

Second Easter 2018

Church of the Advent

Better Together

When I was 16 years old and in high school in Atlanta, I had a group of best friends who did most everything together. We had spent countless days and nights at each other's houses, so it was not unusual to be invited over to spend the night at someone's house after a school dance at the gym. This particular night my date drove me to my friend Malinda's house after the dance, a plan that was well known ahead of time by my Mother. When we got there around 11, the house was completely dark. I got out of the car and walked around to the front and back doors, but nothing. Now as hard as it is to believe, this was a world without cell phones, and I would have had to go find a pay phone to call the house. I did not knock on the door for fear of waking up Malinda's parents. I felt sure if she was home a light would be on, and if she wasn't home, I didn't want to get her in trouble. We waited for a while in the car, thinking Malinda and her date must have made a stop on the way home; eventually I gave up, thinking there had been a misunderstanding. My date drove me home and I quietly went to bed, somehow not waking up my Mother, who was the lightest sleeper God ever made. In the morning, she was shocked to find me at home, because she knew what I did not: that my friends had planned an overnight *surprise* party for my birthday at Malinda's house. While I had been sitting in the car the night before, waiting for Malinda to come home, my friends were waiting inside—in the dark—for me to show up, so that they could do the traditional jump-up thing yelling "Surprise!" When I did *not* show up, *they* had not called *my* house for fear of getting *me* in trouble. So I missed the only surprise birthday party I have ever been given.

When I got the news from my Mother in the morning, I drove over there to see my friends who had a grand time staying up late and eating my birthday cake. I tried to appreciate their good intentions as I opened my presents, but I was not convinced they believed my story, and I was not completely convinced that the whole party had really been meant for me, I had missed something important, and even though I was surrounded by my friends, I felt like I was on the outside looking in.

I often think about that feeling of disappointment and exclusion—of being on the inside and outside at the same time—each time I think of Thomas, the disciple who *missed* the first resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples. They had been huddled together behind locked doors, probably trying to regroup after the terrible experience of the crucifixion and burial of their beloved teacher, and the even more puzzling news that his body was missing from the tomb. I imagine them devastated, confused and guilty at their inability to do anything to save Jesus, and wondering what they should do next. Then, *there he was*, right there in the middle of them. They heard his voice, saw his wounds, felt his Spirit, his very *breath* on them. Then, “Peace be with you,” he said. *Peace*. They *saw* him, and they believed that it *was* him. What they believed about how he got there is not clear, but they *believed* that it was Jesus, come back to them—except for Thomas, who was not there.

No one knows where Thomas was—why he wasn’t there. Maybe he was mourning alone. Maybe he was angry at those who betrayed Jesus. Maybe he was taking care of some practical detail that always needs taking care of when someone dies, or visiting the family of Jesus, paying his respects. What is told about Thomas is that the wounds of the crucifixion were planted in his memory. He knew that his Lord had died and he was distraught. And he was outside of his circle of friends that had locked the doors of their gathering place to keep themselves safe.

That the others were able to take in the truth of a risen Jesus Christ before Thomas had a lot to do with their having been together in fellowship—in community—when Jesus appeared to them. They might have been hiding, but they were hiding out *together*. They were not smarter, or more faithful, or more *believing* than Thomas. After all, they hadn’t really believed Mary Magdalene, had they? What they had going for them was that they were together. When that peace came over them, each could measure his own disbelief with the others’ reactions, relying on others for the virtual pinch to confirm that what was happening was real. Alone, it might have been harder to distinguish a resurrected person from a ghost. *Together* they could witness their collective responses, and tell each other that they weren’t crazy. Left out of the

experience and alone, Thomas missed the depth of their collective emotion. Without that *peace* that Jesus had brought to the others, who could blame Thomas for demanding some evidence that who the disciples described to him was really Jesus?

So Jesus came back later when Thomas was there—Thomas who was sticking it out with his crazy friends, even though he probably thought they had gone off the deep end. Jesus came back to give Thomas the same opportunity as the other disciples to *see* with his own eyes, to *know* with his own heart, to *touch* if he wanted to. Jesus could have gone to see Thomas alone, to catch him up on things, but he chose to bring Thomas into the resurrection fold with his brothers present, with the support of the community. You can almost hear the excitement in the room. “See, Thomas, we told you so, it really is him!” You can almost see their faces exploding with joy. The offer of Jesus to have Thomas touch him was genuine, but Thomas did not need to take him up on that offer, because once he felt the peace, he saw, and he already knew. The real invitation to Thomas was an invitation back into the fold, into a share in the rejoicing that all had seemed lost, and was now found. His Lord was dead, and now he was alive!

The story of Thomas is offered each Second Sunday of Easter, every year, but not so we can repeatedly admonish Thomas, long labeled the “doubting” one. Rather it is to give us the opportunity to remember that Jesus revealed himself to the world in a community, he taught in a community and he left a command for the community he formed to love one another. God’s plan for the world is expressed throughout scripture as a story of community, where no character, no matter how powerful, functioned entirely alone. We are created to be in community, to learn to love in community, to care for one another in community. Certainly we can love and appreciate and worship our Creator during alone time—working in the garden, walking on the beach, or fishing on the river. But we find our deepest understanding of God’s love when we turn our compassionate hearts towards one another, believing that we are better together—that for better or worse, God has called us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to gather in his name and then go set out—never alone—to share the Good News. Together we are reminded of our calling to love one another, to forgive one another, to care for one another—no matter how challenging and exhausting that might be. And by

the grace and welcome of community, we can bring our stubborn, doubting selves back into the fold—again and again if necessary—to accept that love, and forgiveness and caring and peace.

In a few moments, we will welcome through Baptism Iris Michelle Biondi into our community of faith. We will stand and affirm our own faith in our Baptismal Covenant, and we will promise to do all in our power to *be* the beloved community God has called us to be, so that we can be here for her and her family, forever. May our prayers this day shower them with love and promise that throughout her life—wherever she goes and whomever she becomes—Iris will always deep down be touched by the grace of God the love and peace of this community that is poured over her like water this day. And may this beloved child of God be marked as Christ's own forever, filling her with all the power and mystery and promise of the risen Lord. Amen.