The Way, the Truth, the Life
John 20:19-31
A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 15, 2012 by Candice Ryals Provey

It was evening the first day when the disciples gathered and Jesus came, but Thomas wasn’t with them.

Imagine with me these two very different scenes:

Thomas sits alone at home as the shadows gather at dusk, turning over the events of the past week, the past year, thinking through the things he once knew to be true...

How in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it. And yet, here is Thomas, sitting in what seems to be utter darkness, wondering whether Jesus was indeed the light, the life of the world. Had God forsaken him on the cross? Abandoned Thomas, too, and Israel and her promises? Relinquished the world to its tyranny?

Meanwhile, not far away, the disciples are gathered in the glow of candlelight, when a series of remarkable events take place. First, Jesus joins them - this is remarkable enough, given that the doors are locked and just a few days earlier he had been killed, but it’s just the beginning. He comes and breathes upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is an odd reference that brings to mind the way God first created humanity so long ago, how God fashioned the human form out of the mud of the earth and breathed life into its nostrils. John is signifying here a cosmic act. We know that something huge is happening, that Jesus is making the disciples alive in a new way, but we don’t understand it.

Jesus breathes on them and says to them, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” I suspect this is not the good news they were hoping for. After all, they aren’t meeting at night behind locked doors for nothing, the threat of persecution is real. Jesus has already had to say, “Peace be with you,” twice in two sentences just to calm them down. And after John spent five chapters narrating in painstaking detail the words Jesus used to comfort and prepare the disciples for his own death, here, in one sentence, Jesus is sending them out into the world, as the Father sent him, into the fray that claimed his life.

Now here’s the second remarkable thing that happens - they go! Without a word of protest, they go. And not just anywhere, they go to find Thomas, to testify to what they have seen. Isn’t it shocking and somewhat unsettling that the followers of Jesus can have such markedly different experiences of God’s presence in the world?

They tell Thomas: “We have seen the Lord!” Just as Jesus promised, a little while, and you will see me... We have seen him! The Lord is risen! Thomas clearly was not familiar with the conventional response. When someone says the Lord is Risen, you should respond, “He is risen indeed!” But Thomas says, “Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and stick my finger in the marks of the nails and my hand in his side, I won’t believe it!”

Some of you may think he’s rude or overly dramatic. But before you go thinking that he just lacks a little faith, or you start carelessly throwing around that label “doubting” Thomas, let me say there’s not a person in this room who could cast a stone or even flick a pebble in his direction. This morning I’d like to offer my most
compassionate read on Thomas, because I like him, I feel a certain kinship with him, and I think there is a reason we read his story every year at about this time.

I imagine Thomas, like many of the disciples, had come looking for the Messiah. He had heard the rumors, and when he saw the signs for himself, he knew he had found the Son of God. He believed. He followed. He was so sure, by chapter eleven he was ready to die for Jesus. For that brief period Thomas could tell a story about his life that meant something, that he was proud of. He could see clearly the glorious kingdom of God, justice rolling down like waters, and himself counted among the righteous. He was on top of the world.

A few years ago my husband and I went hiking in the Shenandoahs. Our first day out was beautiful and clear; we spent hours on the trails. Later that evening, we were relaxing at an overlook with a view of the entire valley. You could see for miles. Everything was green and golden, and from that height, the world seemed perfectly peaceful. Behind us, this fog was rising up over the ridgeline, like a huge silent wave about to crash. I remember leaning back and watching in awe as it began to spill over and cascade down the hillside. Then we were walking, quickly, running, racing down the trail back to our cabin, because within minutes that cloud had covered the entire mountain, and you couldn’t see past the porch railing. Death has a way of swallowing you up like that, even when you see it coming.

For that brief period, Thomas was on the mountaintop with the Messiah. Then he watched the one he loved most in the world die. He saw Christ’s body, broken on the cross, and something inside him broke too. That’s when Thomas lost the way.

In what I think is one of the most endearing and hopeful moments in our text for today, the other disciples come to find him, to show him the way. They come to tell him, “We have seen the Lord.” But words aren’t enough for Thomas. The Word became flesh, and Thomas demands that he, too, must see Jesus in the flesh. He wants proof of Jesus’s suffering and proof of life beyond it. Like Job, he implicitly challenges God to meet him face to face, to give an account for his terrible suffering, to turn the words of promise into fulfillment in the flesh. He takes his place in a long line of psalmists and saints who lament the ways the world fails to reflect the truth about God’s love, who decry the violence and brokenness, the ways death still stalks us, those who call their peers and their God to do something about it.

When your personal experience, the circumstances of your life, seem to contradict the claims we make about God’s love and justice and mercy, you need the community of faith to remind you about a few things. You need to know that your personal experience does not define the whole truth about God and God’s will for the world, so that you can begin to locate your story and even your suffering within the larger narrative of what God is doing. You need to know that when you are hurting, anger and lament and protest are valid and appropriate responses within the life of faith, so that you can begin to give voice to your sufferings and make room for your rage. Finally, you need to know that you’re not alone. This is why we gather - because the baptismal waters, the breaking of bread, are the signs through which God proclaims to us and we proclaim to each other, “You are not alone, not abandoned, God-forsaken.”

This is my favorite part, one final remarkable turn of events: it is evening the first day of the week when the disciples gather, and this time Thomas is with them. The truth is Thomas didn’t choose Jesus, Jesus chose him. He didn’t find the Messiah, the Messiah found him. And even though Thomas does not believe, Christ still believes in him and comes to meet him.

Thomas sees Christ’s body, broken and yet standing whole before him, and finds that he himself, Thomas, has been restored to life. He sees Jesus and immediately testifies, “My Lord and my God!” This is what it means to believe - to tell the truth about who Jesus is, to tell the story. It was evening when the disciples gathered and
Jesus came, and by the next morning, Thomas would be out in the world proclaiming the truth about Jesus to everyone he met. His story is written down so that we might also believe and testify. So that the good news, the gospel, might spill over and spread from the mountain to the valley.

Now when you find yourself down in that valley, in a place that seems like utter darkness, and Lord knows you will, let Thomas show you the way. When you can’t hope, when you can’t believe, yearn to see Jesus face to face, cry out for an account from God, and gather with the community to wait. For Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Blessed are you who have come here anyway, not believing but desperately wanting to. Blessed are you who yearn for Jesus, the light, the life of the world, to be present here, now. You, too, will see Jesus in the flesh. Blessed are you, every one of you - not because you have chosen Christ or found the way, but because Christ has chosen you, come seeking after you to find you, and when he meets you, to enliven you with the Spirit and send you out again into the fray.