**Weekend of Sunday, March 24, 2024**

**Palm Sunday/Lectionary X/Year B**

**First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a**

**Second Reading: Romans 4:13-25**

**Processional Gospel Reading: Mark 11:1-11**

***Sermon Title: “Living Easter: Embracing Doubt, Faith, and Community”***

**Theme**

*The Easter season is a week of weeks, seven Sundays when we play in the mystery of Christ’s presence, mostly through the glorious Gospel of John. Today we gather with the disciples on the first Easter, and Jesus breathes the Spirit on us. With Thomas we ask for a sign, and Jesus offers us his wounded self in the broken bread. From frightened individuals we are transformed into a community of open doors, peace, forgiveness, and material sharing such that no one among us is in need.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Acts 4:32-35**

32Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

**Second Reading: 1 John 1:1--2:2**

1We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—2this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—3we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

 5This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

 2:1My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

**Gospel: John 20:19-31**

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

 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.”

 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

**Sermon**

Today, as we gather together in this sacred space on this Second Sunday of Easter, our hearts are filled with joy and hope as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Easter season marks a time of renewal, transformation, and profound spiritual awakening. Today, we delve into the heart of the Easter message, drawing inspiration from the scriptures found in the Gospel According to John, the First Letter of John, and the Acts of the Apostles. These passages illuminate the journey of doubt to faith, the power of community, and the transformative love of Christ that continues to resonate through the ages.

In the Gospel Reading, we encounter the story of Thomas, a disciple of Jesus, who struggled with doubt following the resurrection. Thomas's skepticism serves as a powerful reminder that doubt is not antithetical to faith but rather an integral part of the journey toward a deeper understanding and conviction.

As we reflect on Thomas's journey, we recognize that doubt can often be a catalyst for spiritual growth. In our own lives, we may encounter moments of uncertainty, questioning, and disbelief. Yet, it is precisely in these moments that we are invited to seek the truth earnestly, to engage the LORD with our doubts openly, and to journey towards a more profound faith.

Jesus's response to Thomas's doubt is not an angry scolding, though some might think he has a right to give Thomas one. On the contrary, Jesus’s response is one of grace and compassion. He invites Thomas to touch his wounds, to *experience* the reality of his resurrection. In doing so, Jesus not only addresses Thomas's doubts but also invites him into a deeper relationship of trust and belief.

Likewise, Jesus extends the same invitation to each one of us. He meets us in our doubts, our fears, and our uncertainties, offering us his presence, his peace, and his love. The journey from doubt to faith is not always easy, and often gets repeated, but if we make the effort it is a journey that leads us closer to the heart of God.

In the Second Reading from First John, the apostle John emphasizes the importance of fellowship and community in the life of believers. He writes, *7If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin*. That sounds like a pretty good deal to me.

The concept of walking in the light speaks to a life lived in transparency, authenticity, and truth. It is a life marked by openness, vulnerability, and mutual accountability within the community of faith. In the light of Christ, there is no room for secrecy, shame, or division.

As we journey together as a community of believers, we are called to embody the love and grace of Christ in our relationships with one another. We are called to bear one another's burdens, to encourage one another in faith, and to extend forgiveness and reconciliation to those who have wronged us.

In a culture marked by loneliness, isolation, and division, the church and more specifically, this congregation, has a profound opportunity to be a beacon of hope, healing, and reconciliation. As we come together in fellowship and community, members and visitors alike, we reflect the unity and love of Christ to the world around us, drawing others into the transformative power of God's grace.

In the First Reading from Acts, we encounter the early Christian community living out the radical implications of the Gospel as they were inspired. Luke describes the believers as being of one heart and mind, sharing everything they had with one another. There was no needy person among them, for they sold their possessions and distributed the proceeds to all according to need. I’m not going to propose that today. The only faith communities that I am aware of that do that get branded “cults.” Whether they are or whether the concept is still so counter-cultural is up for debate. No one knows how long that Acts 2 community lasted, but by chapter 11, it seems to have fallen apart.

Nevertheless, the example of the early church challenges us to reconsider our understanding of possession, stewardship, and generosity. It invites us to move beyond a mindset of scarcity and self-preservation to one of abundance and sacrificial love.

As followers of Christ, we are called to embody the values of the kingdom – values of:

* Generosity
* Compassion
* Justice.

We are called to be stewards of God's gifts, using our resources, time, and talents to bless others and advance the work of God's kingdom on earth.

In a culture marked by inequality, poverty, and injustice, the call to radical generosity is more urgent than ever. As we follow the story of the early church, may we be inspired to live lives of radical generosity, sharing our blessings with those in need and working towards a world where all may experience the abundance of God's love and provision.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

As we reflect on the scriptures of the Gospel According to John, and the Second Reading from 1 John, and the First Reading from Acts, we are reminded of the transformative power of the Easter message.

* We are reminded that doubt is not the end of faith but rather a stepping stone towards a deeper and more profound belief in the risen Christ.
* We are reminded of the importance of fellowship and community in the life of believers, and the call to embody the values of love, grace, and reconciliation.
* We are reminded of the radical implications of the gospel, and the call to live lives of radical generosity and sacrificial love.

As we continue our journey through the Easter season, may we be inspired to

* embrace doubt with courage,
* to walk in the light of fellowship and community,
* and to live lives of radical generosity and love.

May the resurrection power of Christ continue to transform our hearts and lives, and may we be bearers of his light and love to a world in need of hope and healing.

**Prayer**

Author of life, your resurrection changes everything! We are no longer stuck in a cycle of competing for who gets the most. Rather we are struck by your generosity. Your grace is so amazing, forgive us if we sometimes doubt that it is true and real. We pray this in Jesus’s name. Amen