personally witnessed; and Jesus did not excommunicate him. Instead, Jesus pointed to his scars, the scars that give very real evidence of his very real love for Thomas and for the world, and it was then that Thomas responded with belief and worship, "My Lord and my God!"

And then Jesus told Thomas the other disciples, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

The physical resurrection of Jesus has always been central to the Christian faith, for as Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:17-21).

Or as we read in the Thirty-nine Articles in *The Book of Common Prayer*:

Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of human nature; wherewith he ascended into heaven and there sitteth, until he return to judge all at the last day (868).

And yet when it comes to Jesus’ resurrection, while there are those who believe—always have and always will—there are also those who want to believe but also struggle with doubt, perhaps echoing the father of a demon possessed boy whom Jesus healed, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)—and of course there are those like Thomas initially had been, who dismiss Jesus’ resurrection as a myth or crazy story and demand tangible proof.

The good news of the gospel is that regardless of what you think or believe about Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus’ love for you is greater than your belief or unbelief—and Jesus’ love for you is even greater than your doubt. Yes, Jesus died for you and yes, from the dead was raised from the dead for you.

The same Jesus who personally and individually sought out the woman at the well, personally and individually sought out the healed blind man, personally and individually sought out Peter, and personally and individually sought out Thomas—personally and individually seeks out you today, even now...to reassure you that you are indeed loved by God more than you could ever imagine.

Amen.