

In the Upper Room

John 11:1-16; 19:38-42; 20:1-16, 24-29 (Easter)

Our first reading today comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 11, verses 1-16.

***11** Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' ⁸The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' ⁹Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' ¹¹After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' ¹²The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

Everyone is strong in some ways and crippled in others. I have always thought that I was crippled in my faith. I simply don't believe easily. Everyone else in my family, even my twin brother, can believe what they're supposed to believe, apparently without effort. Not me. Every time a man comes to our little Galilean town claiming to be a prophet – "Thus says the Lord!" – everyone else hangs on his words. I say, "Prove it!"

It's a curse. As far as I can see, people are happier when they believe stuff. If you can believe that there really is an invisible God somewhere, who sends prophets with divine messages and magicians with impossible signs, then no matter how bad things get, you can always believe that they can be fixed. Me? I wonder, if it's that easy to fix everything, why doesn't God just do it? Sometimes I wish I *could* just believe. Sometimes. But I need to see something solid before I accept it. Air dreams and happy thoughts aren't enough for me.

So I have no idea why Jesus picked me. "Thomas. Yes, you. Follow me." Here was another of those wandering prophet-slash-magicians that I didn't believe, but this one picked me. I said, "I think you've got the wrong man, sir. I'm not a man of faith."

"What do you think faith is?" he asked.

"That's the thing, sir. I have no idea."

"Then come and see."

That's why I followed him. It was those words, "Come and see." *That's* how I think – I believe what I can see. So I followed him and saw. I saw amazing things. I don't mean just the magic: the healings and all that. I mean, yes. I now believe that people can be healed with a word, because I've seen it happen. But mostly I saw Jesus. I saw the way he looked at people, even the filthiest of us, with love. I saw him look at me and into me and through me and still love me. So I stayed. And when he announced that he was going down to Jerusalem, into the mouth of the lion, where he was sure to be arrested, just because his friend Lazarus needed him, I was the one who said, "If you're set on going, I'll go die with you." I may have a crippled faith, but I won't desert a friend.

We spent a week in Jerusalem, and all the time there I'm still trying to figure out what happened with Lazarus. Was he really dead for three days and then brought back to life or maybe, you know, just sleeping really hard while his body healed? Meanwhile, Jesus hung out in the temple courts, but that was all right. Surrounded by adoring crowds, he was safe, I thought.

The fifth day of the week was Passover, and Jesus sent some of us to this Upper Room he apparently knew about to prepare for the meal. The lady who lived downstairs helped us clean and set the table, and we gathered there. While we ate, several of the others began talking about the next steps for the movement, and what great things they were going to do. Jesus was not in the mood for that. "What great things?" he snapped. "You'll all desert me. One of you will betray me." We all said no we wouldn't. Peter said he'd never do that, and Jesus said, "By cock crow tomorrow, you'll deny you even know me."

Then he took the bread and said, "See this bread? This is my body, which I am about to give for you." Then he broke it. We were silent, and he said, "Remember me, broken, when you eat this bread." Then he took one of the cups of wine and held it up. "See this cup? You think of it as a reminder of God's covenant with Israel at Passover. After today, it's more than that. It's a reminder of the new covenant, one that isn't based on laws that you keep but rather on promises that God will keep. And this new covenant won't be sealed with lamb's blood, but mine. Remember me when you drink it."

I didn't see what happened the next day. Remember how I had been all "I will die with you, Jesus!?" Well, I lied. When the soldiers came to the garden that night after dinner, I ran away with everyone else. Just as Jesus had said. One of us betrayed him – that was Judas. And Peter denied he knew him. And I hid under a bed and cried.

The women, the only ones who stayed near him, told me what happened, though. He was tried by the Jewish leaders, then taken to Pilate. The crowds turned against him. The soldiers beat him. They made fun of him. Then they took him out and crucified him. Joanna swears she heard him pray for God to forgive his killers. Then he died.

Our next reading comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 19, verses 38-42.

³⁸After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he

was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Pastoral Prayer

You, Jesus. You who suffered. You who endured mocking. You who got hung on a cross.
We're dying down here, too.
By war, hunger, disease, cruelty, cancer, poverty, neglect, abuse.
On battlefields, in refugee camps, on city streets, and in schoolrooms. We're dying.
We have remembered you this morning.
Remember us, too.
Remember children who are separated from their parents.
Remember seniors who are dying alone.
Remember those who have been wounded by others,
Who want to pray, but don't know how
Who want to believe you care, but can't be sure.
If you really did overcome death one time,
Do it again. Because we're dying here.

And in the meantime, we will repeat, with all the faith we can muster, the prayer that you taught your friends to pray,

Our Father in heaven, may your name be treasured and loved. Help us to help you set the world right. Your will, Lord, not mine. We trust in you to provide all that we need. Help us to forgive others as you forgive us. Lead me away from temptation, God, and keep me safe from all evil. Wonderful! Counselor! Almighty God! Our everlasting Father. Amen.

We read now John 20, verse 1-10.

***20** Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not

know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'

Our final reading this morning comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 24-29:

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.'

²⁶A 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.' ²⁷Then 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.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

I looked all over town before I found the rest of Jesus' followers. They were back in that same upper room where we had eaten the Passover just a few days before. I wanted to say goodbye to them before I headed home to pick up my life again.

And as soon as I walked in, they were all shouting at me. "Hang on, hang on! One at a time! You, Andrew! You tell me.

"You all saw this? Alive? Here. Just walked through the walls, huh? Sure, why not? Might as well go all the way.

"Why are you doing this? Do you really think you can make things better by imagining really hard? Yes, James, I know: you really think you saw it. But people do see things sometimes, especially when they haven't slept or eaten and they're afraid for their lives. Sorry, but I can't do it. I need more than air dreams and happy thoughts.

"Don't talk to me about Lazarus. Yes, I know that happened. I saw it. Jesus raised him. Jesus could do things we can't. But remember: Jesus was dead. Which one of you raised Jesus? Just happened, huh?

"Look, I understand. I want him to be alive, too. At least long enough for me to tell him I'm sorry I ran away. Oh, that's what this is, isn't it? It's guilt. If he's alive, then it doesn't matter that we left him. What denial? Right, Peter? Sorry, I'm sorry, Peter. I shouldn't have . . . but I can't do it. Not on your witness. It's not that easy for me. I'll believe it when I can see and touch his face, his skin, his scars, and not until then."

You've heard what happened then. He appeared. Yes, through the walls. He walked up and grabbed my hands and said, "Here. Touch me." Then he looked at me and looked into me and looked through me and knew how hard it was for me to believe and still loved me. It was Jesus. He was alive.

In the years since then I have come to realize that I don't have a crippled faith, just a different faith. There are others like me, people who need more than a secondhand report to

believe something. In fact, I'm still that way, even after seeing and touching Jesus' risen body. It's how I'm put together. I will always question. My faith will always exist somewhere in the uneasy space between reluctant belief and nagging doubt, but that space is still faith. I was luckier than most doubters. I got physical proof. So I know that Jesus is alive. But my suspicion is that God will always provide each of us as much as we need to believe, if we will look. So look. Jesus said, "The one who seeks will find." So seek.

Some of you may be able to believe easily. That's great. Others may be more like me. Some of you may not even be sure what believing means. To you I say this: "He is alive. He is still at work. Come and see."