

Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville  
Second Sunday of Easter, April 7, 2024  
David Gambrell

Isaiah 65:17–25  
John 20:19–31

We've packed up all the plastic eggs and polished off the ham. We've put away the pastel ties, the floral print dresses, and the big hats ... at least until Derby. The brass players are resting their chops and the handbell choirs are all rung out. It's been one week since Easter Sunday.

But not so fast. Easter isn't over. God isn't finished with us yet.

Usually, we get different Gospel readings for Years A, B, and C of the Revised Common Lectionary. But not today, not on the Second Sunday of Easter. It's always the twentieth chapter of John, verses nineteen through thirty-one. Why is that?

This is one of those rare events in the life of Jesus that gets a dateline, a timestamp. All four Gospels report that Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. All four Gospels tell us that women were the first disciples to find the empty tomb. But then the stories start to branch out, offering different perspectives on the resurrection. Mark falls silent in awe and wonder at the empty tomb; the risen Lord doesn't appear, at least not in the shorter ending of Mark. Matthew gives us the Great Commission: go into all the world and make disciples. Luke has the road to Emmaus, where a mysterious stranger reveals himself to be Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

Only John gives us the story of Jesus' encounter with (so-called) "doubting Thomas." (Luke kind of alludes to the event. In Luke, the risen Lord appears and says, "Peace be with you," while some disciples are still doubting and afraid they have seen a ghost.) But John really fleshes it out (so to speak). John names Thomas and gives him a speaking part. And John is very careful to tell us that Jesus appears to Thomas exactly one week after he rises from the dead, on the next Sunday after the resurrection. In the church's calendar, that's today. John reveals that the Easter story is still unfolding, even a week after the women find the empty tomb. Easter isn't over. God isn't finished with us yet.

You know that big service that happened last week? The one where we dressed up and crowded in and sang "Jesus Christ is risen today"? We often refer to that day as "Easter Sunday." But that's really a misnomer. You see, Easter isn't just one Sunday. Easter is a season—seven weeks with seven Sundays, or eight, counting Pentecost. As I always teach the confirmands, Easter is a "week of weeks"—seven weeks times

seven days equals forty-nine. All building up to Pentecost, which is Greek for the “fiftieth day.” Seven times seven plus one—that’s how we get the great fifty days of the season of Easter.

After all, is one Sunday really sufficient to celebrate the resurrection, to mark this great mystery of faith—the triumph of God over sin and death, the gift of eternal and abundant life in Jesus Christ? No, one day is not enough. At least since the second century, many Christians have celebrated Easter as a season of fifty days of joy. Early church leaders even banned the penitential practices of kneeling and fasting during the fifty days of Easter. During this most joyous span of time, every day of the week was to be observed as if it were a Sunday, a celebration of Christ’s rising from the dead.

Indeed, every Sunday is an opportunity for us to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week. That’s why Christians began to gather for worship on the first day of the week, and have continued doing so for two thousand years. That’s why we always celebrate Easter on Sunday, instead of three days after the Passover, which can happen on different days of the week. Sometimes we say, “every Sunday is a little Easter.” In a sense, the Easter celebration is spread throughout the whole year, every seven days. Because Easter isn’t over. God isn’t finished with us yet.

I sometimes wonder if we have it backwards, starting Easter with a bang on the timpani drums. I wonder if we ought to start the Easter season in a small and quiet way—falling silent in awe and wonder, like the Gospel of Mark. Maybe on the second Sunday of Easter we could take a cue from John and invite a friend or neighbor, someone like Thomas, who wasn’t there last week. Let them know their questions and doubts are welcome here. We could follow the lead of Luke and celebrate communion every Sunday in Easter, recognizing the risen Lord in the breaking of the bread. We could think of Easter as a kind of training season for Matthew’s Great Commission, getting ready to go out into all the world and share the good news of new life in Jesus Christ.

As we moved through the season of Easter in worship, perhaps we could add a few more brass instruments, bells, and banners each Sunday. Week by week, add more voices to the Hallelujah Chorus. Imagine that! Maybe even dress up a little more each Sunday? All building up to Pentecost—an extravagant, flamboyant celebration of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life. It might help us to understand and believe that Easter isn’t over. God isn’t finished with us yet.

So, Easter is more than a Sunday. And really, Easter is more than a season. For followers of the crucified and risen Lord, Easter is a way of life.

In the story of Thomas, we get a glimpse of this new way of life. Where there are dividing walls and locked doors, Jesus passes right through them. Where there is fear, Jesus invites us to have faith. The Easter way of life is about offering forgiveness and working for reconciliation in the world—extending the peace of Christ to all. It's not about hiding our brokenness, our wounds, but bearing witness to the healing and life-giving power of God, so that all may know and share this gift of new life. This Easter way of life is not a tiresome chore, not religious homework, but an act of gratitude, an expression of joy, a labor of love. It comes as a gift to us, a gift of the Holy Spirit, as close to us as breathing.

When Thomas finally gets to see Jesus for himself on this second Sunday of Easter, he too is filled with the Holy Spirit. And so-called “doubting Thomas” shouts out the earliest Christian creed, this spontaneous affirmation of faith: “My Lord and my God!”

And still the Easter story continues. John says, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you might come to believe” (John 20:30–31). In fact, John can't help himself ... even after these words, John adds two more Easter stories: the miraculous catch of one hundred and fifty-three fish and breakfast on the beach with the risen Lord.

We are called to add our own Easter stories—to bear witness to the signs of new life we have seen in our lives and in the world. Signs of hope that Easter isn't over. God isn't finished with us yet.

That's good news, isn't it? In days of death and destruction, of war and famine ... in seasons of sickness and sorrow ... in times of trouble and transition, God is still at work, bringing new life to the world.

Isaiah saw it clearly. God is about to do a new thing, to call forth a new creation. The days are coming when God will wipe away our tears. Houses will be homes again, and fields will be full of good fruit. All people will have enough, and no one will labor in vain. All creatures will live in peace, the wolf and lamb will feed together, and no one will hurt or destroy. This is a vision of the eternal Easter.

Trusting in this promise, rejoicing in Christ's resurrection, and relying on the Spirit's power, we live in hope. We walk by faith and not by sight. Because Easter isn't over. God isn't finished with us yet. Thanks be to God.